

# Shadows of the Sun

By theamberfox



# Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	17
Chapter 3	30
Chapter 4	47
Chapter 5	67
Chapter 6	83
Chapter 7	106
Chapter 8	128
Chapter 9	145
Chapter 10	167
Chapter 11	193
Chapter 12	220
Chapter 13	252

# Chapter 1

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea.” a gruff, elderly unicorn said.

His loud, commanding voice resonated throughout the room, but there was a hint of regret in his words. Maybe he didn’t believe he was right or maybe he just didn’t want to tell them they were wrong. Regardless, it wasn’t an easy thing to do. What lay ahead of them was a difficult task and everyone was trying their best to come up with solutions. Everything they tried had failed and the hope that burned so brightly in the beginning had been reduced to a faltering candle.

“We can’t afford to have the best of our researchers and military running around chasing rumours. In spite of our open communications with their government, we still have no idea what they’re doing up there.” his voice growing louder and more assertive as he continued. “The only thing we know is that they’re doing better than we are.”

A white pegasus standing nearby casually stepped forward. She turned her head quickly, throwing her elegant light blue hair out of the way.

“I agree with Lord Thunderhorn.” she said softly, gesturing towards the old unicorn. “Some of the commoners are starting to become openly aggressive towards us and we need every guard in Canterlot as protection.”

“Are you trying to suggest that we can’t spare even a single guard for this?” a pale green earth pony intervened, glaring at the white pegasus. “This isn’t a walk in the park. It’s dangerous and she shouldn’t be leaving alone.”

A brutal drought had appeared almost overnight and spread across all of Equestria. A drought in a land where factories created artificial weather conditions and a princess controlled the sun itself seemed impossible, so no one could have expected a drought with such an unimaginable magnitude. With the only rain coming from the scarce

weather factories and the nobility using their wealth to hoard almost every scrap of food produced, many had begun to starve.

“Lady Wind Dancer has every reason to be concerned. The commoners blame us for the food shortages.” Thunderhorn sighed. “To be honest, I don’t disagree with them.”

“Then why can’t we just ask the nobility to share.” a dark blue pegasus smirked, her tail swishing back and forth as she spoke. “Tell them to play nice.”

“Do you honestly believe we can do that, Lady Vortex?” a light brown earth pony interrupted. “They will find a way around any law we make. They have too much power and influence. If we limited the amount of food they can buy, they will just pay other ponies to buy it for them.”

“Even if we could do something about the nobility, it still wouldn’t be enough. They’re hoarding food, but not as much as everyone seems to believe.” the pale green pony said. “We would just be wasting our time and effort. We need to find a way to increase food production and prevent this from happening again in the future.”

“Then back to the point, Goldenroot, I agree that we need to send someone with her.” Vortex replied, nodding at the pale green pony. “If Princess Celestia is really serious about this, then Twilight is going to leave anyway. I’m sure we can spare one guard as an escort.”

“It’s not that simple.” a dark brown unicorn interrupted. “If we send even one escort with her, then we will be held responsible for her actions. It will be announced that we supported her and if she goes up north and finds nothing, then we will be at the public’s mercy.”

“And we’re not now, Lord Crescendo?” Goldenroot asked inquisitively. “Nothing we’ve done has worked. If they have some answers, then we need to try.”

“We simply cannot act on rumour alone.” Crescendo continued.

“Then Lord Crescendo, Lord Thunderhorn, and Lady Wind Dancer, you all object to the decision?” a light brown earth pony asked.

Thunderhorn exchanged concerned glances with the two other ponies in question. "Yes, Director Prairie Star, we do."

"Then I'm afraid that if Princess Celestia wants to send Twilight to Prance, it will have to be without the council's support and thus, without any aid from our government." Prairie Star continued.

Goldenroot was stunned. "Celestia, please don't ask her to go alone. It's too dangerous."

Princess Celestia had been listening to the entire conversation from her throne, quietly watching as the six members of the council argued over her suggestion. Normally, the council would meet and formally discuss political matters in an assembly, but the severity of the situation had forced them to shed their usual conventions.

"I don't want to have to ask her to do this, Sir Goldenroot," Celestia replied, calmly looking at the earth pony. "But we don't have much of a choice. The drought is only getting worse and we need a solution. If there is even a possibility that Prance can help us, then we need to investigate that possibility."

Ruled by "Le Roi Pierre", Prance was a small and heavily populated country with a history of being frequented by droughts and food shortages identical to the one Equestria was experiencing. Over time, the country learned how to deal with these problems and ceased its constant pleas for foreign aid. For obvious reasons, Celestia wanted to know what had changed. How had they solved their problems and what could Equestria do to improve their current situation and prevent future disasters? Twilight Sparkle, the only one the princess thought was both qualified and available for the job, was asked to travel north and find some answers.

"Then let me go with her." Goldenroot said, stepping forward. "I refuse to have her travel alone."

"Don't be foolish, Sir Goldenroot!" Prairie Star said as she stepped forward. "The council cannot operate without all of its members. If you leave, it's only going to make matters worse."

Goldenroot knew she was right. Council operations would come grinding to a halt if he left and with the council serving as a check on Celestia's power, no political decisions could be made in his absence.

Like many rulers in her time, Celestia did not have absolute power over her country. Every decision she made had to be passed through the council before it became law, allowing the assembly to either rewrite the law and send it back to Celestia for approval, or veto it entirely. Likewise, any decision the council made had to pass through Celestia in the same fashion. It was a way of keeping each other's power in check, with neither political body given the power to make rash decisions.

Celestia had suggested the idea over a thousand years ago when she first made the decision to banish Nightmare Moon. Soon after her banishment, Celestia thought that her decision was made too hastily and regretted it ever since. She loved her sister and it was only from a sense of panic that she was able to exile her to the moon without thinking of the consequences.

In an attempt to correct her perceived mistake, the council was formed as a temporary political body consisting of mostly the educated nobility. Celestia had polled the council, asking them if they thought it was safe for Nightmare Moon to return. Despite Celestia's fierce attempts at coercing the group, they rejected the idea, claiming that the safety of thousands of residents across the country was too important to sacrifice for a single pony, even one of royalty. Although saddened by the decision, Celestia agreed with the council and announced that they would become a permanent addition to the government to provide a second opinion on all of her verdicts.

"So that's it then." Goldenroot said, shaking his head slowly. "We're just going to sit back and watch."

"Do not underestimate my student, Sir Goldenroot." Celestia said. "If any one pony is capable of this feat, it's my faithful student Twilight Sparkle. She may be young, but she has incredible potential and I have complete confidence in her abilities."

"I hope you're right, Princess Celestia."

~

Although she tried to look calm, it was painfully obvious that Princess Luna was nervous about what she was going to tell her older sister. Her movements were slow and purposeful as she tried to maintain the kind of serene grace that was expected from a member of royalty, but the expression on her face completely ruined the attempt. Her eyes darted from side to side as if she were looking for something that was obviously not there and she failed to make even brief eye contact with her sister.

As she approached the throne on which her older sister was leisurely seated, she began to question whether or not it was truly necessary for her to inform Celestia in person. She still had no idea how Celestia would react to the information she was about to present, which was part of the reason she felt the gesture was entirely necessary. It was a well known fact that the princess was able to conceal her inner feelings and keep a calm composure in the face of adversity, but she only ever tried to do so in public. It was another requirement of royalty that Luna never truly understood. For this very reason, Luna had asked the guards to step out when she entered and, as she took the last few steps towards the throne, she glanced back over her shoulder to confirm that the room was indeed empty. Satisfied, she slowly came to a stop in front of Celestia.

“Sister?” Luna asked.

The letter had arrived in the morning, but it was now late in the afternoon. Luna had opened it on her sister’s behalf, unknowing of the contents, and had spent most of the day trying to prepare for this inevitable conversation.

“You look troubled, Luna. Is there something you wish to tell me?” Celestia replied affectionately, but after seeing the distress on Luna’s face, she knew that it was something far more serious than the tone of her voice could have allowed for.

The last light of the sun washed in through the windows and onto the floor across the room, almost directly where the two were situated. As Luna raised her head, making direct eye contact with Celestia for the first time

that day, a small amount of light crept across her face, illuminating it ever so slightly. It was as if the sun itself, was trying to lighten the mood, but the beam of light only made the small teardrops welling up in Luna's eyes more obvious.

"It's about Twilight..."

The tears in her eyes were now building up more quickly. Luna was desperately trying to hold them back.

"She's not coming home." Luna continued.

"Why do you say that?"

"I opened a letter this morning. It was from La Roi Pierre in Prance. He said..."

Luna's words trailed off as she noticed that tears were finally beginning to trickle down her face. She couldn't fight them anymore. The task she was presented with was too harsh, too miserable.

"He said that she never arrived to meet him or his advisors... She was supposed to be there more than a month ago, but the last time she was seen was crossing the border into Prance. He sent out a search party to look for her, but they only found some of her things..."

"They weren't the kind of things that Twilight would willingly leave behind."

"They think she's dead?" Celestia asked, her words empty and lacking all emotion.

Stunned by her reaction, Luna tried to collect herself and comfort her older sister. She noticed that Celestia wasn't looking directly at her anymore, but past her, towards the door. It was as if she believed she was all alone.

"It was supposed to take three weeks." Celestia continued.



Luna knew that Celestia had suspected something had happened to Twilight when she didn't return when she was supposed to, but she had hid her concern well. Very few actually believed that something tragic had happened and even less had actually questioned Twilight's whereabouts. The few that asked Celestia directly were lied to. It might have been because Celestia didn't want to worry anyone, but it was more likely that she didn't actually believe that Twilight might be injured, lost, or worse. It was only when Luna had noticed that the excuses weren't adding up, that she suspected something was wrong.

At first, Celestia had passed it off as poor weather conditions, but it was an obvious fact that it had been hot and dry in all of Equestria and most of Prance for the entire month. Eventually it began to rain slightly in both countries, but it was scarce and nothing that could delay travel. Later on, she had to think of more creative excuses, like waiting while contraptions were being built or planned out, machines that would improve crop harvesting or yield. Luna did not question the idea that these machines might exist, but rather why would Twilight need to stay in Prance to supervise their completion. Surely, less important individuals could oversee the transportation of the machines and their plans.

"What of her things? What happened to them?" Celestia asked quickly.

"They found the map you gave her, some notes, supplies, her bag... I can get one of the guards to bring them to you."

"Have them sent to my bedchamber."

"Please sister; it's not your fault. No one could have predicted what happened."

Celestia continued to stare past her sibling, even as she left the room. *Was Twilight really gone?*

~

The memories of the meeting with the council and her conversation with Luna faded as Celestia returned to the grim reality. The drought was still a problem and Twilight's demise was finally sinking in. Her friends were notified of the tragedy and a funeral was being held in Ponyville. Celestia had arrived early, leaving Luna behind to keep watch over the current instability across the country. Things were getting better, but they were still far from normal. Shipments of food and other supplies from Prance were arriving on a regular basis and helped ease the concerns of starvation. Although the food was enough to keep ponies from starving, it wasn't enough to keep anyone really satisfied and many had begun to wonder about Prance. How were they able to keep sending such massive quantities of food and still have enough to feed their own country?

Celestia had insisted that the weather was improving and that there was no need to send anyone else up north to Prance. She said that everyone would have all the food they needed soon. Although most didn't believe her, hence the prolonged instability, it was true. Today was a living example as the rain poured down across Celestia's face and onto the cold grass. She didn't mind, the rain had a convenient way of hiding a pony's tears. Everyone always looks like they're crying in the rain.

"You're early."

Celestia slowly turned her head to face the pony behind her. It was Rarity, a pony that Celestia had heard a lot about in Twilight's letters. She was one of Twilight's best friends and a dressmaker. She was using her magic to create a small bubble around herself, keeping the rain from messing up her immaculate mane.

"You're also very wet." Rarity said with a kind of unusual monotony, making no effort to conceal her sorrow.

"I'm alright. After all that's happened, it's nice to feel the rain on my back." Celestia replied in an eerily similar tone.

As she turned back to face the tombstone on the ground, Rarity slowly moved up beside her. The two stood together quietly for long time, never taking their eyes off the rigid, flat stone that stood upright in the grass bearing Twilight Sparkle's name. As time passed, more ponies began to arrive at the grave. Some broke out into tears immediately upon arriving

while others offered their condolences and tried to comfort those who were most clearly affected by their loss. There were also those that said nothing at all. Their silence alone was more than enough to display the sadness in their hearts.

Eventually, the ceremony began and ponies would move to a podium to make speeches about their friend, recalling notable events that happened in Twilight's life or merely just praising her for her actions. Each one would trigger a different reaction from the crowd. Some stories would be happy memories, exciting tales that formed bold images in their heads and smiles on their faces. Others were sad, causing many ponies in the audience to weep as they remembered their lost friend. Celestia had noticed Spike, the small purple and green dragon, was reacting most radically to the speeches made. Always laughing the hardest and sobbing the loudest. It was unsettling to see a child so young, so innocent, as mentally and emotionally destroyed as he was now.

Rarity was just now stepping up to the podium where all the ponies were making their speeches. She had managed to keep her mane and the stylish cosmetics on her face perfect, even after all this time. The bubble around her was shining hazily as it reflected the rain that hit its surface, dispersing and gently sliding down around the sphere.

"I have no script to read, nor is any required to express the feelings I have at this moment."

Her tone of voice had changed now. She was trying to preserve the quiet dignity that she was well known for, but it was a fruitless attempt. The thought of her friend, taken from the world so early on in her life, was too much. Memories of the time they had spent together reconstructed themselves one after another in her head and brought tears to her eyes. Slowly rolling down her cheeks, they took some of her mascara with them and left black streaks down the side of her face.

"I didn't know Twilight for as long as some of the ponies here today..."

She smiled weakly at Celestia, who was standing quietly and listening attentively to the words she spoke.

“...But it was more than enough time to learn what kind of amazing pony she was. She displayed great feats of courage, hope, and kindness and inspired us all to achieve things we never thought possible.

“It is by no stretch of the imagination, that I am able to speak these words...”

She stopped. The small tears falling from her eyes had gradually become a steady stream down the side of her face. So much so, that the tears had actually began to wash away the remaining make up on her face. Above her, the bubble that she had created was slowly failing. Her concentration on the spell was loosening and small holes had opened up letting some of the droplets fall down on her.

“She was one of the best friends I had and nothing will ever change that. I just wish I hadn’t let her leave by herself. She asked me to come with her, but I told her I was too busy. Everyone was too busy, so she went alone. She went to help us, to save us and, petrified from what was happening, we didn’t even notice she was gone...”

She looked down towards the cold, solid earth beneath her. A single tear fell from her eye, forming a small droplet of water as it accelerated towards the grass below. As it fell, the bubble above her finally began to give up. She lost all her concentration on the spell and the small holes increased in size and frequency. As the tear hit the ground with an inaudible splash, the bubble tore open and the water that had pooled on top of the bubble flooded in, soaking the unicorn instantly and provoking numerous gasps from the audience.

*Celestia’s right. After all that’s happened, it’s nice to feel the rain on my back,* Rarity thought to herself as she worked her way off the podium and back into the crowd.

She looked very different now; her usually impressive appearance had been washed away. Her hair had been destroyed by the ever worsening rainstorm and her cosmetics removed by the wetness of her tears. It wasn’t normal, it wasn’t right, but nothing about today was.

The storm that had started early in the morning had grown. The wind had picked up speed, periodically blowing in large gusts and causing the rain to attack the glass windows in bursts. Lightning flashed nearby, illuminating the dark room and revealing Celestia's depressed figure lying silently on the bed. A loud crack of thunder soon followed, just as the room was darkening.

Twilight's disappearance had left a burning hole in Celestia's heart. The one pony that, next to her sister, she cared the most for, was gone, but not forgotten. Twilight was lost in a shroud of mystery. No one seemed to know where she went or what happened to her, so why had they assumed she was gone from the world forever? Perhaps the others had already accepted her demise long before it was formally announced. Two months was a long time and the world was becoming a dark and unforgiving place. The drought had created more than just a food shortage; it had created intolerance, mistrust and hate. They had asked her about Twilight and she had lied to them. She lied to Twilight's friends and family, she lied to Goldenroot, and she even lied to her sister. It was a tragic fate that she refused to believe. She didn't want to believe that anything bad could ever happen to the little unicorn she had spent so many years of her life with.

Celestia stared at the small purple bags resting by her dresser. They were visibly dirty and small specks of filth plastered the surface. Slowly, she raised herself out of bed and walked towards them. If Twilight was still alive, then the bags might contain pieces of a puzzle, knowledge of her whereabouts and her situation. Lifting the flaps of each bag, Celestia carefully removed the contents onto the floor and spread them out. The first thing she noticed was Twilight's gala dress. Celestia moved the dress, arranging it into a position on the floor that revealed its true beauty. Apart from the thin layer of dirt and deterioration of the dress, everything was exactly as she had remembered it. The soft blue fabric flowed gently as it settled on the ground with the magnificent silver stars decorating its surface shining dully in the dim moonlight.

*"That was the best Grand Galloping Gala ever!" I said, walking into the small coffee shop.*

*"Princess Celestia?!" the ponies around the table cried.*

*I moved over and stood next to the table, smiling brightly. It was certainly a night to remember. The chaos and confusion Twilight's friends had created was amazing. It changed a usually dull, formal experience into an utterly fantastic one. Most of the nobility would be upset by the uproar, but I haven't had that much fun for decades.*

*"Pardon me, Princess, but tonight was just awful." Twilight remarked.*

*"Oh, Twilight, the Grand Galloping Gala is always awful." I laughed.*

*"It is?" Twilight asked, flashing a surprised glance.*

*"That is why I was thrilled you were all attending. I was hoping you could liven things up a bit. And while the evening may not have gone as you planned, I'm sure you'll agree that in the end it didn't turn out so bad for this group of friends."*

*"You're right, Princess. Friends have a way of making even the worst of times into something pretty great." Twilight smiled.*

Lighting and thunder shook the memories from Celestia's mind. Taking a quick glance around, she searched for the matching shoes among the worn collection of objects, but stopped when she noticed a pile of envelopes. Twilight had obviously planned on contacting someone at one point or another, but the recipient was unknown. No one had received any letters from her student, at least, not that she knew of.

Setting the letters and the questions they evoked aside, Celestia picked up a large encyclopaedia. Several tattered pages fell out as she raised the abused book off the ground. Carrying such a heavy and frivolous item on a long journey seemed insane, but Twilight's thirst for knowledge was insatiable. Even if the book itself was unnecessary, Celestia knew that the comfort she gained from just holding onto it was not. The book was marked to a single page titled, 'The Mare in the Moon'. It was the event that had started everything and one that she could never forget. Jealousy, contempt and fear had driven her sister away and, one thousand years later, Twilight had brought her back. Twilight had done what Celestia could not and for that, she was forever in her debt.

Shifting the trivial items aside, Celestia discovered a small, battered notebook. *Luna mentioned this. Has she read it? Has anyone read it?*

Hoping to solve the increasingly complicated puzzle surrounding Twilight's disappearance, Celestia closed her eyes and calmly flipped open the cover of the book. Twilight was a studious pony, she would have written everything leading up to her disappearance in her notebook. If Celestia had anything to go on, it would be elaborately detailed within these pages.

Breathing slowly, she opened her eyes and glanced down. The page was blank. She panicked and started flipping through the book. This was unlike her. Every single page of the notebook was blank, completely devoid of any writing whatsoever.

Letting the notebook slip from her grasp, it fell and hit the floor in a useless heap. *What happened to you, Twilight? Where are you?*

Tears welled up in her eyes as Celestia quietly packed Twilight's things back into her bag, setting them in the dresser and falling onto the soft bed. Celestia had found it all quite horribly ironic. The council had been created to prevent rash political decisions, but it had actually become the cause of one. It wasn't entirely their fault; they were just doing their job as she had intended them to. Their reasoning was sound and probably in the best interests of the wide majority of Equestria's inhabitants. It was her fault alone for suggesting the idea in the first place. The confidence she had placed in her pupil's abilities had blinded her better judgment. Celestia was well aware that the journey had been attempted in solitude by numerous ponies before Twilight, but they were mostly hardened adventurers or merchants, not young librarians.

And after all the pressure she had put on her student to proceed with the journey alone, it had almost become unneeded. It was as if the weather was trying to play some cruel, barbaric joke on the princess. The rain had returned and soon the crops would follow. Equestria would, once again, be able to live carelessly, free of the trials and tribulations of the harsh drought that had faded with the storm raging fiercely outside her room.

Once again, lightning rapidly lit up the dark room. Celestia remained motionless on her bed, the only movement coming from the tears that proceeded to dampen her pillow. The room blackened, loud thunder rattling

the objects in the bedchamber and masking the creaking of a door as it slowly opened. With the room obscured by the night, footsteps unheard above the assaulting rain, a figure crept towards the grieving princess before coming to a rest at the foot of her bed.



# Chapter 2

Standing at the end of Celestia's bed, the figure wordlessly observed the princess. After only a moment, it began to turn around as if it was just going to walk away and leave her, and its purpose, with the darkness. But a single, bright flash of lightning illuminated the room and in the brief moment of clarity it offered, Celestia's eyelids parted, allowing her to fix her gaze on the silhouette in front of her. It was a pony she hadn't seen for a long time and, noticing her stare, it turned back slowly as a weak smile formed on its lips.

Opening its mouth, it spoke so softly that it was only barely audible over the fierce storm, "Princess Celestia?"

She recognized the voice. Gentle and compassionate, the silhouette's voice had a youthful and unmistakable harmony. It was her student, Twilight Sparkle. The pony everyone thought had vanished forever, to have died on the difficult journey to Prance, was standing in her room, smiling back at her.

Using a single flame that burst into several smaller parts, Celestia ignited the various torches around the room, revealing two very sad looking ponies. The princess looked terrible. Wet with tears, she leapt from her bed and stood awkwardly beside it. The dramatic events from earlier in the day had worn on her, both physically and psychologically. What little jewellery she had worn had been discarded hurriedly upon returning to the bedchamber. They were uncomfortable trinkets, serving only aesthetic purposes, and were completely unnecessary in the confinement of her room.

Twilight, drenched from the rain and splattered with mud, was barely recognizable to Celestia. Her normally well-kept mane and tail hung heavily on her body and made it difficult for her to stand. The long journey through the downpour and darkness had exhausted her and she was adorned with small cuts and bruises as reminders of the hardships she endured.

"They said you died!" Celestia cried, desperately trying to keep her composure and hold back her tears. "But... But I didn't believe them! I couldn't..."

The weak smile grew brighter on Twilight's face and she leapt at the princess, embracing her tightly. The two were both crying now, but it was out of joy and not sadness.

"I'm sorry, Princess Celestia," Twilight said, holding her tightly. "I should have sent something. I should have found some way to tell you what happened."

Amid the violent storm just outside the room, the two held each other for what felt like an eternity. The tears in their eyes flowed freely, let loose by the heartfelt reunion.

"Why were you gone so long? What happened to you?" Celestia asked, indifferent to the mud and water that covered her body as she finally pulled away from her student.

"I... I got caught up in a really big mess." Twilight replied, tears still streaming down from her eyes. "I know you want to hear everything, but I don't really want to talk about it right now. I can tell you the full story later, but I think I need to go and find my friends. They'll definitely want to know I'm still alive."

"You don't want to stay for the night?" Celestia asked, her voice panic stricken by the thought of her pupil leaving again. "The storm is only getting worse outside and you need to rest. You can't possibly want to go out in that again?"

Twilight glanced at the window. The rain was still pelting the thin sheet of glass separating them from the harsh weather outside. Lightning flashed again, but with the room bathed in torchlight, it was barely noticeable until the trailing thunder rattled the furniture and shook the floor beneath her hooves.

"I... I guess you're right, but I'll need to leave as soon as I can in the morning, probably before you wake up." Twilight replied, her voice faintly revealing her fear of battling the storm again.

"That's alright. I understand that you want to get back as soon as possible. But for now, we should both get some rest. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

"I'll come back as soon as I can. There are some things that I need to tell you." Twilight said with a concerned expression.

The unicorn started for the sofa in the corner of the room. It was a large and comfortable looking green couch, its colour clashing with the rest of the objects in the room. The large white and gold bed, dressers, wardrobes, tables, and chairs were perfectly organized around the spacious room, with the strange green sofa placed clumsily off to the side.

"I can't possibly let you sleep there." Celestia said, rushing in front of her. "Not after all you've been through. I'll sleep on the couch, please, you can have my bed."

"Oh, okay. Thank you, Celestia." Twilight replied.

Normally, Twilight would argue with the princess, unwilling to accept such generosity so easily, but she was tired right now and just wanted to get some sleep. But as she moved over to the empty bed, its sheets tossed haphazardly to a corner, she noticed herself in the reflection of the nearby mirror and frowned.

"Oh. I can't... I can't sleep like this." Twilight said, looking at the mud and grime covered figure in front of her.

"That's alright, Twilight." Celestia smiled, glancing at her almost equally as dirty coat, "When you've lived for as long as I have, you learn how to take some mud out of a pony's hair."

Celestia's horn glowed dully and the mud and water on the two ponies slowly lifted off, forming into a ball that she lowered into the sink of the nearby bathroom. The alicorn, now clear of rain and dirt, appeared almost exactly as she usually did. Her regal beauty shined magnificently

despite the absence of jewellery and cosmetics. Twilight, however, was not quite so fortunate. With the mud gone, the cuts and bruises were made more obvious. The princesses' magic had even opened some of the wounds, letting the blood slowly trickle down her legs.

"Oh Twilight..." Celestia said quietly, her smile falling and revealing the pain inside her heart.

"I'm alright, Celestia. Really." Twilight explained, noticing the princesses' sadness and trying to keep a smile on her face despite the obvious pain she endured.

Celestia pulled some bandages out from the cupboard in the bathroom and began to wrap them around the open wounds. Healing magic, while not unknown, was dangerous. It was just as likely that a pony would make a wound worse, than better and, while Celestia was certainly capable of this feat, she decided it was best to avoid using such powerful magic in such a sleep deprived state.

"There. We can fix you up properly tomorrow." Celestia said as she finished wrapping the worst of Twilight's injuries. "Now, please get some rest. I want to know everything about your adventure when you come back from Ponyville."

Twilight merely nodded before climbing into the bed. Utterly exhausted by the events of the day, she fell asleep instantly, not bothering to pull the sheets up over her body. Breathing quietly her chest moved slowly up and down as the oxygen entered her lungs. Celestia carefully pulled the sheets over her, a small smile forming on her lips and tears building in her eyes.

"I'm just happy you're alright Twilight. I didn't know what I was going to do without you." Celestia whispered before finally lying down on the green sofa across the room.

It was light out when Celestia awoke. Despite her absence the sun had risen above the horizon and was glowing brightly in the sky outside the window. Both of the princesses had full control over the sun and the moon, so they were able to take each others place whenever they felt it was necessary. And after the difficult ordeal that Celestia had gone through, Luna had been more than happy to raise the sun and let her sister sleep in a few extra hours.

Celestia dazedly lifted her head off the arm of the green sofa and opened her eyes. Her neck was stiff from sleeping all night in such an awkward position. Stretching slowly and getting up from the bed, a blanket fell off her back and formed a soft lump on the floor.

"Twilight?" she asked softly as she turned to face her bed, remembering the previous night's encounter.

The bed was empty and her student was gone. Celestia panicked for a moment, but soon relaxed when she remembered what Twilight had said.

*"I'll come back as soon as I can. There are some things that I need to tell you."*

Reminded of the promise Twilight had made before they had both fallen asleep, Celestia walked over to her dresser to retrieve her crown and torc. Twilight would be back later today and more pressing matters required her attention at the moment.

Glancing at the brilliant gold hands on the delicate white clock on her dresser, she noticed how late it was. The clock's small and large hands pointed to the ten and five respectively. It was ten twenty-five in the morning, almost noon and well past the time she was supposed to be awake.

"Good morning, sister." Luna said with a falsely cheerful disposition as she gently opened and closed the door behind her. "I was so glad you finally got some decent rest that I didn't want to wake you for the sunrise. I know you haven't been sleeping well lately..."

Luna had tried to be supportive for her sister, but it was difficult. After everything she had gone through, she knew what it was like to lose someone. It was an unpleasant feeling and, no matter how hard you tried to push it away, it remained, tugging at your heartstrings and making every day a painful reminder of your loss.

"Luna!" Celestia replied sharply, smiling back at her sister. "I have wonderful news to share with you."

"Ummm. Is it about why you were sleeping on that awful couch?" Luna asked, desperately trying to smile.

"Actually, it is." Celestia replied excitedly. "Twilight was here last night Luna. She's alive!"

"Really!?" Luna asked in shock, "But what happened to her? I mean, where is she now?"

"Understandably, she wanted to go and tell her friends in Ponyville. I gave her my bed to sleep on last night, so I slept on the couch. She was in really bad shape, Luna. She had cuts and bruises all over her and the storm last night wasn't helping." Celestia replied, trying to answer all of her sister's questions.

Celestia paused for a moment, turning her head to look out the window at the flooded streets below. The storm had passed some time in the night, but it had left a trail of destruction in its wake. Plants were uprooted and many of the houses below were nearly flooded by the sheer volume of water that had accumulated. The city's inhabitants were running between the buildings, talking amongst themselves and trying to repair the damages from the storm. The repairs would take time, but time was something that Celestia always had an abundance of.

"But, she's coming back later today to tell me about what happened to her." the elder sister continued, beaming brightly as she ignored the ugly sight outside her room.

"So you don't know... what happened?" Luna asked with concerned look. "Everyone thought she was dead, Celestia, yet she shows up in your bedroom in the middle of the night?"

Celestia's pleasant smile persisted, "I know it's hard to believe, but this was very real, Luna. I can assure you, no part of me thought it was a dream."

"Well, we'll know when she comes back." Luna replied with a fake smile, trying to hide her doubt.

"Well actually, Luna," Celestia interrupted, her smile falling slightly. "I was hoping that you could watch over the political situation again."

"Oh... sure... I can do that." Luna replied hesitantly, disappointed that she wouldn't get to see Twilight.

"I promise you'll get to spend some time with her." Celestia said as the smile returned to her face. "I just want to make sure that everything starts running smoothly again now that she's back."

"There are some muffins in the dining hall if you're hungry. I guess Twilight's friends don't know she's alright yet."

Celestia turned back to the window and continued to watch the bustling crowd as Luna left the room and closed the door.

*I'll let Twilight surprise them, she thought.*

~

"Scribe, you may now start recording the events of today's assembly." Prairie Star said, glaring at the young pony in the corner that vigorously began writing on the paper sitting at his desk. "It is now one o'clock in the afternoon. The council assembly has now convened."

Prairie Star, a light brown earth pony with flat, golden hair running down the side of her neck, was the council's director. She kept the events of the assembly in order and provided a mostly unbiased opinion. It was

her job to speak in a monotonous and otherwise boring tone at all times in an effort to maintain her impartial status. It was something she had become exceptionally skilled at, but it had the unpleasant side-effect of making her a very dull and unattractive pony.

"As of yesterday, there are three articles on the agenda up for discussion." She continued, "The first order of business is regarding the recent political situation in Equestria. We left off with Lord Thunderhorn making the last comment. As it is written, 'We cannot let what has happened over the last few months destroy our lives and question the decisions of our ancestors. We must stick to the traditions this country was founded upon, lest we be carried away by the tide of change and make choices that we will eventually come to regret.'"

She sat in the largest seat at the great oak table at which she and all her colleagues were seated. The table, although battered from many arguments and flaring tempers, was a thing of beauty. The elegant legs spiralling down from six equally distanced places were complemented by the intricate carvings that detailed the surface. They told stories of grand events that had taken place over the course of history, both glorious and terrible and, although the top was once bare, it was now covered with a thick sheet of glass to protect the carvings from further harm.

"Sir Goldenroot, you now have the floor."

Sir Goldenroot was a pale green earth pony and a respected scholar who had been knighted several years ago, though the reason why was unknown. Upon hearing his name, he leaned in towards the table, glancing around once before stopping and making direct eye contact with Prairie Star.

"My thanks, Director."

On his flank was a rather elegant looking golden tree that, strangely, bore no leaves whatsoever. It was something he obtained while working as an arboreal researcher in his youth. He was always interested in the forests and the animals that lived within them, paying especially close attention to the Everfree forest near Ponyville. But as he grew older, he abandoned his passion in favour of politics. It was something that he felt he was good at,



being able to articulate his thoughts with ease and approach everything with a logical nature.

"My friends, it is a great tragedy that such a conservative thought would prevent us from changing this nation for the better. It is true, we have lived in such a way for many years, our lives going unaltered for as far back as we can remember, but does that mean we are the epitome of our organization? Is there nothing we can do to improve this system?"

"We have suffered a devastating plague for nearly half a year and only when things start to return to normal, do we seek to confront the issue. Why have we waited so long? Is it because of our structure, our lack of ability to realize our true problems?"

Goldenroot raised his voice sharply as he asked the almost rhetorical questions. His words were clear, everything perfectly understandable, yet at the same time, filled with such extravagant passion that he could have convinced an entire crowd to eat the hair off their own heads. The group sitting at the table, however, was conditioned to this type of speaking. They had heard speeches like this their entire careers and, although they were not completely unmoved, they were also not immediately persuaded.

"What Lord Thunderhorn seems to suggest is that we did nothing, because we could only do nothing. I do not believe this is so."

Goldenroot stopped speaking briefly to glance hard at Thunderhorn. The grey unicorn was listening to him attentively from across the room, his black hair, which had started to turn silver with age, shining in the sunlight.

"I believe that we are afraid of change, of what it can do to us and of what it can do *for* us. But we should not be afraid, for that would surely be unwise. Like the great pillars of stone that hold the roof above our heads, I remain solid in my conviction. I wish to expand the council by another five members, giving the duty to commoners. I believe they can benefit our great nation with the very knowledge we seem to lack. Unlike us, the commoners do not live a life of luxury, they feel the pain of the drought and the hunger of the food shortage, the hardest.

"Let this event open our eyes as it has opened theirs. They are no longer blind to our role. We cannot leave keep them out forever and nor

should we. It is through their greater wisdom that we can guide our nation to prosperity and pull ourselves out of the bowels of destruction, before it closes its gaping jaws upon us.

"With that, Director Prairie Star, I return the floor to you."

Goldenroot, satisfied with his argument, relaxed in his chair and let a small grin make its way across his face. Looking out across the table, he saw that Lord Thunderhorn was shaking his head slowly. He knew that Goldenroot had a point and he didn't like it.

Prairie Star acknowledged Goldenroot's final words with a single nod in his direction. "I realize that Sir Goldenroot's argument was directed towards you, Lord Thunderhorn, but we have been without Lady Vortex's opinion for far too long. Lady Vortex, you may now have the floor."

Lady Vortex, or Vortex as she preferred, was one of the only members of the council that regretted holding the position. A former member of the Wonderbolts, she liked to be on the cutting edge of the world. She wanted to be where all the action was, not with a group of squabbling nobles for such long periods of time.

She was elected to the position as the youngest member to date, sparking a decision by the council to institute a minimum age requirement of thirty years to all council applicants. But Princess Celestia decreed it to be unlawful to remove Vortex from the council with a technicality and refused to acknowledge any bill that suggested it, so the law would only apply to future applicants. At only twenty-five, she was elected into the assembly by vowing to give voice to the country's youth. The youngest members of the voting public, sick and tired of being excluded from important decisions, elected Vortex by a landslide. She trailed only Lord Thunderhorn in the polls, him being a conservative minded and retired general of the royal army that usually won over the entire elder population of Equestria.

"Alright. I see what you're getting at Goldenroot. You think that the commoners should be able to participate right?" Vortex said, looking directly at him.

When she actually started participating in the council; however, it became apparent to her what little power she actually held. Before anything got passed to Princess Celestia for review, it would have to receive three votes in its favour. Generally, this was an impossible task for her to pull off, so she had become mostly apathetic to the proceedings. Most other members of the council refused to acknowledge anything she said seriously, passing it off quickly and moving it aside. Only Goldenroot, who was always very logical and understanding, ever supported her.

"Well I can tell you this. I already know I'm not going to sway any opinions in my direction..."

She paused for a moment and glanced over at the brilliant white pegasus beside her, slowly working a brush through her long blue hair and completely ignoring Vortex's words.

"...so I'm not going to tell any of you how I feel about the whole thing until we vote on it." she continued, "You can have the floor back Star."

Her casual approach to the council was considered degrading to most and insulting to others. She refused to acknowledge the other members with their proper titles or sometimes even their full names.

"Lord Thunderhorn, you may now have the floor." Prairie Star responded, not taking her eyes away from the discourteous pony that was now stretching her legs and yawning loudly beside her.

"Thank you, Prarie Star." Thunderhorn said, nodding his head towards the distracted director.

His voice was rusty, but commanding. His stern glare would slowly turn and focus on each member of the council from time to time when he was making a point. On his flank, was a black cannon, a reminder of his former position as a general in the army.

"I don't quite understand where you're getting this Goldenroot. Why are you so certain that they will help us and not just create unnecessary conflicts within our society? Everyone is greedy in some sense and I don't believe you could ever convince me otherwise. If we give them the right to participate in the council now, they won't fix the problem of the drought.

They won't even think about the drought. They're going to be much more worried about taxation issues and how they're not being treated 'fairly'. I realize we have more than they do, in an economical sense, but we pay for everything they don't. If an earthquake shakes our house apart, we're the ones who have to pay for it. However, if the same disaster strikes their house, they get money from the government to make everything new again. And where does that money come from? It comes from us.

"Our positions grant us certain advantages, yes, but they also have a lot of disadvantages. It's our responsibility and we're blamed whenever anything goes wrong. It's out of our pockets that we fix the mistakes, so I don't understand why they should take the responsibility when they don't take the cost."

"This isn't about money, Lord Thunderhorn!" Goldenroot intervened, getting up from his seat and glaring at the grey unicorn, "This is about our well-being! Every single pony in this country is worth more than you could ever imagine. Whether they're a commoner or a noble, we cannot put a cost on life."

"We will have order Sir Goldenroot!" Prairie Star shouted. "I know that you may not approve of what Lord Thunderhorn has said, but you are not permitted to intervene while he is speaking."

Goldenroot, still furious with anger, slowly backed down into his seat and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a single hoof.

"It seems that we've reached the same point as yesterday and not everyone is able to remain sensible in our discussion." Prairie Star continued. "We will resume this topic tomorrow at one o'clock and bring a conclusion to this issue. We can't afford to squander any more time on this."

"Now, let us move on to the second article on the agenda, which discusses the idea of tax corrections and reimbursements during times of economic hardship. We left off with Lord Crescendo making the last comment..."

With the council assembly finished for the day, the young pony in the corner packed his things and headed out the door in a rush. With the exception of Goldenroot, the other ponies began to follow suit, getting up from their seats and leaving. Thunderhorn, with a small smirk on his face, looked over his shoulder once before heading out the door with Director Prairie Star and the other two council members that had remained inactive for the entire assembly. Vortex stayed behind, eager to speak with Goldenroot about the day's discussion.

"It's fun seeing you get all riled up like that." Vortex mocked.

The dark blue pegasus was leaning nonchalantly on the large table, one hoof propping her up. On her face, she shared a less menacing, but otherwise identical smirk to that on Thunderhorn's before he had left out the door.

"I can't believe how stubborn he is." Goldenroot replied, staring down into the carvings on the table. "Our ancestors accomplished so much, but we haven't done anything. In the five years I've spent in the council I've just sat here and argued with that old fool day after day. I want things to be different Vortex. I want things to be better. Not just for me or you, but for everyone in Equestria. We can't do that if we don't let the whole country help us."

Vortex, pushed herself upright and leaned over to Goldenroot. The smirk on her face had faded and was replaced by a look of complete sincerity.

"You've got my support. As long as you can find one other pony to back you up, we'll get this through."

She slowly began walking out of the room, turning her head back and flashing a smile at Goldenroot who was still staring at the delicate carvings through the thick sheet of glass, before leaving out the door.

Goldenroot continued to ponder the idea. Vortex was right, he only had to convince one of the other council members and the new law would be sent to Celestia for review. Since Thunderhorn was obviously not an

option, he would have to convince either Lady Wind Dancer or Lord Crescendo.

Before she joined the council, Wind Dancer was a celebrity. As her name suggested, she started her career as a dancer, but soon became involved in such things as modelling, acting, and singing. Her fame and fortune played a large part in the election and masked her misunderstanding of what it really meant to be part of the government. Only wanting to increase her fame, she was disappointed when she discovered that the council did quite the opposite. She was mostly apathetic of decisions within the council and favoured a conservative mindset. To her, change only meant that things would get worse, and she generally voted against every law suggested. If Goldenroot wanted to convince Wind Dancer to vote in favour of his law, then he would have to convince her that it was advantageous to her on a personal level.

Crescendo, a musical prodigy at the ripe age of fourteen, had conducted the largest orchestra in Equestria, the Equestrain Symphony Orchestra, in his late thirties. He retired nearly a decade later to apply for a position in the council. Unlike Wind Dancer, he was an extremely intelligent, but subdued individual. With every proposition, he would pick out the advantages and disadvantages, writing them down in his notes in case he ever needed to call upon them for reference. During the nine years he was a member of the council, he had never suggested a new law. Many mistook him for a conservative, like Wind Dancer and Thunderhorn, but the truth was that he was genuinely neutral. He was logical, like Goldenroot, but would only ever support a change where the gain drastically outweighed the loss.

Unsure of whether or not he would be able to convince either pony, Goldenroot decided to try and convince them both. It was now three o'clock in the afternoon, meaning they had only spent two hours in the assembly. That left Goldenroot with almost one full day to collect his thoughts, organize meetings with the two council members, and attempt to get them both on his side before one o'clock tomorrow.

"I guess I'm not getting any sleep tonight." He whispered to himself as he gathered his things and left the room.

# Chapter 3

The sun had almost completely vanished beyond the horizon when I arrived at the inn about an hour north of Canterlot. It wouldn't normally take so long to set, but Celestia was carefully extending the daylight, giving me a few extra minutes to make some progress. It wasn't much, but I understood why she may have felt guilty for sending me alone and wanted to help out as much as she could. I didn't blame her for my solitude. It wasn't her fault that I was alone. As a member of the nobility, I was well aware of the council's decisions and how they removed the escorts and researchers from my journey, stating various unreasonable excuses for their removal. Their reaction was almost expected, they had not always been immune to corruption over the years, but Celestia's was not. I had expected her to fight harder against the decision. It just felt like she had given up so easily. In a way I was kind of flattered. Did she really have so much faith in my ability that she was willing to accept the idea of sending me alone without a second thought? I don't know why she felt that way, but the fact that she did only intensified the importance of my journey.

The drought was getting worse and it was becoming more obvious every day. Ponies were eating less and working more. In the days before the expedition had even been mentioned, I hardly ever saw any of my friends. They were all just too busy with their lives to spend any time with a librarian in a tree. So I spent my time reading, writing and otherwise trying to extend my intellectual ability as I had done before I met them. It gave me some time to learn about the council in depth. I knew that the council was elected and that it served as a check on Celestia's power, but I didn't really know much about their exploits. Celestia had always been blamed or praised for everything that was done. Why? It was a question I was still asking myself, even here. I wanted to spend more time on the subject, but the journey had thrown me completely off balance, leaving me to traverse a whirlpool of confusion.

The distance I had travelled in the day had finally worn on me and I turned towards an old wooden building. A single lantern illuminated the word "Inn" written on a battered sign hanging below. I neglected the last

few minutes of sunlight and stepped through the doorway into the inn, pushing the heavy wooden door out of the way as I entered.

The room inside was warm, but not well lit. A wood burning stove sat in the corner of the room. The fire danced inside, making small cracking and popping noises as it moved. A rough wooden counter was positioned directly across the room where an elderly earth pony stared at me with a bright welcoming smile. Her mane was tied into a tight knot above her head. It reminded me of another old pony's similar hairstyle and brought memories flooding back to my head. They were memories of my first visit to Ponyville and how nervous I was about doing something so simple, making friends. It was all so very different to me. I lived most of my life in solitude, but what I experienced changed everything. I didn't want to be alone anymore, not when I didn't have to.

"Why hello there dear." she said, breaking the silence of the room and separating me from my memories. "We haven't had many travellers since the drought started. Are you here for a room?"

"Yes please. I don't need anything special, just a bed to sleep on." I replied, trying to smile back.

"Of course. It's forty bits a night, miss..?" her words trailing off as she tried to get my name.

"Twilight Sparkle."

I lifted some coins out of my bag and set them on the counter in front of the innkeeper. The coins clinked gently as I released my magical grasp and let them fall on top of the solid wood counter top. The old mare gathered up the coins and quickly slid a large book from out under the table, setting it down where the coins had been only moments before. She flipped open the cover and slowly turned the pages. Each page had names, signatures, and general information about the ponies that had stayed at the inn. Reaching a blank page, she grabbed a quill from a nearby ink pot and began to jot down my name and description as well as some other information.

"If you'll just sign your name here, Miss Sparkle, then I can get your room key." she said as she marked the paper with a small 'x'.



Wordlessly, I took the quill she offered me, copied my signature onto the book and replaced the quill to the ink pot. The old mare closed the book and grabbed a key from a small hook on the far wall, placing it gently on the counter in front of me. As I moved the key into my bag, the bright smile that had remained on her face suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a look of concern.

“You're not travelling alone, are you?” she asked.

“Not willingly.” I joked, trying to bring the smile back to her face. “I'm going to Prance on behalf of the princess.”

“But you're so young. Are you sure you're going to be alright by yourself?”

“Unfortunately, I don't really have a choice. Things aren't getting any better and I'm supposed to find out what we can do about it.”

“You're very brave Miss Sparkle. I don't think I would have the courage to go off and save the world like that.”

I laughed at the idea, but the innkeeper just smiled. I guess I never really thought about it like that. Saving the world seemed like the kind of thing that you read about in fairy tales, and legends. The heroes were explorers, saints and warriors, not librarians. I didn't believe that anyone would actually ever consider me to be a hero, but these were strange times indeed. I always believed that a single spark of hope could ignite a fiery passion that changes the world and sparks can be found in the most unlikely of places.

~

The next few days were uneventful. I left the inn and continued to travel north towards the border, stopping only occasionally to rest or eat. On the fourth day of my journey I reached the border. I never would have believed it would be so plain. A large wooden sign was engraved with the words “Bienvenue en Prance” and rested between two identical stone columns. This sign was the only thing that separated Equestria from Prance and my homeland from the complete mystery of the strange world

beyond it. I recognized the characters on the sign, but I was oblivious of its meaning. I had tried to learn the language while I travelled, but it was impossible to learn more than a few words in such a short time. Celestia had assured me that Le Roi Pierre was fluent in English and the map she gave me was well detailed, so I wasn't incredibly concerned. It was, however, an elegant and beautiful language in its own right. The strange words seemed to flow like water, unlike those in my native tongue that seemed to be more descriptive and harsh.

As I stared past the towering sign in front of me, I began to realize what little difference there was between our two nations. Both landscapes had rolling hills, patches of trees, and houses and farms spotted throughout the countryside. It was calming to think that one could be so far away from their home and still be reminded of it.

I continued on past the sign, enjoying the pleasant scenery and weather as the hot sun beamed down on my back. It was hot, but not unbearably hot. I followed the path until I was met with another sign on the edge of a great forest, this time with much more complicated words than those on the border. As their meaning escaped me, I ignored the words and continued on. The path quickly became a winding trail through the dim forest with only a few cracks of light seeping through the canopy and reaching the forest floor. It was strange, despite all its similarities to the Everfree forest, I was not frightened. Like much of the landscape before it, the forest brought back pleasant memories that reminded me of home. Memories that reminded me of the time I had spent with my friends and the adventures we had together. But my reminiscing was interrupted when I heard faint voices echoing through the wooded wilderness.

"These northern folk are the perfect victims. They just hand it over and run away." A voice called out from deeper within the forest and was followed by a cheerful laugh.

I stopped. I could understand what was being said on the path ahead of me, but it was unpleasant. Their words, laced with evil intentions, informed me of their purpose. Thieves, bandits, the worst kind of ponies, they picked on the weak and the innocent for personal gain and thought nothing of it. Celestia had kept vigilant watch over Equestria and crime was mostly a thing of the past, but she couldn't prevent what went on beyond the border. The bandits had obviously come north to avoid prosecution in

Equestria, believing that Prance wouldn't keep the same watchful eye over her inhabitants.

The voices continued, but they were quieter now. Had they heard me? I ducked behind a tree along the path and closed my eyes, trying to keep silent. My heart raced, trying to escape from my body and the danger it was in. I wanted to stop them, but I knew it was an impossible feat. I was alone and I could pick out at least four different voices on the trail ahead. Alone and afraid, I resorted to the only thing I could do. I glanced off into the darkness of the forest far beyond the edge of the path. I would have to move around them and hopefully meet up with the path further ahead. I could warn Le Roi Pierre of the bandits when I arrived at the capital, but I wouldn't arrive for a few days. By then, it would be far too late for anyone that encountered them.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here."

"Eeeekk" Startled, I let out a high pitched scream and backed up slowly.

A black pony with a white mane had snuck up behind me while I was looking into the forest. A red handkerchief was tied around his neck and, upon inspection, his flank was bare. The pony had obviously dyed his hair and covered his flank in an attempt to disguise his identity.

"A pony travelling all alone in the splinter forest." He continued with a smile. "The splinter forest isn't safe you know."

"I'm sorry if I interrupted anything. I'm just trying to get through." I said nervously while trying to collect myself and continuing to back up. "Eeeekk"

I bumped into another pony while moving backwards. His hair was dyed black and white, identical to that on the pony with the red handkerchief. Instead of a handkerchief, the larger pony that I now turned to face had an unusually messy mane. It was dirty and tangled and went in every direction. The pony stood silently, glaring down at me with a menacing grin.

“Oh you’re not interrupting anything. We’re just so glad you’re here.” The pony with the red handkerchief continued, his smile growing larger and soliciting a chuckle from a pony that had appeared on my right side.

The new pony was obviously female. She was smaller than the others, including myself, and her mane and tail were tied in several points with green bows that matched her irises. She walked gracefully up beside me and crossed her right foreleg in front of her left before she stopped laughing.

“We love getting clients.” She said as she resumed laughing quietly and staring at me.

“One more.” I thought to myself, counting the ponies around me as I stood next to the large tree I had tried to hide behind. “There has to be one more.”

“You see, we offer a service.” The pony with the handkerchief said. “We clear the path through the splinter forest and make sure it’s safe. Then we charge the ponies crossing through a modest sum for our trouble.”

In the corner of my eye I noticed a pony resting leisurely against a tree behind the pony with the handkerchief. He wore a dark brown cowboy hat that covered most of his face, revealing only the fat cigar that stuck out from under the brim. Puffs of smoke would gradually rise up from the red tip of the cigar and dissipate in the air above his head. He obviously thought that his participation was unnecessary and wasn’t even looking in my direction.

“I think it's a fair agreement.” he continued.

“But you look like the kind of pony that could afford to contribute a larger sum to our cause.” The female pony with the bows said, starting to laugh again.

I couldn't afford to give them my money or my possessions. I needed them. I depended on them. They were essential materials for my journey and, without them, I would be stuck all alone in a foreign country with no hope of returning. The realization of my cruel fate was horrendous and a flood of panic washed over me. What could I do? How could I get away? I

needed a plan. I needed to find a way to get away from here with my possessions, even if it meant fighting these brutes.

With this knowledge, I began to search the surrounding area. Above the pony with the messy mane was a large branch. Old and decaying, it could be easily knocked loose and appeared to be heavy enough that it could knock the pony out if it fell on him.

“Of course, if you made a large enough donation than we could give everyone else a free pass for the rest of the day.” The pony with the handkerchief lied. “I’m sure they’d be very grateful.”

The female earth pony laughed again, still crossing her front legs she wobbled from side to side, slightly unstable in the relaxed position.

“Actually, why don’t you just hand over everything? That would certainly save us all a lot of work.” He said as the smile on his face turned into a menacing glare.

He was standing near a large round moss-covered stone. It seemed light enough that it could be lifted, but heavy enough that it could still seriously injure someone if it was thrown fast enough.

“So how about it. You want to help a good cause?” The pony with the bows asked, laughing again.

“I’m not much of a philanthropist.” I replied, recollecting my thoughts.

The other ponies were obviously surprised by my reaction and they didn’t really have time to react to what I did. I reached out with my magic and snapped the large branch over the messy-haired pony. The old branch cracked and fell directly on top of the pony’s head. Simultaneously, I turned around and kicked hard at the pony with the bows. Aiming for her front legs, I knocked her off balance and she fell to the forest floor. The pony with the handkerchief started to leap towards me, but I hurled the moss-covered stone quickly at the side of his head and he fell over. Turning back, I checked to make sure that the messy-haired pony was out before I kicked the female pony as she tried to get up. My hoof landed firmly in her face and sent her hurtling backwards before she hit the ground unconscious.

“That was pretty impressive.”

The pony with the hat and the cigar was looking at me from the tree he was still leaning against. He pushed himself up and started walking towards me, his hat glowing as he picked the cigar out of his mouth and threw it carelessly onto the path.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” he continued.

“I read a lot of books.” I shrugged.

His brow furrowed. “Fine. I never assumed you would tell me the truth.”

He lifted the hat off his head and tossed it to the ground, revealing the horn on his head. As he neared closer, I noticed the moss-covered stone on the ground beside the pony with the handkerchief.

“I hope you know that I’m going to have to kill you now.” The unicorn said, forcing me to back away from him.

My heart beat faster. He was serious. I picked up the stone and threw it at the unicorn, just as I had done to the pony with the handkerchief. He caught the stone midair and threw it directly back at my face. I didn’t have time to react and it hit me in the mouth. He hadn’t thrown it very hard and didn’t cause any permanent damage, but my mouth had started to fill with blood and I staggered backward. My vision blurred for a moment before coming to focus on the unicorn again.

“I don’t want to be here.” I thought. “I want to go home. I want to be with my friends. I want to be with Celestia. I want to be anywhere but here.”

He laughed. “That was too predictable. Next time I won’t be so forgiving.”

“I don’t want you here. Go away.” I said, looking directly at the unicorn as my eyes began to water.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He said as he flashed a smile and his horn lit up.

I picked him up and threw him against the tree he had been resting on. He had tried to struggle, moving his legs frantically and using his magic to try and keep himself on the ground, but it was all futile. I had spent nearly my whole life building up my magical ability and there were very few ponies left on the planet that could surpass me.

As soon as he hit the tree and fell to the ground, I ran. I ran down the path and through the winding trail of the forest. Tears were filling my eyes and droplets escaped and fell to the ground below. My mouth hurt, but the reason for my tears was different. I didn't want to do this anymore. I didn't want to save the world or be a hero in a legend. I wanted to go home, but I knew I couldn't. I had to keep going. I had to keep running.

*"You're not travelling alone, are you?" she asked.*

*"Not willingly." I joked, trying to bring the smile back to her face.*

~

"I'm so sorry Twilight." Celestia interrupted as she stared at the ground ahead of her. "If I had tried harder... If I hadn't let you go alone, then none of this would have happened."

Celestia and Twilight were sitting in the throne room. Celestia had asked the guards to step out and give them some privacy when Twilight had arrived, so the two were alone now. They sat in the middle of the room, the sun bathing them in a warm orange light as it began to disappear over the horizon.

"I don't blame you for what happened, Celestia." Twilight said, trying to reassure the princess. "It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could do."

Celestia turned her head up and met Twilight's gaze, her eyes glistening in the remaining sunlight. "There were some others that I wanted to send with you, but the council believed more important matters required their attention."

"I know." Twilight said as she turned to look out the window and pull herself away from Celestia's eyes. "Sometimes I think the council is doing more harm than good."

"Sadly, I have to agree with you Twilight." Celestia said, looking down again. "They're different now. Everything they stand for has changed. When I made the council, I never expected anything like this to happen. Luna didn't deserve to spend a thousand years trapped in the moon and you didn't deserve to endure what you had to over the last few months."

Twilight looked away from the window and back at Celestia. The bandages covering her body were worn and covered with dirt from her recent travels to Ponyville. She had left well before the sun had risen in the morning and returned just before the sunset at the end of the day. It had given her barely enough time to tell her friends that she was alright, but not nearly enough to fully explain what had happened. She was going to return tomorrow so she could spend a more significant amount of time with them.

"But in the end, was it the right thing to do? Do you think the world is a better place now? Were the decisions made in everyone's best interests?" Twilight asked, pausing briefly before each question was raised.

"I don't know." Celestia replied as she turned to face Twilight. "That's something that I still have to think about."

"I don't know everything that happened on your journey Twilight. I want to hear more, but it can wait until you return from Ponyville. For now, let me help you with those bandages."

"But what about the drought?"

"I don't want to put any pressure on you right now, Twilight. I know this may sound naive and I do not wish to discredit your journey, but the complications of the drought are being washed away with the rain. Everything is finally returning to normal and the ponies need some time to settle before we make any drastic changes."

"The knowledge you have will be an important tool in the future, but it's nothing that can't wait until you're feeling better."



“I guess so.” Twilight said, disappointed that she was unable to help Equestria when it really mattered.

The two sat in silence as Celestia removed the bandages and focused her magic on healing Twilight's wounds. It was a long, straining process that required her full attention, something that she didn't want to jeopardize by holding a conversation. Twilight didn't mind the silence. She was busy thinking about her recent actions. Although Princess Celestia had tried to convince her that the journey had not been made in vain, the psychological pain she felt from failing Equestria overwhelmed the physical pain she experienced from her wounds. And even Celestia, with her nearly infinite power, could not heal those wounds. It was something that only time or retribution could repair and it would be a retribution that would almost certainly be directed at the council.

~

Goldenroot read through his notes. It was seven forty-five, fifteen minutes before he had to meet with Crescendo in his manor. Convincing him wasn't going to be easy, but Goldenroot had always lived with the opinion that nothing worth doing ever was.

As he started to make his way outside, there was a knock on the door. Three consecutive taps, unevenly spaced as if the pony outside the door was trying to recreate some kind of tune. Goldenroot swung open the door. He didn't have time to deal with anyone right now and certainly not the kind of person that would knock so strangely. He hoped to deal with them quickly so that he could carry on with the more important business ahead of him.

“Why hello there, Sir Goldenroot.” Vortex said, bowing her head slightly as she attempted to parody the most common greeting amongst the nobility.

She was standing casually on the step, her light blue mane and tail unusually tidy as it shimmered in the moonlight. Goldenroot blinked. He was surprised by her presence at this hour. She almost never came to visit him, so why would she show up now? Goldenroot was genuinely curious and the effort she had made to make herself presentable only added to that fact.

“Please, not now Vortex. I’m meeting with Crescendo in fifteen minutes.” Goldenroot replied, trying to sound annoyed and cover up his curiosity.

“But that’s exactly why I came.” She said, restoring her voice to a tone that Goldenroot recognized.

“How did you know I was going to meet him today?” Goldenroot asked, taken aback by the pegasus’ strange comment.

“At eight o’clock?” She said, smiling. “You’re kind of predictable, but that doesn’t matter. I came because I thought you could use some help. You seemed pretty serious about this whole thing when I talked to you about it in the morning.”

“Yes, I am serious about it and that’s precisely why I can’t let you come with me.” Goldenroot replied, still shocked that Vortex was able to correctly guess exactly what time he would meet with Crescendo.

“I’m not giving you a choice, Goldenroot. Trust me, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

Goldenroot sighed. “Alright let’s just go already.”

The two stepped out of the doorway and started on their way to Crescendo’s manor. It wasn’t far away, but Goldenroot couldn’t afford to be late, not with something so important. The streetlights illuminated various parts of the path, along with the light that shone brightly out of the houses nearby.

Goldenroot noticed the spinning torrent of water on Vortex’s flank. The water rushing around in a circle was chaotic, unpredictable and perfectly suitable for the type of pony that Vortex was. Goldenroot had always been curious how a pony could have a cutie mark that so accurately resembled who they were. He was aware that some ponies changed their name upon receiving their cutie mark, in fact it was commonplace, but the idea that a pony could have a name that accurately depicted the cutie mark they had yet to receive was marvellous.

Realizing that he had been staring at Vortex's flank for an unreasonably long time, Goldenroot quickly turned his head back and looked forward down the dimly lit streets. Out of the very corner of his eye, he noticed that Vortex was looking directly at him and smiling happily. Embarrassed, his cheeks turned red and he looked in the opposite direction.

"I thought you weren't interested in this kind of stuff." Goldenroot said, still looking away.

"I'm interested in the important stuff." she replied.

"Everything in the council is important, Vortex. It affects our lives. Big or small, every decision we make is important." Goldenroot said, turning back to look at Vortex as the redness in his cheeks disappeared.

"That's just your opinion Goldenroot." Vortex said, maintaining the pleasant smile on her face. "Taxes, construction, land subdivision, whether you can or can't spit on the sidewalk in the nobility quarter of Canterlot... None of that is important to me."

"It's not my opinion, it's a fact. The world changes when we make these decisions."

"I like you Goldenroot, but you seriously need to loosen up sometimes. You put too much value in being correct. It's not the end of the world to accept that you're wrong and move on."

"And do you think I'm wrong about all of this, about what were doing right now?"

The smile on Vortex's face faded. She was rarely ever serious about something, but when she was it was obvious.

"No. I believe in what you're fighting for. I may come across as apathetic sometimes, but I want to believe in a better tomorrow. Every once in a while I tend to forget, but you always seem to find a way to remind me of the reason I got caught up in all of this in the first place."

Goldenroot just smiled, Vortex returning the expression as they approached Crescendo's manor.

"It's just up ahead here." Goldenroot said, changing the subject. "I don't know what you plan on doing, but I would appreciate it if you let me do the talking."

"I don't mind. Personally, I just want to stick around and watch."

The two ponies moved quietly up the walkway towards the manor. A set of large dark brown doors were accented by two lanterns on each side, the flames inside burning brightly in anticipation of their arrival. On the base of each door was a large bronze plate that stretched the entire width. Traditionally, this plate was used for knocking. When a pony kicked the door with their hoof, it would prevent the door from being damaged by an overzealous knocker. Goldenroot kicked the plate twice in quick succession and moved back away from the door. They waited for about a minute before the door swung open and revealed a grey pony wearing a black suit and a tie. The pony had a tired look on his face, a result of his obvious ageing. He blinked twice and moved aside.

"Sir Goldenroot. Lord Crescendo is expecting you in his study." The butler said. "Shall I take you there?"

"That's quite alright. I know the way." Goldenroot replied as he and Vortex stepped through the doorway into the manor.

The manor was filled with extraordinary paintings, carvings, and statues. They were expensive works of art that dated well beyond the manor itself. Sitting on top of the brilliant marble floor was a single rug depicting a forest. The gnarled trees and winding path similar to that of the Everfree forest that Goldenroot had spent so many years occupying in his youth.

"I've never been in here before. Crescendo's got a pretty lavish lifestyle." Vortex remarked, stepping around the rug as she made her way across the main entrance and towards the study nearby.

The study was a spacious room. On the wall directly across from them was a large fireplace. It was not in use; however, and contained three

logs, neatly stacked on top of each other. Instead, the study was illuminated by a series of lamps that were placed sporadically around the room. Lord Crescendo was lying in a large cherry red sofa, sipping tea from a cup that floated in the air in front of him.

“Please, come in Sir Goldenroot. I was wondering when you were going to arrive.” Crescendo said, glancing in their direction and setting the cup on its corresponding saucer. “I wasn’t expecting you; however, Lady Vortex. Although, I suppose you have as much of a part in all this as we do.”

Vortex simply winked as Crescendo looked in her direction.

“Have a seat.” Crescendo continued, pointing to the two empty sofas placed around the table. “Would you care for some tea?”

“I think we’ll be fine, thank you. Tea’s usually more trouble than it’s worth when you’re not a unicorn.” Goldenroot said, raising his hoof in objection before lying down on the sofa. “I’ll be honest with you, I don’t want to beat around the bush. Let’s get straight to the point. I want the law to go through tomorrow and I want to know what your opinion is.”

“My opinion?” Crescendo asked. “You know me as well as everyone else. I have to be absolutely sure that this is going to benefit our nation. If we give the commoners a place in the council, do you really believe that they’re going to help and not just work against us? Not everyone is as virtuous as you are.”

“I can only hope that they will. The future is never certain, but it is not entirely unpredictable. We all live in this country together and, although our goals may vary slightly, we all want the same thing.”

“And what, may I ask, is that?”

“A life of happiness, of dreams and experiences that we want to remember. Not every memory is a happy one, but the ones you spend doing what you enjoy with your friends and family are the ones that you want to keep. I think everyone can relate to that.”

“And what if you’re wrong? What happens then?”

"If I'm wrong, then we won't really be able to make a difference anyway. The drought will come again and the commoners won't just stand around and starve while we continue to live a life of luxury. In our sheltered life, we don't wake up in the morning and wonder if we'll be able to eat today. Even if the price tag may fluctuate slightly, the food's always there and we can always afford it.

"They will rise up and overthrow both us and the princess. They will take our homes, our happiness, and perhaps even our lives. Why should I, or anyone else, sacrifice even a single happy memory when it is not required. I believe in this, perhaps more strongly than I have with anything else."

The three ponies lay in silence for quite some time after Goldenroot finished speaking. Crescendo gazed into his teacup, staring at the leaves resting in the bottom of the cup while Goldenroot waited quietly for his response. Vortex, who had been sitting silently for the entire meeting, slowly unfolded her wings and stretched them out before returning them to their original position. As she repositioned them back on her sides, Crescendo looked up from his teacup and at Goldenroot.

"I'm glad you came to see me tonight, but I still require some time to think about all of this. I believe the gravity of the situation is something that I have underestimated." Crescendo said, breaking the silence.

"I understand." Goldenroot said, getting up from the sofa. "Have a good night."

Vortex followed suit and the two walked out of the study and towards the main hall. As they did, Vortex looked back at Crescendo as he stared into his cup before taking a sip. The butler, appearing from nowhere, hastily moved towards the front door and opened it.

"Have a pleasant evening." said the butler as the two stepped out through the doorway.

"Do you really think he's going to help us?" Vortex asked as the door closed behind them.

Goldenroot stopped. He looked up at the moon and the stars as they pierced through the darkness of night and shone brilliantly in the sky.

“I don't know. I want to think so, but I don't want to take any chances.”

As they walked out into the street, Goldenroot looked at Vortex and stopped.

“I'm going to see Wind Dancer tomorrow. Would you like to come with me?” he asked.

Vortex shook her head and tail violently, restoring her naturally wild look before turning to Goldenroot and smiling. The moonlight sparkled in her amber eyes and across her light blue hair.

“I never thought you'd ask. Of course, you know I'd come anyway.”

“Yeah, but lately I've been enjoying your company.”

# Chapter 4

Goldenroot glared at the clock in his living room. It was almost nine forty-five in the morning. It had taken some persuasion, but he had organized a meeting with Wind Dancer at ten o'clock. Wind Dancer had very little interest in the law that Goldenroot was proposing and she made it very clear that she was going to be voting against it. It was only after Goldenroot convinced her that she might be overlooking an important side-effect of the law that she had agreed to meet with him. But Goldenroot had rather foolishly asked Vortex to tag along and now he was paying for the consequences.

"We were supposed to be leaving now." Goldenroot said to himself quietly, making his annoyance with Vortex's tardiness obvious. "Why did I ask her to come?"

He paced back and forth in the room, impatiently looking at the clock on the wall beside him. Goldenroot placed a high value on the concept of time. Everything always had to go according to schedule and, as a result, he tended to be early for everything.

"Forget it. I need to go." he said as the clock's large hand moved to indicate that a minute had passed.

He walked quickly to the door and swung it open. In front of him, sitting on the step, was Vortex. Her head was resting on her hoof and her face displayed a look of utter boredom.

"Hey! Good morning, sunshine!" Vortex said, lifting her head up as a bright smile formed on her lips.

**"What are you doing here!?"** Goldenroot yelled, more surprised than angry that she was on his doorstep.

"You said to be here by nine forty-five. I was here..." she paused, looking towards the sky as she tried to calculate the time. "...roughly ten minutes ago."



Goldenroot was flabbergasted. She had arrived ten minutes ago and she hadn't bothered to knock or do anything to notify him of her arrival. He had spent probably an equal amount of time worrying about her for no reason and now he was just standing speechless, looking at her as she smiled radiantly. It wasn't the kind of smile that led him to believe that she was playing a trick on him, but a kind of genuinely happy smile. She was happy to see him and just plain happy to be there.

"Why didn't you knock?" Goldenroot said, bringing a hoof to his face and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Because I knew you would come out here at nine..." she paused and looked at the sky again. "...forty-seven is it now?"

Goldenroot placed his hoof back on the floor and turned his head to look at the clock down the hallway. It was almost exactly nine forty-seven.

"How do you do that?" he asked in surprise.

Vortex's smile disappeared and was replaced by a look of complete sincerity.

"Oh come now, Goldenroot. I don't have time to explain that right now, we've got a meeting to attend. We have to leave right now if we're going to be there at ten." Vortex said, a smile quickly returning to her face.

Goldenroot simply started walking down the path and out onto the street with Vortex following close behind. As they entered the busy street, filled with ponies moving in every direction, Vortex moved up close beside him. Her mane and tail were perfectly groomed, just as they had been last night. Goldenroot wasn't exactly sure who she was trying to impress, him or Wind Dancer, but he was still flattered that she had made the effort.

"Are you nervous?" she asked.

"The decisions we make today could change everything. The butterflies in my stomach are practically a requirement." Goldenroot joked, turning his head to glance at Vortex as she moved along the cobbled road.

"I am too." Vortex said hesitantly.

"You're nervous?" Goldenroot asked, giving her a strange look. "I don't believe you."

"It's true. It's the first time since I was in the Wonderbolts."

"What about the election. You weren't nervous about that?"

"I didn't have to be. At the time, I was a famous celebrity. The celebrities always get elected. Just look at Wind Dancer. She didn't know anything about politics and, to be totally honest with you, neither did I. The only real difference is that I actually tried to learn. I don't know how you plan on convincing her to vote for this thing, but you're going to have to come up with something good."

"I have a plan." Goldenroot grinned. "I always do."

The two continued to follow the path to Wind Dancer's mansion. She lived in an outrageously large house that, despite resembling a castle, was really quite unspectacular. It was a simple stone box with a tower on one corner and only a few small windows. Instead, the focus was put on the surrounding garden. Several fountains, flowerbeds and hedge sculptures were meticulously arranged around the courtyard. The left and right sides of the pathway leading to the single wooden door at the entrance were almost perfect mirrors of each other. It was a reminder of how much importance Wind Dancer placed on such a fickle thing. She was an artist and appearance meant everything to her.

"These ponies are making me look bad." Vortex said, admiring the garden. "Everything's flawless. It's like the rainstorm never even happened."

"It's a result of having too much time and money." Goldenroot said as they approached the door. "She probably had everything replaced after the storm. Something like that would cost thousands of bits and a hundred workers toiling for hours on end."

Like Crescendo, Wind Dancer had a large bronze plate at the base of her door. It was much more extravagant; however, and several expensive jewels were attached to the corners in an attractive pattern.

“Kind of defeats the purpose, doesn't it?” Vortex mocked, pointing to the plate.

Goldenroot ignored her remark and kicked the plate twice. The door opened immediately and they were greeted by a tall, aggressive looking brown pony. His black mane was combed to the side and he wore a scarlet suit jacket and tie.

“Can I help you?” he exclaimed rather boorishly.

“We're here to see Lady Wind Dancer.” Goldenroot replied, taking a step back from the intimidating butler.

“Right.” the butler continued. “Wipe your hooves and follow me.”

Vortex and Goldenroot did as they were told and stepped through the doorway. With the butler leading the way, the three ponies traversed the narrow corridors of the mansion. Its stone walls were decorated with potted plants and paintings at regular intervals, more indicators of Wind Dancer's wealth and the value she placed on aesthetics.

At the end of the hallway were a set of doors, which the butler opened to reveal a large room with several deep violet sofas and an enormous window overlooking part of the garden. The sound of classical music filled the air as it played softly from a traditional record player in the corner. The room was very similar to the one in Crescendo's manor, but it lacked many of the intellectual components. Where Crescendo had shelves stacked with books of all subjects, Wind Dancer had instead large plants with wide leaves and delicate flowers. Where he had lanterns, she had expensive, magically infused jewels that glowed with a faint blue. Where he had a large desk filled with notes and documents, she had a wide table with an assortment of cutlery, dishes, and food. The room was used purely for relaxation and it all perfectly described the kind of interesting pony that Wind Dancer had become.

The pegasus was lying on the largest of the violet sofas. Like everything else in the house, her appearance cost a fortune. Her long, light blue mane and tail were crafted in exquisite detail, flowing down from the white coat on her body and resting peacefully against the violet fabric.

“Hello dears. Wonderful day we're having, isn't it?” Wind Dancer sang, shifting herself gradually from her relaxed position.

Her voice was soft and soothing. The words seemed to slide off her tongue and float through the air like a gentle breeze. It was no wonder that she became a singer following her career as a dancer.

“Indeed, but we have serious matters to discuss right now.” Goldenroot replied, staring at the beautiful mare on the sofa.

“Ah yes, you said you had something important to talk about, didn't you? For the life of me, I can't seem to remember what that was...”

“It's about the council.” Vortex snapped, slightly annoyed that she hadn't even remembered what they had come to talk about.

“But of course! No need to get snippy now, Lady Vortex.” Wind Dancer said as she glared at her. “A proper mare mustn't act that way in good company.”

Vortex rolled her eyes, “Right.”

“We want you to vote in favour of the law today. I know you don't really like the idea, but I thought I might be able to interest you in a certain side-effect that will take place if it goes through.” Goldenroot said, trying to change the subject.

Wind Dancer's deep blue eyes sparkled in the dim light offered by the jewels. She leaned back and relaxed in the sofa, her luscious hair falling to the side and dangling onto the floor. The music on the record player changed and started to play a lighter, supple melody.

“And what might that be, dear?” Wind Dancer asked, intrigued by Goldenroot's words. “You know I'm not going to vote for this unless it's really very good... for me, that is.”

"You selfish pig." Vortex whispered.

"What was that dear? I didn't quite hear you." Wind Dancer asked innocently.

"Uh, I was wondering if I could have some of the delicious looking appetizers that you have in the corner." Vortex said, turning her attention to the table on the side of the room.

"Help yourself dear, but don't eat too much. It's nearly time for lunch."

Vortex nodded politely and walked over to the table. She picked up an apple and took a large bite, staring curiously at Goldenroot as he gawked at Wind Dancer.

"Bringing us back to the point, I'm talking about a previous law that we have written in regard to council reform. It states that any time the number of council members changes, a general election must take place." Goldenroot said, blinking as Wind Dancer batted at her hair.

"And..?" Wind Dancer questioned, unable to grasp Goldenroot's hint.

"And that means the four year term is going to end at one."

Vortex swallowed hard. "What!?"

Goldenroot had spent most of the night searching for a way to convince Wind Dancer. After a few hours of flipping through dusty books and documents, he found an interesting law that stated the following: 'If the number of council members is permanently increased or decreased for any reason, an election must be held.' To Goldenroot, the justification was obvious. It prevented the council from making any potentially unethical decisions, like decreasing the number of council members in order to kick out anyone they didn't agree with.

"So I won't have to be a part of this dreaded council business anymore?" Wind Dancer continued, ignoring Vortex's comment.

"Exactly." Goldenroot said in conclusion.

“Interesting.”

“Does that mean you'll vote for the law?” Vortex asked in surprise.

“I will consider it.” Wind Dancer replied while looking out the window. “I still don't like the idea of those filthy commoners being a part of our government.”

Vortex frowned, clearly displeased by her response.

“That's all I can ask for, Wind Dancer.” Goldenroot said, finally taking his eyes away from her position on the sofa. “Have a nice day.”

He turned and started to leave the room with Vortex close behind. As they approached the door, Wind Dancer got up from her sofa and flew gracefully over to the record player, turning a knob slightly to increase the volume.

“Ta ta.” Wind Dancer sang, turning to smile happily at them as they left the room.

They had expected the aggressive butler to be outside, but he was nowhere to be seen, so the two ponies navigated the hallways back to the main entrance alone and in silence. Vortex was eager to talk to Goldenroot about the meeting, but a combination of the apple that she held in her mouth and her unwillingness to speak about Wind Dancer while they were still in her home restrained her thoughts.

As they reached the front door, the butler rounded a corner and swung the door open, watching them carefully as they exited. The moment the door closed behind them Vortex twisted her neck and sent the apple flying into the pristine flowerbed nearby, crushing some of the flowers and leaving chunks of apple strewn about the dirt.

“I hate that pony.” Vortex said, spinning her head back to face Goldenroot.

“Wind Dancer?” Goldenroot asked as he looked at Vortex, his eyes wide with surprise.

“She's obnoxious, arrogant, uptight... I can't believe she's actually considering voting for this thing just so she can get out of the council.”

“She just got caught up in something that she regrets. She wasn't like that before she joined the council.”

Vortex stopped when they reached the cobbled road and turned to face Goldenroot.

“I've got some things that I need to take care of.” she said abruptly. “I'll see you at one, Goldenroot.”

Before he could respond, Vortex shot into the air and disappeared. She may have quit the Wonderbolts to become a politician, but she hadn't lost her skill as a flier.

She just wanted to get away from him. She was jealous of Wind Dancer, the pony that seemed to have everything that she didn't, but more than anything, she was angry at Goldenroot for supporting her. She was furious that he was so impressed with her appearance and overlooked all of her negative features, waving them off with feeble excuses. *Was he really that shallow?*

~

After treating Twilight's injuries, for what she hoped would be the last time, Celestia decided to spend the remainder of the day dealing with the politics that she had been burdening Luna with over the past few days. The first item on the agenda was to go out and survey the damage caused by the storm. She would walk around the city to determine where help was needed most. Canterlot was split into quarters, with each quarter serving a different, vital purpose.

“Princess Celestia, are you leaving the castle?” one of the guards asked as Celestia approached the gate.

“Yes, but I’m only going to wander around the different parts of the city. I don’t need an escort.” she said, smiling at the stone-faced guard standing to the right of the gate.

“With all due respect, your Highness, the sergeant has ordered us to accompany you.” the other, female guard, replied. “Some of the city’s inhabitants are unhappy with how you handled the drought situation and it could be dangerous.”

“I’ve realized that some of my actions were...” Celestia paused, turning to look past the guards and out into the streets. “...inappropriate, but I can’t believe that anyone would want to hurt me.”

The female pony nodded, “The very thought is resentful indeed, but it’s our duty to keep you safe and even the smallest threat must be taken seriously.”

“Very well. I’m inspecting the damages from the storm. I expect you to follow quickly and take notes for me.” Celestia said, sighing as she floated a quill and paper in front of the female guard.

She walked out through the gate and into the first quarter of the city, the two guards following close behind and occasionally glancing from side to side as they moved. The government quarter, which they now occupied, mostly consisted of the castle and the royal army’s headquarters. It was here that all the important political decisions were made and the royal army was trained. Apart from the castle, the structures in the government quarter were very ordinary. Solid brick, they were built to be functional and stand the test of time. Any embellishments to their design would be impractical and unnecessary. The results of their sturdy construction were impressive and the buildings had taken very minor damage from the storm. A few shingles were missing, windows were cracked or broken, and plants were uprooted and drying in the hot sun, but it was nothing a couple hours of work couldn’t fix.

“Please take a note.” Celestia said, glancing back at the guards. “The government quarter is mostly undamaged. It would be unwise to allocate our resources to its minor reconstruction at this time.”



The guard quickly jotted down the note and rushed forward to keep up with Celestia as she continued down the path towards the nobility quarter. The nobility quarter was where all the most prestigious citizens had built their homes. The houses were architectural marvels, huge, magnificent buildings that were worth incomprehensible amounts of money. Even the smaller structures, which stood like rocks among mountains, were impressive. Made of only the most expensive materials, they stood on large plots of land with extravagant gardens. It was usually a serene, peaceful place, but amongst the buildings was a flurry of activity. Ponies hammered on rooftops, dug in gardens, and pulled carts filled with wreckage. The residents of the nobility quarter had their own incentives for working. They lived in a society that placed a high value on appearance and anyone who failed to meet the expectations quickly became an outcast. Most of the nobility was more than willing to dig out of their own pockets to maintain their worth in the eyes of their neighbours.

“Please take another note.” Celestia said, calmly looking around at the extensive construction. “The nobility quarter is damaged, but most of the citizens have already started on the repairs. They should be offered compensation for the damages, but government organized reconstruction will not be necessary.”

The male guard intervened. “Princess Celestia, if I may.”

Celestia turned and nodded at the pony.

“The nobility would never accept handouts. I think we may even be insulting them by offering.” he continued.

“If even one pony accepts our offer, then it is worth offending thousands of others.” Celestia replied, smiling kindly at the guard.

Celestia turned back and walked towards the next quarter of the city. With her head turned, the two guards beamed at each other, both proud to serve under such a noble and dignified ruler. It was a cruel fate that such a caring pony had to endure such a difficult life, but perhaps that was the only reason she had the courage to do so.

The three ponies carried on into Canterlot’s center of trade and business. Ponies from all over Equestria would arrive in the market quarter

to sell their goods and, as a result, the market quarter had the largest variety of commodities in the entire country. Everything from simple apples and bread to ancient artefacts and luxurious dresses could be found in the hundreds of shops and stalls. But the market was not quite as Celestia had remembered. It was now barren and empty with many of the shops closed and the stalls missing. What little that remained was poorly supplied and maintained, selling inferior produce or substandard clothing and wares. Shocked by the unsettling condition, Celestia approached one of the stands selling small, weathered vegetables.

“Princess Celestia, your highness! It’s a pleasure to see you in the market again.” The shopkeeper said, bowing his head slightly as she approached.

“What’s going on? Is this from the storm?” Celestia asked, looking around at the pathetic vegetables on the counter.

“The storm was a blessing, your highness. No, what caused this was the drought.” he replied, lifting his head back up to look at the princess. “At first, the drought only hampered our sales and production. But after time passed and the weather worsened, we just lost everything. Nothing would grow in the arid soil and what little we had left was drying up and dying.

“Many ponies have refused to sell their crops, relying on what they have left to survive, but my family won’t sit and watch our friends starve to death. We’ve continued to sell our produce, despite its less than satisfactory condition. Most ponies aren’t picky these days, they’re just happy to have something to eat.”

“And what of the other vendors?” Celestia asked, turning her head to glance around at the empty shops. “The ones that sell clothes and furniture, what happened to them?”

“At the moment, only the nobility is willing to spend their money on non-essential goods and most of what they buy is special order.” the shopkeeper shrugged. “Basically, if you aren’t selling something that can feed your family, no one is going to buy it.”

“I see. Thank you for your time.” Celestia said calmly as she turned and walked away from the stand.

“It is always a pleasure to assist your royal highness.” the shopkeeper said, bowing again as she left.

“Please take a note.” Celestia said, staring off into the distance as the female guard reached for the quill and paper. “The market quarter...”

She drifted off, unable to finish her sentence as she stared into the distance. Tears were welling up in her eyes as memories of the market quarter drifted back into view. Even when she was very young, the market had always been the same. It was a beautiful place that stole away your troubles and sadness, leaving you with only a senseless joy. Young fillies and colts played amongst the bustling crowds, their parents watching them carefully as they wandered around the stores. Colourful banners hung proudly over shops filled with all kinds of interesting knick-knacks and the delicious smells of cooking food. Laughter and excitement filling the air as entertainers from all over the country put on wondrous demonstrations of their talent and theatrics. Firework displays and dancers, clowns and magicians, they were always the focus of attention in a bizarre, almost surreal world and Celestia loved it all.

All of that had changed now. Everything was gone. The empty streets, boarded up shops and foul stench of rotting food sweeping away the memories and bringing her back to the harsh reality. The country wasn't getting better as she had once believed. Even with the weather returning to normal, the footprint of the drought would never truly vanish until someone did something about it. It would linger in her thoughts like the foul stench of rotting food. It was the disaster that she had failed to prevent and it was the bleak future that lay waiting for them if she refused to change.

“Are you alright, Princess Celestia?” the female guard asked, still waiting behind her with the quill.

Celestia lifted a hoof to her face and wiped away the tears discretely. “I think I want to go back to the castle now. I'll finish surveying the damage later.”

“Of course, your highness.” she responded empathetically, placing the quill and paper in her bag.

~

“Scribe, you may now start recording the events of today's assembly.” Prairie Star announced, glancing at the young pony in the corner. “It is now one o'clock in the afternoon. The council assembly has now established.”

Her words and actions were identical to what she had done and said yesterday. The whole process had become routine for Prairie Star and now she failed to show any emotion whatsoever.

“Today, we will decide on the law that Goldenroot proposed nearly a week ago.” she continued, looking around the table at the five other members of the council. “The standard voting procedure applies. Every member gets one ballot. When you're ready, make a mark on the ballot to select your choice, fold it in half and place it in the box.”

Prairie Star lifted a large wooden box out from underneath the table and placed it in front of her. The box closely resembled a chest with a golden frame and several elaborate patterns covering the surface. In the very centre of the lid was a small horizontal opening, just barely large enough for a slip of paper.

“As always, there will be no formal debate immediately before the poll.”

Leaning forward, she opened the chest and removed the contents, placing five identical slips of paper in the middle of the table. Each slip of paper had two words, ‘support’ and ‘oppose’, spaced equally apart from each other and next to a small box. The ponies around the table each took a ballot, sliding it across the table into their immediate vicinity.

Goldenroot, who had made his decision long before anyone else, was the first to vote. After marking a small 'x' next to the word 'support', he folded the ballot and placed it in the box. Leaning back in his seat, he quietly observed the other ponies as they followed a similar procedure. Thunderhorn was the next pony to insert his ballot, lifting the paper with his magic and navigating it through the opening. As the light shining from his

horn disappeared, he turned his head and confidently smirked at Goldenroot.

Goldenroot frowned slightly and thought to himself as he predicted the outcome. *One to support, one to oppose.*

Vortex followed closely after. She slid the ballot through the opening and leaned back, winking at Goldenroot from her position across the table. Her light blue hair had resumed its untamed appearance. It was fascinating and beautiful at the same time. It flowed like the trees in a forest, each individual strand bending and twisting as she moved.

Noticing, Goldenroot smiled back. *Two to support, one to oppose.*

Wind Dancer was next. She carefully folded the ballot, leaned forward and pushed it through the opening. As the ballot fell to the bottom of the box, she relaxed in her chair and flashed a smile at Goldenroot. His mind raced as he tried to figure out what she was thinking. The smile was cryptic and it masked her true intentions. *Is she smiling at me because she knows it's going to fail, or because she knows it's going to pass?*

Lost in thought and unaware of his surroundings, Goldenroot completely missed Crescendo quickly mark his ballot, fold it and place it in the box. As the paper quietly hit the bottom of the chest, Goldenroot snapped back to reality. Everyone had voted and it was now merely an issue of counting the ballots.

"I will now open the box and reveal the contents." Prairie Star said, describing her actions as she leaned forward and threw open the lid.

"One ballot, support." She announced, placing the piece of paper on the table so the rest of the council members could see. "One ballot, oppose."

Goldenroot's face turned pale. If the count was so close, so early on, then it would still be close. It was entirely possible that he hadn't convinced either Crescendo or Wind Dancer.

"Two ballots, support."

Goldenroot's expression changed immediately to a bright smile. *Only one more vote.*

"Three ballots, support." Prairie Star continued.

Goldenroot's smile spread across his entire face now. Raising a hoof to conceal his grin, he desperately tried to restrain himself from jumping out of his seat and shouting in triumph. Looking across at Vortex, he noticed that she also had a bright smile on her face. In fact, everyone in the room, including the director, was smiling to some degree except Thunderhorn, who was displaying a rather furious frown on his wrinkled face.

"And just for the record," Prairie Star said, taking note of the expressions around the table. "Four ballots support."

Thunderhorn had been the only pony in the room to vote against the law. Whether Goldenroot had managed to persuade them, or if they had made the decision on their own terms was a mystery, but one that he didn't care to solve. It didn't matter now. The law would be passed on to Celestia for review and was out of their control.

"The law has been approved and a formal declaration will be written tomorrow to be passed on to Celestia. I think some of you want to celebrate, so we're done for today. Scribe, you may stop recording now. We will resume tomorrow at one o'clock."

Goldenroot jumped from his seat and bolted out of the room. Vortex quickly gathered her things and flew out after him, barely making it through the door before it closed. When she got outside, Goldenroot was just staring up into the sky. A light wind was blowing through the air and the sun was shining. There were some dark clouds in the distance, but they wouldn't disturb the weather until tomorrow.

"Are you alright, hotshot?" she asked, tilting her head to the side slightly as she approached him from behind.

"This is monumental! Everything is going to change now. Everyone will have a voice in the government, not just the rich and famous." Goldenroot turned towards her with a huge grin on his face. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

“Okay, but only if you promise to not spend the whole time eyeballing Wind Dancer.” She joked.

Goldenroot blushed, “Well it worked, didn’t it?”

Vortex shook her head slowly, grinning at Goldenroot. “Yeah, nice try.”

~

“Sister, I have the council summary report. Would you like to see it now?” Luna asked as she walked towards Celestia.

Celestia was sitting in the throne room, her multi-coloured mane flowing around her like a river. It was early in the afternoon and the sun shone through the windows at a steep angle, illuminating small patches of the marble floor. The guards at the entrance were like statues, with only their eyes moving to follow Luna as she approached her sister’s throne.

“Yes, I would.” Celestia said. “Thank you Luna. I really appreciate your help with all of this.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” Luna smiled as she passed the documents to her sister.

The two quietly smiled at each other in silence. Celestia took the documents and set them down next to her throne, refusing to take her eyes off her sister. As the documents settled on the floor and the light from her horn vanished, Celestia’s smile disappeared.

“Do you remember when we used to go to the market with mom and dad?” she asked, her eyes sparkling as tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

Luna’s smile fell and she nodded slowly.

“We used to go together and eat at that one restaurant.” Celestia continued softly. “The Purple Turnip.”

Luna stared at the marble floor below, the small grey discolorations snaking through the brilliant, reflective white.

“And we would always have their famous turnip soup.” Celestia said, tears rolling down her cheeks as she remembered her parents.

Luna smiled weakly. Their parents had passed away only a few years before she turned into the vicious Nightmare Moon.

“I hated turnips.” Celestia chuckled, shaking the tears from her cheeks onto the red carpet resting on the marble floor beneath her. “But it wasn’t about the soup or the restaurant. It was about spending time with the ponies we loved.”

Luna sobbed quietly, “I miss them, Celestia. I miss them so much.”

“I went to the market quarter today.” Celestia said, looking away from her sister and outside the window. “There’s nothing there. The ponies, the shops, the food, they’re all gone. Everything’s gone.”

“I know. I was there too...” Luna said. “I just didn’t want to tell you... It’s hard, sister.”

“It’s my fault, Luna. I’m sorry.” Celestia replied. “I didn’t want any of this to happen.”

Luna leaped forward and held onto her big sister tightly, closing her eyes and nuzzling against her neck. Her warm tears soaked the side of Celestia’s neck and she wrapped her great wings around Luna, pulling her closer. After some time, Celestia slowly unfolded her wings and pushed away. She smiled and wiped the tears away from her face.

“I’m going to fix my mistakes, Luna.” Celestia said. “And when I do, I want you to come with me to the market again.”

Luna looked up and smiled hopefully. “I’d like that.”



Luna turned around slowly and walked out of the room. As the doors closed, Celestia lifted the documents by her throne into full view. Trying to pry her thoughts away from her sister, Celestia flipped through the documents. They detailed the events of the assembly, describing every word and action of each member for the past two days. Beside each line was a note by the Scribe. It was intended to be purely factual, but occasionally hinted at his personal opinion.

*Director Prairie Star: "It is now one o'clock in the afternoon. The council assembly has now convened." Current date and time is as follows: Third day of the ninth month, thirteenth hour and first minute. Assembly started one minute later than planned.*

*Director Prairie Star: "As of yesterday, there are three articles up for discussion." The articles in question are as follows: food allocation among the noble classes, taxation and reimbursement during times of economic hardship, and council reconstruction to accommodate the non-noble inhabitants.*

Celestia repeated the notes quietly to herself. "Council reconstruction to accommodate non-noble inhabitants?"

She turned her head to look outside the window. Dark clouds were just barely visible in the distance, swirling madly as they approached the castle.

*They want to change the council so that it includes the commoners,* she thought, raising a hoof to her face as she contemplated the idea. *Why would they want to do that?*

She continued to read through the notes, flipping quickly past the pages that described Goldenroot's speech in support of the law. The scribe had labelled many of the lines with evidence to support or deny the claims made and a certain line caught her attention.

*Sir Goldenroot: "We have suffered a devastating plague for nearly half a year and only when things start to return to normal, do we seek to confront the issue. Why have we waited so long? Is it because of our structure, our lack of ability to realize our true problems?" Officially, no law*

*was suggested by the council to Princess Celestia to make any effort to improve the critical situation caused by the drought.*

*It's all just nonsense, she thought, slightly taken aback by what she read. They did nothing. After all the time that's passed and everything that's happened, they did nothing. They only claim to be thinking about the drought, but they instead spend all their time on council reform.*

Trying to calm herself, Celestia skipped to Vortex's very brief opinion on the issue.

*Lady Vortex: "I already know I'm not going to sway any opinions in my direction, so I'm not going to tell any of you how I feel about the whole thing until we vote on it." This stance is common for Lady Vortex. She has refused to share her opinion on many of the issues presented in the council.*

*They don't even seem to work together, Celestia thought. How can anything ever be accomplished if they won't open up and share their opinions about the issues? Is this why nothing was done about the drought?*

Celestia was enraged by the council summary report, shaking with a seemingly overwhelming anger that dispelled her immense sorrow from only moments before. Everything they did seemed either inefficient or just plain pointless. Trying to contain her anger, she noticed Thunderhorn's openly aggressive rebuttal.

*Lord Thunderhorn: "I don't quite understand where you're getting this Goldenroot. Why are you so certain that they will help us and not just create unnecessary conflicts within our society? Everyone is greedy in some sense and I don't believe you could ever convince me otherwise. If we give them the right to participate in the council now, they won't fix the problem of the drought. They won't even think about the drought." Lord Thunderhorn places a strong value on traditions. Anything that goes against tradition is usually met with harsh disapproval from him.*

*And when they try to change things, they're shut down immediately like this? It's not that they can't change, it's that they don't want to, Celestia thought. How could I let this go on for so long?*

Celestia closed her eyes, trying to forget about the council. Breathing slowly and relaxing, her thought's wandered to the conversation she had with Twilight.

*"But in the end, was it the right thing to do? Do you think the world is a better place now? Were the decisions made in everyone's best interests?"*

*No Twilight. The answer to your questions, all of them, is no, Celestia thought as she lowered her head, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. I was a fool to let you leave for Prance on your own. I was a fool to keep Luna, my own sister, imprisoned in the moon for a thousand years. It wasn't the right thing to do, the world isn't a better place and the decisions were only made in the best interests of the ignorant council I created.*

It was like a waterfall of sorrow and regret, washing over her in a single moment she was reminded of all her failures over the years. The council had only ever been a crutch. She had tried to let them take the responsibility, her responsibility, for all the decisions made. It was a mistake to think that she could share the burden given to her at birth. She was an alicorn, a member of the royal family, and she alone was responsible for the well-being of everyone in Equestria.

Celestia's tears began to fall toward the ground. Her concentration on her magic failed and the pile of documents being held in front of her was released. Like leaves falling from a tree, they separated and scattered across the room, coating the floor beneath in a thin layer of paper.

"Princess Celestia! Are you alright!?" One of the guards asked as he rushed to her side.

"I've hurt the ones closest to me and betrayed my family's trust. I've made some serious mistakes," Celestia said, turning her head slowly to look up at the guard standing attentively by her side. "But it's okay. I know how to fix them."

# Chapter 5

“You know, Goldenroot, I think you live just a teensy bit too close to the council assembly.” Vortex said, glancing out the window near the door.

“It saves me a lot of walking.” Goldenroot said, looking up into the dark, clouded sky as he headed out the door. “Besides, I don’t like spending too much time outside on a day like today.”

“Almost makes me happy that we’ll be spending nearly the entire day arguing in a stuffy room.” Vortex joked, smiling as she slipped out behind him.

Rain was pouring down and soaking the path beneath them. The two ponies walked towards the council assembly, dodging the large puddles that accumulated in the cavities of the road. The water rippled in the pools as the droplets randomly broke the surface and sent tiny waves crashing against the shore like miniature lakes.

“It’s not that stuffy.” Goldenroot replied, grinning at the Pegasus. “I have to admit that this is a fairly dull part of the process. Mostly everything about the law is written in the records already. We’re only checking over the wording and making sure we don’t leave any loopholes.”

“A few of us are going to feel pretty apathetic about the whole thing. We’re all getting the boot if the law is accepted and then we have to decide whether or not we want to come back.” Vortex said, kicking a small rock along the path.

Realizing that she was referring to herself, Goldenroot stopped in his tracks and turned to face the blue pegasus with a concerned look. Her mane lay flat against her body and her tail hung uselessly between her legs, wet from the downpour.

“You’re not going to run for re-election?” he asked quietly.

“I’m still thinking about it.” she answered, sending the rock hurtling into the bushes nearby and gazing up at the huge structure in front of her.

The building that housed the council’s assemblies was almost completely characterless. Only recognizable by the illustrious stained glass windows at the entrance, it was essentially a large stone rectangle with a peaked roof. The building had sustained damage from the storm that had ravaged the city only a few days ago, but it was minor and only a few shingles were missing. The repairs had obviously been marked as a low-priority objective since it was difficult for the building to become any less attractive from a few scuffs and scrapes. It was just plain ugly and there wasn’t much that anyone could do to change that.

Vortex turned her head and smiled brightly at the stallion. “I want to continue working in the council, but it’s for all the wrong reasons. I just don’t think my heart really belongs in politics.”

Goldenroot pulled the heavy door leading into the building open, and stood to the side. “Well I’m certainly going to miss you if you leave.”

“You’re not going to lose me that easily. I just wouldn’t be in those boring council meetings anymore.” Vortex said, walking through the opening Goldenroot had created.

Goldenroot smiled happily at her reaction and followed after her, letting the door close behind him. The interior of the building was decorated with several tapestries and potted plants, but they were worn and unevenly spaced. It almost reminded Goldenroot of the corridors in Wind Dancer’s mansion, but the tasteless arrangement rushed the memories away. To add even more distinction between the two areas, the government building had large, wide hallways that allowed many ponies to walk among them without disturbing each other, vastly different from the restricted passageways in his fellow council member’s house.

“You had your own ways of making things interesting.” he said.

“So did you.” Vortex laughed. “You must have blown up at Dancer and the general a dozen times each.”

“Lord Crescendo had his fair share too,” Goldenroot smirked, “although it was definitely a lot less often.”

“I can’t believe you actually made Dancer cry about the luxury tax increase.” Vortex said, laughing more loudly.

She then attempted to mock Wind Dancer by raising her voice and putting a hoof to her chest dramatically. “Oh boo hoo! You just don’t understand my needs, Sir Goldenroot! I have to wear expensive make up and spend three hours on my hair every morning!

“Hahaha!!”

Vortex’s overenthusiastic laugh echoed through the spacious hallways. It was odd, the hallways were wide for a reason, but that reason was hiding in the shadows, unwilling to reveal itself. A building that was usually clamouring with activity, was completely vacated and the pair hadn’t seen anyone since they entered, not even the guards that diligently patrolled the halls.

“I didn’t mean to offend her.” Goldenroot said, ignoring the oddity and grinning stupidly at her impression. “I just got really caught up in the moment.”

“She gets offended way too easily anyway. She’ll be offended the moment we walk through this door.” she said, trying to shake the water out of her mane and tail. “We’re late and totally drenched. That’s all the reason she needs.”

Goldenroot flinched as Vortex flicked water at him. When she stopped, he turned his head to look at the clock just outside the room. It was fifteen minutes past one and he was late for something for the first time in ten years, but he didn’t really mind. He was in a good mood today. Everything seemed to be working in his favour lately and he didn’t feel like getting upset at something so minor.

Ignoring the water in his own hair, Goldenroot opened the door to the council assembly and smiled at Vortex, waiting patiently for her to walk through the entrance. Speechless, the dark blue pegasus simply glared through the opening and into the room. Concerned, Goldenroot gradually

turned his head and peered through the doorway. The room was almost completely empty. The great table, with all its intricate carvings that had been so delicately preserved over the years, was gone and replaced by three figures, which Goldenroot immediately recognized as Princess Celestia and her royal guards.

“Princess Celestia, is something wrong?” Goldenroot asked anxiously, water dripping from his soaked body and pooling on the floor beneath him. “What are you doing here and where is everyone?”

“I was waiting for you two.” she said, calmly smiling back at them. “You’re both late. The others have already been notified.”

Goldenroot displayed a very confused expression, “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“Do not worry, Sir Goldenroot. They’re probably just sitting at home, enjoying all the nice rain we’re having.”

“Why aren’t they here, in the assembly?”

“The assembly doesn’t exist anymore.”

Goldenroot stood in silence for a moment. Celestia’s words just seemed to flow so effortlessly that it was difficult to grasp the severity of what she had just said. *The assembly doesn’t exist anymore..?*

“I don’t understand.” Goldenroot said, giving her a blank stare.

“Your services are no longer required, Sir Goldenroot. Please go home.” Celestia said, turning around to face the back wall.

As he became aware of the situation, Goldenroot’s momentary disbelief disappeared and was replaced by a strong hostility towards the princess. The council, which had existed for a thousand years, had vanished in an instant and taken with it all the progress he had worked so hard to achieve. He strongly believed that the council was the most important part about the government, even more important than the princess herself. The council served as the representatives of the country’s

diverse inhabitants and gave voice to their plight. Even without the commoners, it was the essence of the equality Goldenroot believed in.

“You can’t do this! We’re an essential part of the government. You can’t just remove us from the equation!” Goldenroot shouted.

Sensing the aggression, the two guards moved in front of the princess and glared at Goldenroot. Undaunted by the pair of golden armoured ponies, Goldenroot walked closer, fire burning in his eyes.

“Calm down! We don’t know the whole story.” Vortex intervened, trying to remain composed. “Princess Celestia, how can you just tell us all to go home? Goldenroot has a point. We’ve been a part of this government for a thousand years.”

“I can show you the official records if you like, but technically every action of the council was considered to be treasonous and punishable by law for acting against the current ruling monarch of Equestria.” Celestia replied. “You don’t have any power... You never did.”

“What about everything we’ve done? Everything we’ve accomplished!?” Goldenroot exclaimed. “You created us to help you!”

“Please go home, Sir Goldenroot. I don’t want to have to use force.”

“This doesn’t make any sense, why are you doing this now!?”

Celestia lowered her head. “Because I was wrong. Twilight helped me realize that. The council forced me to deviate from the path I was destined to follow. I was born to lead this nation and I can’t place that burden on anyone else. The council was an artificial creation that I used as a scapegoat. It was all just a lie.”

Goldenroot stopped moving and stared at the princess. She was carrying all the blame for the drought on her shoulders and she made no effort to conceal her misery. Celestia’s pain stung like daggers in his heart and he was ashamed that he had lashed out at her. She didn’t deserve that and she didn’t deserve to carry the weight of an entire nation by herself.



“Princess Celestia, please don’t do this. I know we failed you during the drought. We failed Twilight Sparkle and we failed Equestria, but we can still help you fix this.” Goldenroot said, cautiously approaching the princess. “You don’t have to do this alone. I know that it might feel that way sometimes, but it’s not the truth.”

“It’s not just the drought, Goldenroot!” Celestia shouted. “Ever since that day a thousand years ago, everything that we’ve done was wrong... I’m hurting the ones I care about the most. The council was a mistake and I intend to fix it.”

“Princess Celestia...”

“Please Goldenroot...” Celestia interrupted, lowering her voice slightly.

She gently turned around to face the pale green stallion with an intimidating gaze. Suspicious, Goldenroot looked past her harsh stare. This wasn’t the princess he remembered. He knew that somewhere, deep inside, she was scared of what she was doing.

Celestia closed her eyes and looked away. “This isn’t easy for me to do. I know that you think you can help, but you have to trust me. I’m tired of pretending that everything is just going to all work out in the end. These are my mistakes and I alone will correct them.

“So please... Just go home, Sir Goldenroot.”

The pale green stallion stood motionless, watching the princess still hanging her head. She looked so weak, so helpless, but what could he do?

Vortex moved beside Goldenroot and placed a hoof on his shoulder, causing him to break his stare and face the pegasus. Her comforting gaze met his, the amber eyes glistening in the faint light and calming his nerves.

“Come on.” she whispered. “There’s nothing we can do now.”

“So the council is just... gone?” Twilight asked, quietly staring out the window.

The two ponies were sitting on the strange green couch in Celestia’s bedroom. They were both trying to relax, but only Twilight really seemed at peace. She just sat there, watching the sun approach the horizon through the window.

“Yes.” Celestia replied. “I thought about what you said and, although they don’t believe me, I’m sure it was the right thing to do.”

“It just seems strange... What will you do now?” Twilight asked curiously as she turned to face Celestia. “I mean, now that they’re gone, can we really fix the drought?”

“I am going to make it my primary objective. I won’t let Equestria suffer any longer than it already has.”

Celestia paused and smiled at Twilight. When she had gone missing, Celestia was turned into an empty shell of what she once was. But now that she had returned, everything Celestia lost had returned at twice the strength it once was. She finally had the courage to make a difference in the world, a feature she lacked ever since the council was first created and Luna was exiled.

“But before I can act, I need your help.” Celestia said. “I need to know what happened in Prance. If we can do anything at all to prevent this from happening again, I’ll need to know every single detail of your journey.”

“Of course, but you have to promise me that you will listen right to the very end.” Twilight smiled weakly. “Not everything is pleasant.”

~

The centerpiece of the castle was an enormous obsidian tower that shot hundreds of feet into the sky. It was the focal point of my journey and the very reason I had endured everything up this point. In truth, I didn’t

know what lay waiting for me inside that massive construct. I wanted answers to the questions I had and solutions to the problems at home, but even now, when I stood at the very doorstep of the capital, everything seemed so far away.

“You’re from Equestria, aren’t you?” a black stallion in silver armour asked pryingly as he walked away from the city gates and towards me.

Surprised, I uttered a quick reply, “Yes, but I thought...”

“We wouldn’t speak your native tongue?” he scoffed. “Don’t be so naive. You don’t seem to realize it, but we rely on trading with the citizens of Equestria and since your government is so unwilling to communicate with us, we have to interact with the merchants on your border directly.”

“I’m sorry...” I apologized, astounded by his reaction.

“Don’t bother with this idiot.” a yellow mare in identical silver armour said, walking up beside the black stallion. “He’s not going to help you.”

The black stallion frowned and glared at the mare, scolding her in his language. I was getting better, but I still lacked the basic comprehension that was necessary to understand what he said. From what I gathered, the stallion was very upset with the mare, but that could be recognized from his body language alone.

After a minute or two of what I assumed was cursing, the stallion turned and glared harshly at me before returning to his place at the side of the gate. The yellow mare just rolled her eyes at the display and walked closer to me.

“He’s just not very fond of outsiders.” she said, “It’s not your fault.

“Now, judging from your personal items, you’re not a merchant yourself, but from that ugly little battle wound you’ve got there, you could be an adventurer. Though I haven’t seen any adventurers since vigilantism was outlawed so that makes me wonder...”

She paused briefly before continuing, “What are you doing here, traveller?”

I fixed my posture and tried to smile at the mare. After my last encounter, I wanted to get straight to the point in a very professional manner.

“My name is Twilight Sparkle. I was sent by Princess Celestia of Equestria to see Le Roi Pierre of Prance.” I answered almost mechanically.

“Well you managed to pronounce his name completely wrong, but I know who you’re talking about. I don’t know what business you have with him, but Pierre is our king and if you really were sent by Celestia, then he’ll want to see you right away.”

“Why don’t you refer to him with his full name?” I asked, blinking.

“‘Le roi’ means ‘king’ in our language, so it’s not really his name, but his title.” she replied. “It would be...”

She paused and looked off into the distance with a blank stare, searching for the right word to say.

“Redundant?” I said hesitantly.

“Yes!” she exclaimed excitedly, pointing her hoof in my direction, “It would be redundant to say that King Pierre is our king. See, we both have a lot to learn about each other. Now please, follow me, I’ll take you to see King Pierre.”

I followed the yellow mare into the castle and through the winding streets. Unlike Canterlot, nothing was very well organized and it was difficult to really get anywhere. Streets mysteriously ended or looped around to where they started. Various shops lined the streets, making it extremely difficult to follow the guard as she navigated through the crowds to the black pillar that cut its way out of the skyline like a knife.

“I forgot to tell you my name, Twilight.” she said, turning around and talking loudly through the crowd. “I’m Catherine.”

*These ponies have really strange names,* I thought as I bumped my way through the dense mob.

"It's very nice to meet you, Catherine!" I yelled in response.

"Hahaha!" Catherine laughed. "Okay, I get it. This isn't really the place to talk. We'll be at the tower shortly."

There was a large cast iron gate barring the way to the tower's entrance, each individual metal pole ending on both sides with a sharp spear-like tip. Compared to the constantly flowing mass of ponies on the opposite side of the gate, the tower's courtyard was nearly empty. Two tall, black iron statues were visible on either side of the pathway leading to the entrance. One resembled a pony holding a magnificent banner, flowing in the wind, while the other depicted a different pony standing on its hind legs with an elegant crown and cape.

I picked out the words I understood as Catherine spoke to one of the guards standing adjacent to the gate. "Please... Twilight Sparkle... Princess Celestia... Le Roi Pierre"

*I'm really going to have to work at this.*

The guard nodded and laughed at a joke that lay far beyond my understanding as they pushed open the gate. Smiling, Catherine motioned for me to follow her inside, giving me a better view of the courtyard. Around the statues were several flowerbeds, containing brilliant ruby and white blossoms arranged in several appealing patterns.

"Interesting statues." I thought aloud, ignoring the perplexing arrangements of flowers.

"The one with the cape resembles our king. Every time a new king takes power, we change the statue." Catherine replied, slowing her pace to walk beside me. "The other represents our battle for freedom against barbarism, greed and anarchy. It is a reminder of everything we believe in and what our ancestors worked so hard to accomplish.

"Hundreds of years ago, Prance was a set of four nations, constantly on the brink of war with each other. They fought over the resources that were uniquely plentiful to each separate nation. One nation had rolling hills and huge tracks of fields that produced a bountiful crop every year. Another

had steep mountains and caverns filled with precious minerals. The third had massive, crystal clear lakes and the last had immeasurable forests filled with all kinds of wildlife.

“They could each survive on their own resources, but their avarice took over and one year, when the hostility between the nations was especially high, our original king, Florence, rose out of the darkness and disparity. He dreamed of a single, prosperous nation that was free from the conflicts that constantly ravaged the nations. With a tongue as sharp as a dagger, he cut into the very souls of the nations and united their inhabitants under a single banner.”

Catherine stopped and pointed to the banner the statue held. It was a simple cross that divided the flag into four equal portions.

“You can’t tell from the statue, but our flag is a white cross through a deep blue background.” she continued, glancing in my direction. “It symbolizes how, despite our differences, our similarities prevailed and unified our nations.

“As a filly, the legend of Florence and the four nations touched my heart. It showed me that the light of the good in the world would always conquer the darkness of evil. That’s why I became a soldier. I wanted to protect everything that he believed in, even if it cost me my life.”

“Catherine... That’s beautiful.” I replied sincerely, smiling at her.

“If you fight for what you truly believe in, you can do no wrong.” she said, smiling back. “But I digress, let us continue.”

We walked towards the great black doors that led into the pillar, guarded by two ponies in recognizable silver armour that opened them as we neared. I followed Catherine closely as we stepped through the doorway and into the tower. The interior was very open. Several doors were placed in a pattern around the main hall, with a great staircase leading up into the building. Each floor had a separate, identical chandelier that illuminated the levels of the tower as we ascended.

After a long gruelling walk up the monotonous staircase that seemed to narrow as we climbed, we reached the top floor. A small room with a set

of cast iron doors, it was guarded by two very large ponies. Towering above her head, one of the ponies smiled as Catherine approached.

“Catherine, it’s not every day that I get to see you here.” he grinned.

“Always a pleasure, Daniel.” she replied, returning the smile.

“And who have we got here? It wouldn’t be the Equestrian that King Pierre has been expecting?” he said, looking in my direction.

Still panting from the staircase, I cracked a smile. “Actually, yes... I’m glad to hear... That he was expecting me... I’d hate to show up unannounced.”

“Twilight Sparkle. It is an absolute honour to meet you. As you may have noticed, I have been brushing up on my Equestrian for the occasion.”

“I’ve been trying to learn some...”

“But Miss Sparkle! You are injured” he interrupted, rushing in closer as he noticed the bruises around my mouth.

“Oh it’s not that bad. I’m fine really.” I said, smiling weakly. “I ran into some bandits on the way here.”

“I know of them.” He said sternly, inspecting the bruises. “They wait on the border, jumping across to the other side when either nation tries to prosecute them. They are evil, terrible ponies. I myself have had to show them the error of their ways a few times, but there will always be more.

“Did they steal anything from you? King Pierre will be furious if he finds out that anything has been taken from you.”

“No. I...” I paused for a moment before continuing, “...Dealt with them.”

He smiled brightly. “You are no doubt a splendid mare, Miss Sparkle! I would love to hear more about you, but we should really take you to see King Pierre.”

He turned around and motioned to the other guard. They pulled the two doors open and revealed the large room inside. A single pony sat at a desk on the far side of the room against a massive window that stretched across the wall and overlooked the city below. Decorated with elaborate paintings, packed bookshelves and a set of smaller statues, identical to the ones outside the tower, it was absolutely stunning.

As we walked towards the desk, the pony lifted his head and smiled as the doors closed behind us. "It is nice to finally meet you, Miss Sparkle. I am hoping that you aren't too tired of greeting all these new ponies by now."

"No, no. Of course not, your highness." I replied, bowing my head.

"Bah! You needn't take such formalities with me, Miss Sparkle, we really haven't the time."

I raised my head quickly as he got up and walked around the desk. He was a ruby red pony, with a white mane and tail, the exact same colours of the flowers outside.

"But we do have enough time to show you to your room." he continued, walking past me and towards the door. "For your convenience, I have found a room for you on the bottom floor so that you needn't climb those awful stairs every time you want to leave."

My jaw nearly fell off at the thought. *I have to walk down the stairs again!? I just got up here! I'm exhausted!*

He stopped suddenly and turned around. "Haha! I jest, Miss Sparkle! Although your room is indeed at the base of the tower, I won't make you walk that distance so promptly."

I closed my jaw and smiled in relief. *Oh, thank Celestia!*

He walked back towards the desk and sat down. "Please, have a seat, Miss Sparkle. And so as not to bore you during your duties, you may return to your post, Catherine. I hope you don't mind the exercise."



“It is no trouble at all, my liege.” she replied, turning around and heading towards the door.

Pierre waited for her to leave. He smiled brightly at me while we sat in silence.

“I was informed that you have been having problems with a drought.” he said, breaking the silence. “I am truly sorry that you have had to endure such a devastating curse.”

“I’m worried about my country.” I said honestly, “I felt so useless at home. I came here, not because I was ordered to, but because I wanted to. I want to do whatever it takes to help my country and I am honoured that you are willing to help me.”

“I sincerely hope that you will be able to find a solution to your problem here in Prance. I do not yet know how we can help, but I will send someone to escort you around the country to the various production facilities and give you access to the royal library. It is unfortunate that you cannot yet read our language; it makes the entire process much more unpleasant.”

He stopped and smiled, turning his head to the side as he lost himself in his thoughts.

“You are well acquainted with Catherine, no?” he asked.

“Yes. She’s a very nice pony.”

“She is. I will have someone replace her at the gate and send her with you.”

Once again, he just stopped and smiled, turning his head again. It was a little unsettling. It felt like he just died for brief moments as he contemplated his actions.

“Now, as unfortunate as this is, I’m not sure how much more I can help you right now so perhaps it is finally time to show you to your room.” he announced, breaking the awkward silence again.

*I have a feeling that I'm going to learn to hate these stairs,* I thought as I flashed a fake smile.

~

"Your princess said that you lived in a library at home." Pierre said, opening a door. "I thought you might feel less estranged to the tower if you settled here."

The room was utterly gigantic. As I walked through the library, my jaw hung open and my eyes widened with admiration. It took up an entire floor of the tower and contained hundreds of shelves of books and records. The library at home was nothing like this, not even Celestia's royal library.

"Do not worry about the others. I forbade access to the library while you are here. If anyone enters, it will only be for an absolute emergency and I will make sure to let you know beforehand.

"I have tried my best to secure a proper sleeping chamber in the corner of the room and the facilities are just around the corner."

"Why are there so many books here? I've never seen a library so vast..." I asked, ignoring the plush bed and large desk that Pierre pointed to.

Pierre lowered his hoof and smiled at me. "We do our very best to document everything we can and encourage the literary arts within the country. Our library contains virtually every book produced in both of our nations as well as many others. It would take decades to read every book in the library and almost as many to learn the languages to read them."

I salivated slightly as I looked around the room. *So much knowledge...*

"If you are ever hungry, please contact the guard outside your room. He will have the tower's chefs prepare something for you." Pierre said, smiling as he noticed my expression. "His name is Daniel; you may have already introduced yourself to him."

“Thank you so much, Pierre.” I said, trying to wipe my mouth inconspicuously.

“If you need anything else, let me know immediately. These are dark times, but that needn’t prevent you from enjoying your stay.”

Pierre turned around and walked out of the room, leaving me to stew in my thoughts. They were all very nice ponies, but they weren’t really helping me right now. I had no idea where to start. I could begin by visiting the different areas of the country, but I would just be wasting my time if I didn’t have a plan. I could start by reading the books in the library, but I would need to know what to read first. It was all becoming increasingly complicated and the amazing library I stood in wasn’t really helping.

But under the veil of uncertainty, one thing was absolutely crystal clear. If I wanted to discover the truth about this nation and solve the drought at home, I would need to learn their language and I would need to learn it in less than a day.

# Chapter 6

“Are you ready to go, Twilight?” Catherine asked, poking her head through the door and glancing around.

She wasn’t wearing the helmet she had the day before and her now visible, short orange mane accented her light blue eyes. It was combed back across her head, a common military style that I recognized from the soldiers at home.

“Almost, just give me a minute.” I replied, stuffing everything on the desk into my bag. “I want to make sure that I have everything I need.”

“You really don’t need anything.” she shrugged, her eyes following me as I dashed around the room. “The mills are just outside the city walls.”

‘The mills’, as they liked to call them, were a series of windmills and the largest grain processing facility in the country. Nearly every grain farmer in the area took his crop to the mills to have it processed. It was something the government of Prance had done to help the local farmers. By centralizing the refining process, efficiency was increased, cost was decreased and everyone was happier because of it. At least that’s what I learned from the books in the library.

“I still can’t believe you learned how to read our language in a single night.” she continued with a rather shocked look on her face. “I’ve never met anyone that could do something like that.”

“I spent my entire life reading books, Catherine.” I said, stopping to smile and wink at her, “Although sometimes I wish I had left the house more often, it’s a skill that really comes in handy.”

“Well I completely understand why they only needed to send you.”

“They?” I asked, giving her a strange look. “Celestia was the only one who had anything to do with this adventure.”

“Oh, right. I guess I just forgot... Ready to go?” she asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Yeah, let’s go.” I answered, starting for the door across the room. “How far is it?”

“Not far. It takes about twenty minutes.” she replied, propping the door open with her hoof while I walked through.

I had to squint to avoid blinding myself as I stepped out of the library and into the tower’s foyer. The brightly lit room was a sharp contrast to the dim lighting in the library. With all the amenities in such a close vicinity and Daniel coming in to check on me and ask what I wanted for meals, I had comfortably spent the last twenty hours in that room. In a way, Pierre was right, it was so similar to my home in Ponyville that, if it weren’t for the dire situation I was in, I would have nearly forgotten that I had ever left.

“Miss Sparkle! It is a pleasure to see you finally leave the library after all this time.” Daniel exclaimed, positively beaming at me. “I suspect you have much to accomplish today?”

“Uh... yes.” I smiled back. “I’m going to the mills.”

“But of course! It is a wonderful place to explore...” he said, pausing for a moment before continuing in a lower tone. “...and to learn.

“But I won’t keep you a moment longer, Miss Sparkle. I will leave you to our fair Catherine’s protection. Enjoy your visit and I shall see you when you return.”

“You really are too much, Daniel.” Catherine said, smiling and chuckling quietly to herself.

“I am a gentlecolt.” he replied sternly, “It is my duty to be respectful and courteous whenever possible.”

“Right. Well as much as I’d like to stick around and receive complements from you, we really need to get going. I’ll see you around.”

He nodded slowly, “Of course.”

“Bye Daniel.” I smiled as I followed Catherine to the massive doors leading out of the black tower.

Daniel was an interesting pony. He was right, he was a true gentlecolt, but that was exactly the problem I had with him. He acted like a member of the nobility, a scientist and a scholar and unlike any soldier I’d ever met. I would have placed his interesting nature on the conditioning of the strange society I now presided in, but the other guards we’re all so very like the ones at home. I wanted to know why he was different, but I just didn’t have the time.

Once again, I stepped out into an even brighter area, the tower’s garden, and again I had to squint to avoid blinding myself in the intense light. The sky above was a brilliant blue, with hardly a single cloud. A pleasant breeze rolled through the courtyard and moved the flowers like waves on water. It was a beautiful day to be outside and, if only for a moment, I let my concerns slide away from the unfortunate condition at home.

Prance really was a gorgeous country and whatever they were doing to keep the drought at bay was working extraordinarily well. The inhabitants were blissfully moving about the city, wandering in and out of the many shops that lined its streets. ‘The Pointed Needle’, ‘Marie’s Café’, ‘Jacque’s Fine Furniture’, all my work had made every sign perfectly legible. Although I still lacked the knowledge to understand their spoken language, my new awareness would help considerably.

Making our way out of the busy streets and towards the same gate I had entered through only a day before, I took note of the two guards standing to either side. The pony that replaced Catherine at the gate waited quietly, his eyes following us as we approached. The black stallion stood on the opposite side with a dirty glare plastered on his face.

*How unfortunate.* I thought, remembering his rudeness. *Perhaps he will be nicer if he knows who I am.*

“Catherine,” he growled, “I see you’re playing tour guide today.”

“I’d rather do this than sit at the gate like a bumbling moron.” she mocked.

The stallion just fumed as we both walked past. I only laughed a little at her comment, trying not to increase his annoyance with us.

Although I had seen it before, I never really had the time to enjoy the countryside outside the city. It was not unlike that at home, with sparse trees and houses decorating the rolling hills at irregular intervals. The cobble path painted along the ground led off into two separate directions. One way led back towards the south and Equestria, the other went farther north, towards our destination.

Looking out across the horizon as we continued, I could faintly see the outlines of the mills. From this distance, they appeared as several, equally spaced towers with six sails that moved slowly in the breeze. We had windmills at home, it wasn’t exactly new technology, but it was extremely rare for more than one windmill to exist in the same neighbourhood. At most, I had only ever seen three small windmills placed next to each other on a single farm. These windmills, however, were comprised of a dozen gigantic towers that lay only a short distance from each other.

“So is there anything in particular that you want to see when we get there?” Catherine asked, slowly trotting down the path beside me. “It’s not exactly the most exciting place to spend an afternoon, but I understand that you need to see it.”

“I want to see how many ponies are coming to the mills, how much grain they bring with them, how long it takes to process their grain...” I said, listing my objectives and drifting off, “You know... Stuff like that. Almost anything could be useful, that’s why I’m so eager to go.”

“I can have one of the workers guide you through the process.” she said, turning to face me. “It really doesn’t take all that long.”

“That’s alright.” I shrugged, “I learned enough about it from my books.”

It was a simple process. The wheat was cleaned to remove dirt, pieces of straw and other parts of the plant that shouldn't end up in the flour. After it was cleaned, the wheat was put through a set of rollers powered by the windmills to grind up the kernels and then sifted into a fine powder and bagged. A large cart of wheat bushels only produces about two thirds of its weight in flour, which is kind of disappointing when you really think about it. It was part of the reason for the awful food shortages at home.

"Good. I'm relieved that you don't want to hear about it." Catherine chuckled, "It's reeaaaally boring."

We both laughed for a while as we walked down the cobbled road. The gentle breeze blew across my face and threw my hair back.

"I thought it was kind of interesting, actually." I finally remarked. "But I don't need to hear about it again. We just don't have the time."

"There isn't enough time in the world to hear about wheat processing more than once, Twilight." she laughed.

I couldn't help but smile at her reaction. She was a soldier alright, the kind of pony that always wanted to be in the heat of the action. She wasn't old, but she wasn't young either, so why was she guarding the front gate of the city? She seemed competent enough that she would have been promoted to a more important and exciting role by now.

When I was younger, I had asked one of Celestia's guards what it was like watching the doors to her throne room all day. The guard had smiled and reluctantly admitted that he had been scolded for falling asleep on one occasion. Except for the occasional disputes with angry nobles, it seemed like his job was fairly dull. He showed up for work in the morning, watched the doors, ate lunch, and again watched the doors until he went home at night and was replaced. If Celestia left the throne room, another set of guards would accompany her while he just stayed and watched the gate. He seemed rather annoyed that it was necessary to watch an empty room, but when he asked about it, his commanding officer said that it gave the citizens a clear picture of the authority they held. After telling me this, he just said, "You don't argue with the commanding officer."



Perhaps Catherine was just too nice or maybe she even enjoyed the job. As we approached the mills, I made a note to myself to ask her about it later.

Another set of guards stood at the entrance to the large warehouse-like building that connected the windmills. Beside them, a unicorn levitated a quill and a large tomb in the air as he questioned a pair of farmers, each with a large cart of wheat. He looked at each individual farmer and asked a question, moving the quill to the tomb and marking one of the pages as they answered.

"I'm beginning to wonder, Catherine, why are there so few pegasi and unicorns in Prance?" I asked, turning to the yellow pony beside me as we waited for the unicorn to finish his inquiry. "I think he must be the first unicorn I've seen here."

"So few?" Catherine smirked. "Your country is spoiled by its extreme diversity. From what I know, it is a very rare occasion to see unicorns or pegasi in any country. Equestria is the only exception."

"Many believe that the diversity roots from the Equestrian royal family. They believe that the unicorns and pegasi were lured in by the power that the alicorns held or that the alicorns actually gave them their power to begin with. Depending on your interpretation, some regard the pegasi and unicorns as gifted and powerful ponies. Others believe them to be mutants and abominations warped by the royal family's influence."

*Mutants and abominations..? I thought, looking down. Is that what other ponies think of us?*

Strangely, the idea had never crossed my mind before, but it seemed reasonable. The pegasi and the unicorns were naturally better than earth ponies. They were gifted with everything the earth ponies had and more, with the only reasonable justification being that the earth ponies were more 'in tune with nature'. I didn't even know what that meant, so even if they were only jealous, was it really that irrational for them to call us mutants?

"I don't believe that you're some kind of abomination, Twilight. You have a gift and you should be proud of it and, as much as I wish I could, I can't change what the ignorant public believes." Catherine continued,

flashing a quick smile. “Even if they aren’t mutants, they are still social outcasts in our society and, excluding you, I have only ever met four unicorns and three pegasi and all of them have important positions in the government. Pierre recognizes their talent and tries to protect them from unjust harm and, whether they are part of the government or not, they are kept under close watch.

“From what I understand, they don’t really have a choice anyway. They have to work for Pierre and the government...”

At that moment, the unicorn made some final notes and motioned for the farmers to move along. They returned to their wagons and pulled their crop through the gate and into the building.

“Nathan,” Catherine said, gesturing towards the unicorn and smiling, “oversees all of the grain production in the entire country.”

“That I do, Catherine.” he responded in a commanding tone. “And this, I presume, is the Equestrian I received word of?”

“I’m Twilight Sparkle.” I said, smiling and approaching the unicorn. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, but I’m surprised that you speak Equestrian. Nearly every pony I’ve met seems to speak my tongue, which I can’t help but find a little unusual.”

“All the important government officials are required to speak a multitude of languages.” he said, “Since Catherine is in charge of guarding the gate to the city, she must also meet that requirement.”

“As you may already know, we’re going to be looking around the mills.” Catherine interrupted.

“Of course.” he replied, quickly nodding his head. “Take as much time as you want.”

Looked towards the unicorn I asked, “Actually, Nathan, I was wondering if I could have a look at your logbook before I go in.”

“Go right ahead.” he said, levitating the logbook towards me. “If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

I opened the book to the most recent page and began flipping through it backwards, going one by one through the entries.

*Processing Registration ID: 10038495*

*Taxation Level: 10%*

*Wheat Processed: 212 lbs*

*Flour Produced: 13 bags (10 lb)*

*Processing Registration ID: 10016201*

*Taxation Level: 10%*

*Wheat Processed: 237 lbs*

*Flour Produced: 15 bags (10 lb)*

*Processing Registration ID: 10001473, 10020345*

*Taxation Level: 8%*

*Wheat Processed: 501 lbs*

*Flour Produced: 34 bags (10 lb)*

“You tax the wheat?” I asked, noticing the ‘taxation level’ in the book.

“Yes.” he replied, smiling. “It helps pay for the cost of running and maintaining the mills.”

I pointed to the last entry on the page, “How come this last entry isn’t taxed the same as the others?”

“Each mill can handle a thousand pounds of wheat, but only one farmer’s crop can be handled at a time. We tax them less for the larger amounts to encourage them to combine their crops. Larger loads increase the efficiency. It’s actually a little more complicated than that, but the rest of the details are relatively unimportant...”

I nodded my head in understanding and flipped through some more of the pages. Passing through several nearly identical pages and satisfied that I wouldn’t learn anything particularly useful from them, I levitated the book closer to Nathan. He reached out and grabbed it with his own magic before setting it down beside him.

“How do you measure the weight of the grain?” I asked.

“I have been magically trained to weigh the wheat while it’s still on the wagons.” he said proudly as he fixed his posture. “We don’t tax the pounds of wheat, only the bags, so they never complain that I’m not giving them an accurate measurement and trying to rip them off. It’s strictly for record keeping purposes.”

I nodded again, “Thanks Nathan. I’m going to look around a bit.”

Nathan just smiled as we walked further into the refining facility.

Catherine followed closely as I walked around the building. It was a fairly dull, empty room that served as a shelter from the ferocity of the wind outside. Up close, the windmills were almost deafening as they moved in the air, but under the protection of the large stone warehouse, it wasn’t so bad.

Several ponies worked outside the entrances to each windmill, helping the farmers gather up their crop, clean it and bring it inside. The whole process seemed to be very quick and efficient, but it wasn’t really helping me find any answers to the drought. Most of the information that I needed was in the logbook Nathan had, and it hadn’t been as helpful as I thought it would be.

I wandered around for a few more minutes, watching them move the wheat into the rooms and eventually take the resulting bags of flour out and load them into the carts to be taken away. A few of the bags from each load were gathered into a pile beside each windmill as payment for the service.

Eventually turning to Catherine, I glanced at her nervously, “Um... Is this it?”

“It sure is.” she shrugged nonchalantly, “I said it was boring, didn’t I?”

I sighed, “I don’t think I’m going to learn anything else by staying here any longer.”

She simply nodded her head and we walked back to the entrance. After passing by Nathan once more and expressing our thanks, we left on the trail back to the city.

I was disappointed by today's exploits. I had hoped that the mills would have given me more to go on, but it was mostly just a dead end. Like I had read in the black tower, the mills were an efficient way of processing grain that seemed to benefit both the farmers and the government. What I did not expect was that they would contain so little information on the actual production of wheat across the country. Everything seemed to be coming from small, individual farms, just like at home and anything that was just like home was exactly the opposite of what I was looking for.

~

"Well here we are, back again at the library." Catherine said, glancing around the huge room. "Are you sure you don't want to go anywhere else? It's still early in the afternoon."

"I don't see the point." I sighed, levitating my bags off my back and falling on top of the bed. "I obviously need to spend more time figuring out where I need to go. Today was almost a complete waste of time."

"Well I'm going to leave then. If you change your mind, get Daniel to find me." she said, smiling at me once more before leaving the room.

*I should send a letter to Celestia. She'll want to know what I'm doing, even if I'm not making any progress.* I thought, rolling off the bed and back onto my sore hooves. *I'm really getting sick of walking so much.*

I moved over to the desk and sat down, taking a quill and some paper from my bag.

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*I have safely arrived in the capital of Prance and have made contact with King Pierre. He is a strange pony. Despite his position, he seems very relaxed, but I guess you are too.*

*I have learned to read their native script so that I can study the books in their library. It is far larger than I would have ever imagined, much larger*

*than the library at home. I will spend the next few days exploring the library and searching for answers among their writing.*

*Most recently, I set off to investigate a grain processing facility comprised of a dozen large windmills with a very pleasant pony named Catherine who is serving as my guide. It is an efficient way to process the grain, but it did little to help me with the problem of the drought. I plan on utilizing my time more wisely in the future.*

*I will send you a letter every day, but I am unsure of how long it will take for them to arrive. I will not expect an answer from you anytime soon.*

*Your Faithful Student,  
Twilight Sparkle*

I leaned back, folded the paper and retrieved an envelope from my bag. Slipping the letter inside, I stood up and walked towards the door. *Now I just need to find out how to send it.*

Opening the door leading out of the library, I looked around the tower's entranceway.

"Miss Sparkle!" Daniel shouted from across the room as he ran over. "How was your little expedition?"

"Disappointing, Daniel." I answered, frowning slightly. "I guess I had just hoped to find more there."

"I am sorry to hear that, Miss Sparkle." he said, mirroring my frown. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Bringing my attention back to the letter floating beside my head, I smiled.

"Actually, yes there is, Daniel. I was wondering if you knew where I could send this letter."

"Worry not, Miss Sparkle, for I shall send the letter for you." he said, once again mirroring my expression.

“Thank you very much, Daniel. I’m going to get back to work then.”

“Not a problem, Miss Sparkle. I shall check in on you in an hour and see what you want for dinner.”

~

“Wait.” Celestia said sharply, looking at Twilight strangely from her place on the floor. “I never received any letters from you.”

“I thought you promised not to interrupt me.” Twilight replied, smiling back at her.

“I did, but this doesn’t make any sense.” Celestia continued, shaking her head. “You sent a letter to me every day and I never got any of them? Weren’t you worried that I never responded?”

Twilight’s smile quickly disappeared. “I knew that it would take at least two weeks for a reply. Without any pegasi to carry the mail, it would take a week to arrive in Equestria and then another week for your response to reach Prance. So for the first two weeks, no, I wasn’t worried.”

She turned her head to look outside the window. It was dark now and the room was lit up by the torches on the walls. The flames flickered and strange shadows danced on the floor.

“After the two weeks had passed though, I became suspicious. You had always replied to my messages in the past, so why weren’t you now? The days went by, quickly turning into weeks, and despite everything I was learning, nothing helped my plight. I had already spent the time allowed for my trip, but I was determined to find something before returning home. I was sure that you wouldn’t mind...”

~

Everyday was spent reading four or five books and then going to some production facility, not entirely unlike the mills near the city. I would arrive and learn absolutely nothing to help the situation at home and then go back to the library to read more books. It was beginning to grate on my nerves, but more recently, I had other concerns.

The ponies I now lived with were very strange. There was something odd about them all that I just couldn't put my hoof on. Catherine, the fierce, ambitious and sociable gatekeeper, Daniel, the intelligent, courteous, and regal soldier, and Pierre, the relaxed and elusive king, if only one of them had acted like a normal pony, I would not have been so worried. However, their professions did not match their personalities in the slightest and they would frequently change the subject whenever I tried to ask about them. To say that they were just strange was an understatement.

In truth, they were like a thick fog, clouding my vision and keeping me from reaching my ultimate goal. Who were they really? What were they hiding from me and why? I was determined to find the answers before I continued my search for the solution to the drought, if only to ease my possibly irrational suspicions.

So in the dead of night, moonlight creeping through the small windows in the library and casting long shadows across the room, I decided to investigate. The candle I had lit had been reduced to a pool of wax that had hardened when the flame disappeared. I moved silently towards the door and opened it slowly. Looking out the crack of the door I searched for the large pony that usually watched it.

Satisfied that Daniel had gone to bed, I crept out of the library and closed the door behind me. *If I remember correctly, the only guards in the building are at the top of the tower and outside the main entrance. Pierre should be asleep, so his guards shouldn't be watching his room.*

Moving swiftly, I ascended the staircase towards the top floor. The identical chandeliers shone just a little too brightly for my taste, but it was the only way up the tower unless I grew a pair of wings.

As I neared the top floor, my conscience kicked in and tried to persuade me to return to the library. *This is ridiculous, Twilight. You're just*



*a little irritated from the bad luck you've been having. There's nothing wrong with these ponies. They're just very unique.*

Unconvinced, I continued on and approached the black iron doors at the top floor. Moving slowly, I tried the handle only to feel it immediately resist my effort.

*Heh, locks are only a problem for pegasi and earth ponies.* I thought to myself, gathering my magic and teleporting to the other side of the door.

The interesting statues and elaborate paintings that once inspired wonder and awe now conjured different emotions inside of me. They awakened the fear that lay dormant in my mind and I panicked at the thought of discovery. My heart beat faster and I could feel it thump against the side of my body as it tried to escape.

I took a deep breath and, pushing my fear aside, approached the desk and walked around behind it. Along the side of it were three simple drawers. Reaching out, I slid the top drawer open and revealed its contents.

*Just some blank paper,* I thought, sifting through the drawer.

Closing the top drawer and working my way down, I opened the second drawer. Inside were several, identical envelopes all addressed to the same pony.

*Princess Celestia.*

I gasped. Though my heart had beat fiercely before, now it had almost ceased. My body trembled as I lifted the envelopes out of the drawer and onto the desktop. Turning an envelope over, I discovered that it had already been opened and sliding the paper out, I noticed that the letter was bent in the corners, something that the earth ponies and pegasi usually did with letters as they had difficulty forcing the paper into the envelopes without the use of magic.

Gradually unfolding the paper I began to read the contents,

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Today is the first day of my second week in the capital of Prance. I'm disappointed by my lack of progress, but I haven't given up hope. I'll find something soon, I just know it.*

*Catherine has been helpful with my research and I really enjoy spending time with her. She has taken me to some of the most interesting places all over the country and her knowledge of them seems almost limitless. Despite the immense cultural barriers that separate us, I feel like we've become very good friends...*

I immediately dropped the letter onto the desk as if it had been set on fire. Not only had they read all my letters, they were keeping them! Princess Celestia had no idea what was going on. She didn't even know I was alive!

"You found the letters..." a voice resonated from the far end of the room. "I feared this would happen eventually."

Quickly turning my head, I looked across the desk and towards the iron doors. Standing at the entrance were the shadows of four ponies in the dim moonlight.

A bright light flashed suddenly and illuminated the room. Blinded, I turned away from the source.

"I am prepared to tell you the truth, Miss Sparkle." the voice continued. "Including the solution to your drought problem. It won't matter now anyway."

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I turned back to face the figures. Standing at the door were three faces that I immediately recognized. Second from the left, was the one who had spoken, King Pierre, waiting silently and glaring in my direction. To the right of him, was Daniel and then Catherine, each in their brilliant silver armour.

"You remember Daniel and Catherine." Pierre said calmly. "You've probably discovered that they're not normal guards by now. They, like all the other gifted ponies, play vital roles in the operation of my government."

The bright light flashed again, forcing me to turn away a second time. When the light subsided, the two ponies I had recognized as Daniel and Catherine were gone. Different ponies took their place, standing beside a pile of silver armour.

“Catherine is a pegasus. She merely hid her wings under the armour.” Pierre continued, glancing over towards the yellow pony.

Catherine, now devoid of her armour, spread out her wings slowly before returning them to her side. She looked solemnly down at the floor, almost ashamed of whom she really was.

“Daniel is a unicorn especially skilled at illusionary magic. He merely copied the form of my personal bodyguard.” Pierre continued, gesturing towards the tall grey pony in silver armour on his right.

Daniel had taken on a completely different form. A short unicorn with a fading orange coat, he nodded at me to show off his horn. He was quite old, much older than Pierre, which wasn't surprising considering that he had been able to maintain such an exhausting and convincing spell for so long. Something like that took substantial training and experience.

“I couldn't let you know they're true forms or you might grow suspicious. After all, why would I send all my most capable servants to feed you and watch you wander aimlessly around the countryside? However, it appears you became suspicious anyway.”

“Why are you doing this!?” I yelled, glaring hard at the king. “What's the point!? If you knew how to solve the drought, why didn't you help me?”

“It's all part of a bigger picture, Miss Sparkle. I don't expect you to understand, but believe me when I say that I didn't want to have to hurt you.”

“We're not really bad ponies.” Daniel added in a low, raspy voice, very unlike what I remembered.

“We want to help the world become a better place and if that means we have to do some terrible things, then so be it.” Pierre said.

“That doesn’t explain anything!” I screamed.

“Catherine told you about the story of our creation, did she not?”  
Pierre asked.

The yellow pegasus flinched and closed her eyes tightly upon hearing her name.

I just stood motionlessly watching the king as he waited for some kind of reply.

“That story is part of our vision.” Pierre eventually continued, realizing that I wasn’t about to respond. “Just as the four nations were united to create Prance, we want to unite the whole world under a single banner.

“No more wars and no more food shortages. The entire world will work towards a common goal and become a better place for it!”

He smiled and walked closer to the table flanked by Daniel and the bodyguard while Catherine just stood speechlessly gazing at the floor.

“Oh Catherine,” he said, noticing her reaction. “You shouldn’t be so glum in front of our guest.”

He walked right up to the desk and gradually leaned over, staring directly into my eyes.

“She didn’t really want to help, but she knows she doesn’t have a choice.” he whispered.

He turned his head and glanced over his shoulder.

“Progress will be made with or without you, Catherine!” he shouted.

She flinched again and turned her head away, quivering and unable to look directly towards us.

“Now, how about a story, Twilight?” he continued, raising an eyebrow. “You might want to have a seat for this one.”

He paced back and forth along the desk, but I refused to sit down and give him the satisfaction. How could I possibly relax at a time like this?

“No?” he asked calmly, as he stopped pacing. “Very well then, let me start at the beginning.

“As a young colt I was born into my position as king of Prance. I was given the right to lead from birth, but I never really understood how to properly utilize it until about five years ago. I read about the legend of Florence and the four nations and I studied it heavily. I went over every aspect of the legend and Florence’s dream and I realized, why should we stop at the four nations? Why not unite the entire world!?”

Pierre raised a hoof dramatically and looked up at the ceiling, pausing for a brief moment. I looked behind me, out the window and towards the city below. From this distance, the city was not so different from the stars above. It was a few bright lights shining on the dark blanket of the night.

“But I had to come up with a plan.” he continued, glancing back in my direction. “Obviously no nation would willingly give up their independence to us. We’re just too small.

“I need help from Equestria, from your homeland. I need your power and to do that, I need to remove Princess Celestia from her position.”

“You’re insane!” I scoffed. “How could you think that you could ever replace Celestia? You can’t even touch her!”

“No.” Pierre replied. “You’re absolutely right. I can’t do anything...

He stopped and stared at me with a wicked smile.

“But you can.” he continued. “You see, I had to find someone that Princess Celestia cared so much for that she would be so overtaken with the grief of their sudden disappearance that she would be unable to respond to what happened next.

“I couldn’t use Luna, no she’s too powerful and Celestia has protected her like a baby since the Nightmare Moon incident, so I needed you, Celestia’s star pupil.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you created the drought?” I asked doubtfully.

Smiling he just shook his head.

“No, Twilight. I did not create it, but with the help of the council, I was able to greatly extend its length and weaken your poor nation.”

“The council!?” I asked. “What do they have to do with this?”

“They are working with me, Twilight. I promised them the power to rule over Equestria beside me, without their corrupt princess and her paper thin wall of propaganda and lies.”

“Propaganda and lies!? How could you possibly think that?”

He walked around behind the desk and looked out the window into the night. The moon shone brightly, a single white orb in the blackness of the night.

“On the contrary, I don’t understand how you could think otherwise.” Pierre said. “She’s lying to you, or rather; she’s not telling you the whole truth. Princess Celestia tries to isolate Equestria from the rest of the world by restricting trade and travel amongst the surrounding countries. Any information about them is immediately passed off as mere rumours. She walls you off from the world and the moment you have a problem you can’t solve by yourself, the entire country is thrown into disarray.

“After all, did you really think that it was reasonable for no one in your entire country to know anything about Prance? Someone had to know something and this ridiculous journey for knowledge shouldn’t have been necessary. We know more about your country than you do about yourself.

“Celestia is so lost amongst her own falsities that she doesn’t know what to believe anymore. She doesn’t know who to trust...”

*Is he telling the truth? It seems reasonable enough, but why would Celestia do that?*

He paused and turned around to flash his wicked smile at me once again. The moonlight cast a horrible glow on the grin, piercing its way through the night.

“Except you, Miss Sparkle.” he continued. “So I led you here and kept you captive as my prisoner. In a few days time, I will send a letter to Celestia stating your unfortunate passing. She will be overcome with grief and, with the help of the council, we will take control.”

“How do you know that she won’t blame you? How do you know that she won’t break down your door and destroy you for what you’re trying to do?”

“Because she doubts herself. Why do you think she created the council in the first place? And even if she did blame us, the council would stop her from invading.

“It’s all part of the plan.”

*No I won't believe him or his lies. He's completely insane, this can't be true.*

I wouldn’t believe him because one pony in the room was showing me the truth. Catherine, who cowered in the corner by the door, was telling me something. She was telling me that he was lying, that everything he said was some elaborate plan to convince me of this falsity. She knew the truth and she was afraid of it.

“And what do you expect me to do?” I asked, smirking at him and shaking my head. “Do you just expect me to sit back and watch it all unfold?”

“I had hoped, but not expected, to convince you, Miss Sparkle, but I see now that’s not possible.” Pierre said with a deathly serious expression. “If I had expected to convince you, I wouldn’t have needed the others to come with me.”

Like the splinter forest, I was confronted with a difficult situation. Although I was sure neither Catherine nor Pierre would try to stop me, Daniel and Pierre’s bodyguard weren’t petty bandits and I couldn’t catch

them by surprise. They were trained soldiers and I couldn't hope to stop them alone.

*Why does this keep happening to me?*

My only hope was to try and escape. I could use my magic to teleport out of the room and away from the ponies.

Daniel and the tall grey pony neared ever closer as my horn lit up. I thought of the library below, perhaps if I could just escape this room then I would be safe.

"Twilight, I'm sorry, but we can't let you leave..." Daniel said as he noticed the glow of my horn.

He changed my thoughts to that of the night sky just outside the window. The soft gleaming of the stars and the polished white moon filled my head and before I knew it, I was outside the tower, looking in through the window at the ponies inside. Time seemed to stand still, a cool breeze brushing against my face as all four ponies looked silently towards me.

The gentle breeze quickly turned into a freezing hurricane and I drowned in the sound of my own screams as I plummeted towards the ground. Staring at the small, bright lights below and then the identical lights above, the window shattered into a thousand pieces. The glass fell like tiny raindrops, surrounding the yellow pegasus that came soaring towards me.

*Catherine!?*

Grabbing onto me, she sharply changed directions, now flying parallel to the ground. Crashing through the glass window had produced deep cuts all over her body and she was losing a lot of blood.

Unable to maintain her flight, she staggered in the air and we tumbled towards the ground. Rapidly approaching the city below, the small lights growing bigger and brighter, she aimed towards a window in an old building. She knew she was going to crash and she was determined to find somewhere safe to do so.



She turned herself at the last moment and absorbed the blow as we smashed through the window and tumbled onto the floor, slamming against the far wall.

My head throbbed from hitting the wall and I was covered in little pieces of broken glass, blood trickling out of the small gashes covering my body.

“Catherine!” I screamed, getting up and rushing to her side.

She lay in a crippled mass on the wood floor. Clutching her side tightly, she was covered in broken glass and coughing up blood. The entire event had destroyed her body and now I could hardly recognize her.

“You’re... you’re going to be okay, Catherine.... We’re going to find you some help.” I stuttered, bending down beside her.

“No, Twilight...” she said, staring back at me. “It’s time for you to go home.”

Her voice was weak, but calm. Tears rolled down her cheeks and onto the floor beside her as she moved her bloodied hooves away, revealing a large piece of glass embedded deeply into her chest.

“No! I’m not going to let you die here, Catherine!” I screamed, tears falling down the sides of my face.

“Do you remember what I said to you when we first met, Twilight?” she asked.

She paused and coughed twice while I just stared into the wetness of her eyes, the weak smile on her face growing slightly when she stopped.

“I said that if you fight for what you truly believe in, you can do no wrong.” she continued. “I was fighting for the wrong thing, Twilight... I wasn’t fighting for what I believed in... Instead, I was fighting for the dreams of some insane king and his lust for power.”

I just kept staring into her soft, light blue eyes as she spoke, my tears dampening the floor below.

“But I’m fighting for what I believe in now, Twilight. I’m fighting for what good is left in this world and I’m fighting for you. You can still make a difference, Twilight. I know you can.”

She turned her head and coughed again, wincing at the pain and clutching her chest harder.

“So I want you to leave. I want you to go home and tell Princess Celestia what happened and I want you to stop Pierre and help these ponies. I know that’s asking a lot from you, but I don’t know who else to turn to. I feel like you’re the only real friend I ever had.

“Please...Just don’t let him hurt anyone else...”

“I can’t just let you die here, Catherine.” I sobbed quietly.

“I’m already dead, Twilight. My bones are broken and my body is bleeding.” she said, smiling weakly. “I lived for the wrong reasons, so I’ll die for the right ones...”

“I’m sorry I lied to you, Twilight... I’m sorry it had to end this way.”

I leaned in close and hugged her, being careful not to disturb her too much and cause her anymore pain.

“You don’t have to apologize to me, Catherine. I feel like I barely even know you, but you sacrificed yourself for me.”

As I pulled away, I noticed she wasn’t breathing anymore. Her eyes were closed softly and the weak smile on her face remained.

*I’ll find a way*, I thought to myself, wiping the tears from my eyes and rushing out into the cold, dark streets outside.

# Chapter 7

“So they were planning all of this from the very beginning?” Celestia asked, getting up from her position on the floor.

“Not everything, but more than we could have possibly imagined.” Twilight replied nervously.

The alicorn stared at the floor and slowly paced back and forth across the room. Twilight’s story and the detailed summary of the current situation had been quite jarring and she was still recovering.

“And the council was helping them the whole time?”

“I don’t know if every member of the council was involved or not. Pierre was pretty vague.” Twilight replied, her eyes following the princess as she moved about the room.

“I’m having trouble wrapping my head around all of this... Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner, Twilight?” Celestia said, stopping and raising her voice substantially. “Do you have any idea how important this is!? These ponies are trying to kill me!”

Twilight looked away from the princess, wincing at the dramatic change of her mood and the sheer volume of her voice. Celestia’s anger pulsed throughout the room as she glared at the little purple unicorn in front of her.

“I was afraid of how you would react... I’m sorry, Princess Celestia.” Twilight replied, still trying to dodge her mentor’s cruel gaze.

Upon hearing her student’s apology, Celestia’s harsh glare faded into a worrisome look and she practically fell backward as she sat down again and dropped her head.

“I’m sorry, Twilight...” she apologized, “I’m so sorry... It’s not your fault. None of this is. It was mine for being so trusting, so ignorant... We need to do something about all of this before it’s too late.”

Twilight turned back towards the princess, “But what can we do, Princess Celestia? They’ll just deny everything I’ve said and try to convince you that it’s all a lie...”

Celestia shifted her head slightly as she contemplated the thought.

“I know and I don’t care.” Celestia replied gently, “I believe you, Twilight... And it’s because I believe you that we will have to go to war with Prance.”

“How will that help!? Isn’t that what they want?”

“No, it’s not what they want. They wanted to catch me by surprise.”

Celestia raised her head to stare back at Twilight with an uncompromising demeanour. It was an exceptionally focused expression that the unicorn had never seen before. The decision was hers alone and she could finally make a difference. All of the bureaucratic drivel had been pushed out of the way and she could act quickly and without doubt.

“I don’t want to start a war, Celestia...” Twilight said, a concerned look crossing her face as she sensed the princess’s emotions.

“It has already begun, Twilight. They brought this upon themselves and they should be prepared to face the consequences of their actions. I won’t sit here and wait for them to plunge a dagger into my heart. They’ve done enough already and I won’t let this continue any longer.

“I’m tired of shedding tear after tear for all the things I cannot change. The past is not the present, nor will it ever be, but the future is quite different. We can mould and shape the future, Twilight. We can change it and create a thriving society that everyone can live in happily, not just the greedy and influential noble elite.

“That is what I believe in, Twilight. Something better... But before we do anything at all, I have to speak with the former council members.”

“Now?” Twilight interrupted with a troubled gaze. “It’s past midnight.”

“Yes. They cannot be trusted and I don’t want them doing anything to intervene.” Celestia said as she walked to the door. “They betrayed me once before. I won’t give them time to do it again.”

~

“Did you hear that?” Goldenroot asked, breaking the silence and looking up from his book.

“Mmmm... Hear what?” Vortex said, dozily rolling onto her back.

“The door.” he continued from his seat across the room. “Someone’s knocking at the door.”

Goldenroot was sitting at the large desk in his study, a small lamp dimly illuminating the desktop and surrounding area. The smooth, glossy wooden surface was almost completely covered with the books and papers he had been drowning himself in.

“No... You’re just crazy... crazy and paranoid.” she sighed, rolling over onto her side again. “If you’re going to be crazy and paranoid and make me sleep on the couch in your study instead of my comfy bed at home then you have to be quiet.”

“No, I’m being serious. I think someone’s at the door.” he said, getting up from his seat and walking over to the couch. “And I told you that you could sleep in my bed if you were uncomfortable, but you said no.”

Vortex rolled over onto her back again before her eyes popped open, the amber irises piercing through the darkness and fixing on the pale green stallion above her. Goldenroot looked silently back at the navy blue pegasus, her messy hair unevenly covering the soft, contrasting red fabric of the sofa.

“I said you’re pushing your luck, Goldenroot.” she said, smiling faintly and yawning. “Why don’t you have spare bedrooms like everyone else? It’s not like your house isn’t big enough for them.”

“I have spare bedrooms, but they’re filled with books and files instead of beds. I never have any guests.”

“Well you have one now and she’s very displeased with the sleeping arrangements.”

Vortex closed her eyes and frowned superficially, crossing her forelegs over each other with a huff. She wanted Goldenroot to feel bad for her, but he just rolled his eyes at the overdramatic display of discontent.

“I’m going to check the door. Even if it’s just my paranoia, I’d rather be certain.” he said.

“If it’s a monster, be sure to scream so I can swoop in and save you.”

Goldenroot just shook his head at her remark and walked out of the room into the gloomy hallway, closing the door quietly behind him. Despite what Vortex believed, his house wasn’t all that big and the entranceway was only a short distance from the study.

Several loud knocks caused Goldenroot to come to an abrupt halt.

“Hello!?” he shouted, his voice echoing down the hall.

“This is Princess Celestia’s royal guard!” a muffled voice responded through the thick wooden door. “Goldenroot, we need to speak with you at once!”

“At this hour!?” he continued, nearing closer to the door. “What is this about!?”

“Goldenroot, you will open this door or we will break it down.” another, feminine voice yelled back.

*What is she doing here!?* Goldenroot thought as he grabbed the handle and turned it.

Pulling the door open revealed several of the princess's guards standing all around the brilliant white monarch herself. Her mane flowed almost violently around her body as she stood at the doorstep, a bitter look on her face.

"Is Vortex here as well?" Celestia asked firmly, glancing around the dark room.

"No, of course not." Goldenroot lied, staring strangely at the princess. "What is this about? Is it about her? Is she alright?"

*Best not to let her know that Vortex is here, at least not until I know what this is all about,* he thought, maintaining his anxious expression.

"Do not lie to me, I know she's here. She wasn't at her home and, from what I hear, she's been spending a suspicious amount of time with you lately." Celestia said, fixing a callous glare at the stallion.

Goldenroot blushed slightly, but the weight of the situation forced the embarrassment away, "Even if she is here, why would I want to lie about it?"

"You're just avoiding my questions, Goldenroot." Celestia said before turning to face the guards behind her. "Search the house and find that pegasus. She's in here somewhere."

The guards reacted quickly and pushed the stallion out of the way, rushing into the home. They split into several different directions, heading towards the various rooms.

Goldenroot turned and yelled loudly, his lungs burning as he forced the air out of them. "**Vortex, get out of here! It's not safe! Get out!**"

"So you *were* lying to me." Celestia said, shaking her head slowly, "You really are all the same aren't you? Wind Dancer, Crescendo, even Thunderhorn and Prairie Star, they all denied their involvement. They all lied to me, so why would I think you were any different?"

“Did you really think that you could take over my government? I’ve held this right since my birth over a thousand years ago.”

“What is wrong with you!? What are you doing!?”

“I’m punishing those responsible for the corruption in our country. You played your role and you will be punished for it appropriately. Your rank as a noble and a knight has been stripped, Goldenroot. You are a lowly peasant now, but I wouldn’t let that concern you. You won’t have much use for a title where you’re going.”

Goldenroots stuttered, “What... What are you going to do?”

“I haven’t quite decided yet.” Celestia replied, considering her options. “In the past, the punishment for treason and conspiracy was death and this has been going on for long enough that I may need to set an example for my subjects.”

“What has happened to you, Princess Celestia? Why are you doing all of this?”

The princess paused and just shook her head again. As the two stood in silence, the guards continued to frantically search the rooms of the house for the blue pegasus. Goldenroot hoped that his warning had given her enough time to escape.

“I could ask you the very same question, Goldenroot. I trusted you as a friend, enough to knight you even, but now I find out that you were working with Prance to destroy me?” Celestia said, turning her head slightly as she asked the rhetorical question. “I just want to know why, Goldenroot. Why would you do this to me after everything we’ve gone through?”

Goldenroot tried to calm himself down before replying, “Princess Celestia, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was never trying to destroy you.”

“Then you wished to capture me, enslave me, or otherwise remove me from power? Are you really so arrogant that you believe you could do better?”



Before Goldenroot was able to respond, a voice shouted, "In here! She's in here!"

Goldenroot's head snapped back towards the source as he watched a guard fly against the wall, propelled by a powerful blow to the chest. Vortex emerged from the room, standing on top of the guard she had just knocked out as the rest swarmed down the hallway towards her. It was too narrow for her to fly over them, so she went straight through. After gathering her strength, she pummelled through the armoured ponies and emerged on the other side unscathed.

Vortex, landed valiantly amongst the pile of unconscious guards, "Nice scream, but why are we fighting..."

She paused and her smile fell as she looked towards the princess standing just inside the doorway.

"I told you to leave, Vortex..." Goldenroot muttered softly as he looked at the pegasus.

"It's so nice of you to join us, Vortex." Celestia smiled, "But now that I have all the pieces of the puzzle, I can stop wasting time."

Celestia's horn lit up and the room grew darker as the lights were extinguished and a thick fog rolled across the floor.

"What's going on, Goldenroot? What is this all about!?" Vortex yelled through the shadows.

Celestia's voice cut through the dense fog, "I'm tired of hearing your excuses. Your actions are enough to put what little disbelief I have to rest."

Her words echoed in the room as the two ponies slowly slipped out of consciousness. The fog was lifted and Celestia stood silently among the bodies of the former council members as several more guards rushed in from the street and proceeded to carry them outside.

"Put them in the dungeon with the others." she said sternly, turning to one of the guards. "Those two lovers can share a cell the day before their judgement. It might be the only time they have left."

The guard promptly nodded and hurried out into the streets after the others.

~

A small, concrete room with two beds, a simple toilet and a sink, the dungeon was a grim place. Over its astonishingly long existence, very few ponies had actually dwelled here. Admittedly, Celestia never really had any use for the dungeon. Perhaps it was the result of the very mundane society that she ruled over. With hundreds of guards constantly patrolling the streets of the capital, actual criminals were extremely rare. It was almost impossible to commit a crime in the city when someone was constantly looking over your shoulder and nearly every offence was discovered and prosecuted within a single day. And ever since the Nightmare Moon incident, Celestia considered locking a pony away in the dungeon the worst form of torture. Instead, she forced the guilty to perform community service and improve the society that they had deteriorated with their crimes.

“So is this what you thought would happen?” Vortex asked, glancing over at Goldenroot. “We’d end up in a dungeon waiting for our execution?”

“We don’t know that for sure. She never actually said that we would be executed.” Goldenroot replied, “But to answer your question, no I didn’t. I thought she might change her mind about eliminating the council, but what I think and what I feel are two different things entirely. I was afraid. That’s why I tried to protect you.”

The two ponies lay almost motionless in the old beds across the room from each other. The mattresses were surprisingly clean, but they were stiff and lumpy, causing the ponies to constantly shift their weight around the surface.

“I’m sorry I didn’t leave when you asked me to.” Vortex said, breaking the silence. “If I had listened to you, I might not even be here right now.”

“That’s okay, Vortex. I never really believed you would leave.”

“Really?” Vortex asked, smiling faintly. “Why not?”

“Because I would have done the same thing and we’re not actually that different from each other.”

The two ponies smiled pleasantly at the cracked ceiling above as they each thought about the pony on the opposite side of the room.

“Do you know why I was knighted?” Goldenroot asked.

“Actually, I don’t.” she responded, rolling over, propping her head up against her hoof and gazing at the pale green stallion patiently.

“Very few ponies are ever knighted in Equestria. I never really thought I was worthy of the honour and, as it turns out, neither did she...

“About eight years ago, when I was still working as an arboreal researcher, a small forest in the far east of the country was dying. It was a terrible disease that caused the bark on the trees to peel off, exposing the wood to the harsh weather. With nothing protecting the trees from decay, they slowly perished and the disease only spread more quickly.”

Goldenroot turned to face Vortex with a solemn expression. She was still watching him attentively and, even in this bleak dungeon, he blushed faintly at the thought of her admiring him wordlessly. But it was depressing, forcing him to turn back towards the ceiling and regain his composure. *How could a sweet mare like her get wrapped up in all of this chaos?*

“The disease threatened to spread to other forests and eventually kill every tree throughout the land.” he continued, “Naturally, Princess Celestia enlisted the help of every researcher in the country, including me. Other than the researchers, however, the entire country was kept behind a veil of ignorance.

“As time passed and the disease worsened, most of the researchers gave up looking for a cure. They urged Celestia to burn down the entire forest and save the remaining trees from harm, but would that really solve the problem? I didn’t think so and neither did the princess.

“We saw what the others did not. The disease could easily reappear and we couldn’t afford to burn down entire forests every time we ran into the problem.”

Goldenroot paused and leaned forward as he waited for a patrolling guard to pass. His eyes slowly following the sentry as he walked down the narrow hallway and in front of the iron bars that separated them from the outside world.

“They argued with her and even convinced the council, but she refused to change her mind.” Goldenroot said, leaning back again, “So one by one, the stubborn fools abandoned her. They all just deserted their research and left her to deal with the problem by herself.

“But I refused to leave. I was an inexperienced fool and didn’t know any better, but I still felt like I had to try. I spent every day and every night working on what little knowledge I had and eventually I started making progress. I had isolated the disease and had started to work on the cure. I told Princess Celestia that I needed a month, but she told me that I only had a week.

“You see, the other researchers were becoming impatient and they were threatening to burn down the trees, regardless of the princess’s orders. They were gathering the materials they needed and the entire forest would soon be set ablaze. However, what they didn’t realize was that the disease had already spread. It was in nearly every forest in Equestria and my laboratory, with all the essential data inside it, was at the heart of the disease and the forest they threatened to torch. If I didn’t finish my research in that one week, I would be burned alive.

“I continued to work despite the impending doom. I didn’t really care if I died. I believed that if a solution wasn’t found here and now then it never would be. This same event would only happen time and time again and so, on the very last day, I was still working in my laboratory when Celestia arrived.”

“I’m sorry, Goldenroot, but you need to leave now.” Celestia said, walking gradually up to me.

“All my research is here, I’m not leaving.” I replied firmly.

The laboratory I worked in was a large, wooden structure built in a clearing deep inside the forest. It seemed unreasonable to have such a huge, complicated workspace for a single pony, but it had once been packed with dozens of researchers, all working towards the same goal. Every one of them had been far older and more experienced than I, so why did they leave? Didn’t they know what would happen?

“They’re going to burn the forest down in a matter of minutes, you *must* leave.” Celestia continued, trying to persuade me to abandon my work.

“And then what!? Then I can watch the country rot and fade away as all life perishes and we die a slow and painful death from starvation!?” I yelled, turning to glare at her. “I’m sorry Princess Celestia, but I’m not leaving. If my life was ever worth anything at all, then its entire worth is placed on this very moment. I will find a cure or I will die trying. I refuse to follow the path that so many of my colleagues, my superiors and my idols did!”

I turned around and started working again. I was following the notes I had so diligently taken on the virus, grabbing test tubes and mixing the differently coloured chemicals in glass beakers around the laboratory. The task was significantly more difficult for an earth pony. Where a unicorn could precisely control the glass containers using magic, I had to manually grab each one of them and be careful not to drop any of the potentially volatile chemicals.

“Then I will stay here with you.” she replied in the same, serene tone of voice. “I can hold back the flames and give you the extra time you need.”

“Are you mad!?” I asked, turning around to face her again, practically laughing. “You’re the ruler of this country. The princess! You can’t afford to die here!”

“Goldenroot, your passion burns more brightly than any flame ever could. I find it highly doubtful that we’re going to perish.” she said with a smile.

I smiled back and turned around quickly, continuing my work with the test tubes. “I always wondered what it would be like to have an insane monarch leading my country. I guess it’s not so bad after all.”

After an hour had passed, I could finally smell the smoke of the fire burning just outside the building, but I wasn’t frightened. In truth, I don’t really know why. Was it because of what Celestia said or because of what I actually believed?

The alicorn was sitting on the floor in silence. She was concentrating her magic and keeping the flames from entering the laboratory, but I wasn’t sure how long she could hold out. It was strange, I always thought that a task like this would be easy for Celestia, but it seemed like her magic was weakening. Perhaps it was the combination of the flames, the smoke and the heat, or maybe the strength of an alicorn just wasn’t as legendary as we had all believed.

As the room heated and filled with an intense orange glow from the burning forest outside, I mixed the last of the chemicals together and poured a small droplet on the specimen nearby.

“Does it work!?” Celestia asked.

She was exhausted and the sound of her panting was barely audible over the crackling and burning timbers.

“I... I don’t know. I need more time.” I panicked.

“We don’t have anymore time, Goldenroot!” she yelled as she got to her hooves, “Grab your notes and let’s get out of here!”

She lifted a huge desk and flung it across the room at a large window, smashing the glass to pieces. Reacting quickly, I gathered up everything that could fit in my bag.

“Ready!?” she asked, glaring at me as I put the bags on my back.

As I nodded, she picked me up and threw me onto her back. Dashing out the broken window, we flew out of the woods and high into the smoke-filled air. As we ascended, I could see that the entire forest was engulfed by the fire, the huge flames rising far above the canopy.

“I don’t think I want to do that again.” she laughed, still panting from her fatigue.

~

“A week later, the tiny tree that I tested my cure on had prospered and its bark was rebuilding. We mixed the cure into artificial rain clouds and spread it over the affected forests.

“When all the trees had finally returned to normal, Celestia invited me to her castle. She knighted me for my bravery, but she refused to tell anyone else what happened, forcing everyone involved with the disease into secrecy. She said it was better that way. No one really needed to hear that their country had teetered on the edge of apocalypse.”

“You speak of it so casually...” Vortex smiled. “I heard about that forest fire. Everyone said it was just a natural disaster. What happened to the researchers that actually caused it?”

“The council refused to punish them. They believed that their hearts were in the right place and that they were just trying to help...” Goldenroot shook his head. “Ridiculous... I would have thrown them all in the dungeon for what they had done. Princess Celestia, felt the same as I did, but she couldn’t get anything past the council. Even minor punishments were waived.

“On the day I was knighted, I swore that I would become a member of the council and stop such atrocious things from happening ever again.”

“And just as the council was finally getting better, Celestia got worse and the council was abolished.” Vortex smirked. “Funny how that works.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“While I understand how you feel about all of this, don’t you think we should make the best of our situation?”

Vortex slid out of the small bed on the opposite side of the room and moved leisurely over to the stallion, who continued to stare at the ceiling and ignore her.

“I don’t really understand what you mean. How could we possibly make the best of this?” he asked.

“Well, we may only have one night left on this planet, isn’t there something you want to do other than just mope around.” she smiled, winking at him.

“We’re stuck in a dungeon at the bottom of the castle. Forget about what I *want* to do, I can’t really think of anything I *can* do.” he replied, sounding rather annoyed that she was so focussed on their depressing future.

“Oh, you are such an idiot sometimes, Goldenroot!” a pompous, but familiar voice sounded from the other side of the concrete wall.

Startled, Goldenroot sat up in his bed and turned to face the wall.

“Wind Dancer!?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes, you ignoramus, we’re all locked up in this dungeon together, even if we can’t see each other.”

“You were listening to all of that?”

“Of course I was!” Wind Dancer exclaimed, “How else should I entertain myself in this concrete box?”

“Then how come you didn’t interrupt me before?”

“Because up until now, I was trying to respect your privacy like a proper mare, but you’ve got such a thick head, I just had to intervene.”



Slightly offended, Goldenroot replied back, "What?"

"You can figure this one out, Goldenroot." she said coolly, "You may only have one night left to live and you're stuck in a dungeon with a beautiful young mare that you've spent a large part of your career gawking at."

Vortex blushed brightly and rapidly turned away at the statement.

"What are you going to do?" Wind Dancer asked softly.

"Uuhhhh..." Goldenroot responded stupidly, glancing over at Vortex who was turned the other way and glowing red.

"Oh just kiss her, you idiot!"

~

Celestia stood behind a podium on a large wooden platform, pushed to the far edge of the town square. A massive crowd completely filled the area, small fillies and colts pointing at the stage and tugging on their parent's tails as they tried to figure out what was going on. Their parents, however, were just as lost, very little had been explained about the gathering except that it was important. So the ponies just stood and waited in silent anticipation.

"Citizens of Equestria!" Celestia exclaimed, amplifying her voice with her magic. "You are no doubt wondering why I have gathered you all here today. The truth is that traitors have been living among us!"

The crowd gasped and looked around in shock and awe.

"Foul ponies, they have been working in the shadows, performing vile deeds and conspiring against us. They sought to overthrow the government and take it for themselves." she continued, "I'm sorry that I let this happen to our country. I never would have believed that the very thing I created would turn against us, especially when we needed them the most."

One after another, six ponies were led onto the platform and **out** into the open, each with an iron shackle around one of their hooves that connected them to their companions.

“Goldenroot, Vortex, Wind Dancer, Thunderhorn, Crescendo and Prairie Star, once members of the elite council and the nobility, have now been stripped of their titles and positions.” Celestia continued, turning to glare at the ponies as they stopped and faced the crowd in front of them. “They are not worthy of an honour that we reserve for only the most respected ponies in our society.

“They were working with Prance, the nation of ponies we all thought to be our allies and our friends. The drought that has caused so much suffering and pain was nothing that we could not have solved on our own in the past, yet it caused such terrible food shortages now. We all asked why and how, but only now do I know the truth. These ponies were lying to us and secretly worsening the drought. They were helping Prance weaken us for a coming war! They wanted to conquer our peaceful nation to meet their own selfish ends!”

“You’re making a mistake, Princess Celestia!” Wind Dancer cried, tears slowly rolling down her cheeks as she desperately tried to convince the alicorn. “We haven’t done anything wrong.”

Princess Celestia left her spot by the podium and walked slowly over to the white pegasus. Wind Dancer’s once long, beautiful light blue hair had lost most of its lustre, drooping down around her in a tangled mess. Everything she cared so much for had been tossed aside, disappearing in what seemed like an instant. The threat of her execution was too great and her appearance just didn’t seem to matter anymore.

“I wish I could believe you, Wind Dancer, but I can’t afford to gamble on our future. This is too important.”

Meanwhile, the crowd was becoming increasingly agitated by this new realization. How could anything like this happen? Were they really so weak and vulnerable that they had let this go on for so long?

Celestia turned away, leaving Wind Dancer speechless. She walked back in front of the podium and gazed out over the troubled ponies around her.

“I won’t let our country fall victim to their lies any longer, but I will not degrade myself to their level. Despite their crimes as traitors, conspirators and manipulators of the truth, I will grant them my mercy.”

She turned back towards the former council members and paused, glaring at each individually.

Goldenroot looked at Vortex who was chained beside him. She returned a momentary glance and smiled slightly before pulling her eyes away and staring at the floor beneath them.

“You will all be exiled from Equestria and never allowed to return. If you refuse to live in harmony with us, then you will be forced to live in discord without us.”

The ponies all reacted at once, sighing heavily or smiling brightly at their neighbour. Relieved to be spared, their eternal banishment from the country they had all spent their entire lives inside paled in comparison to an otherwise unfortunate and bitter end.

Vortex leaped over and hugged Goldenroot tightly, wrapping her hooves around the stallion’s neck. Goldenroot almost immediately returned the gesture, too happy to be embarrassed.

“If you choose to defy this punishment and return to Equestria for any reason at all, I will have to resort to a penance reserved for only the most horrifying of creatures. I am only giving you one chance, don’t waste it.”

All six of them were unshackled and led off the platform and into a large black stagecoach waiting nearby. The crowd booed and heckled them while the unicorns in the audience threw stones. As the first rock guided itself towards Goldenroot, a magical barrier was lifted in front of him, causing the stone to gently bounce off and fall to the ground. Surprised, Goldenroot stopped and turned back towards the stage.

Celestia looked back at him with disgust, “You may not be now, Goldenroot, but you were my friend. I owe you this much, but nothing more.”

Goldenroot just turned back and got into the stagecoach behind Vortex, the barrier disappearing as the door closed shut.

“Do not concern yourself with these traitors any longer. To remember them would be to acknowledge their existence within our country and I refuse to give them that satisfaction.

“No, we have more important matters to deal with! Our enemies lay waiting on our doorstep. They wish to see us misstep, but we cannot give them that opportunity. We must bring the war to Prance before they bring it to us. It is our privilege, no, our duty to stop them. They, not the drought, are the one true plague in this world and they must be brought to justice. We must free Prance from the tyranny of their leader and rescue its inhabitants from the corruption and brutality he has created.

“But I need to ask you for your aid, citizens of Equestria. Please, will you help me? Will you help your country? I am powerless without your support.”

Her speech had worked the crowd into a frenzy of emotion and they let out a deafening roar of approval, stamping the ground with their hooves and cheering loudly. Even the young fillies and colts cheered, though they didn’t understand why.

“Thank you.” Celestia said, bowing her head in gratitude, “I could not ask for a greater country, or ponies, to serve. Your courage and strength truly has no equal and it is an honour to live among you all.”

The crowd continued to cheer noisily as Celestia walked off the stage and towards the palace. They would support their princess. They would even follow her to the end of the earth and walk off the edge if she asked it.

Luna rushed down the hallway towards the throne room. Her new knowledge was nearly arresting, causing her to seethe with anger.

*How could she do this!?* she thought, the guards eyeballing her movements with curiosity. *She banished the entire council from Equestria and now she's starting a war!?*

"I'm sorry, Princess Luna, but Princess Celestia is very busy with war preparations and she has asked not to be disturbed."

Luna completely ignored the guards standing on either side as she flung the door wide open and walked through the threshold, leaving the two stunned ponies in her wake.

"Sister!" she yelled, slamming the door behind her.

Celestia was standing at a large table placed in the center of the room. A map was spread across the surface of a massive table, almost completely concealing the intricate carvings underneath. Small, differently coloured wooden blocks were strewn all over the map, each block representing a different army or group of soldiers.

As Luna drew ever closer to her sister's position, Celestia turned around and smiled pleasantly, "Oh, hello Luna."

"Why are you doing all of this? A war!? What are you thinking!?"

"Why?" Celestia repeated, turning back towards the table, "I was hardly given a choice in the matter. Prance held Twilight hostage, tried to convince us that she died and used the council, the second most influential members of our country, as puppets to further their own selfish goals. They wanted to take over our country, Luna. They wanted me gone forever.

"So wouldn't sitting here and just smiling like I've been doing for the past millennia give you more grounds for asking 'why?' than a war? A war is what they wanted and it's what I intended to deliver to them on a silver platter."

Luna looked extremely confused, "I don't understand where you're getting this. Traitors..? Conspirators..? Who told you this?"

Celestia spun around, "Luna, Twilight told me everything that happened in Prance. I may not have wanted to hear any of it, but it's the truth. Why would she lie about something like this? Do you think she wants a war? She's a librarian not a bored soldier or a maniac. She wants this no more than you do and after the *nightmare* she went through I'm not about to even *consider* that she's lying."

Celestia shook her head and turned around again, glancing over the map and moving the small blocks around the surface delicately.

Luna's anger diminished as she thought about everything Twilight had been through. Her sister hadn't told her everything, but she had heard about the bandits and everything that happened afterwards was almost certainly worse.

"I'm sorry, sister..." she apologized quietly, "I just don't think that a war is the answer to our problems."

Celestia, recognizing her sister's regret, turned back to face her. With a compassionate look in her eyes, she lowered her head down to her sister's level.

"Luna, it will be alright. Prance is too small to oppose us. They will probably surrender within the first few days." Celestia said reassuringly, "I'm not going to give them time to react and I will keep the casualties to a minimum. The only chance they had was through their dirty, indirect tactics."

"And who knows? Maybe if we knock on their door they will just open it, invite us in and no one will even be injured, but I can't let them get away with this. There has to be some justice in this world and if I need to look for it, then so be it."

But Luna's worried look persisted, even as her sister smiled warmly at her. "You've changed, Celestia. This isn't like you."

Celestia's smile faded away as she raised her head and answered her sister, "No... It isn't, but the circumstances have forced me to change and I'm beginning to think that a lot of our problems could have been avoided if I hadn't been so blind."

“Sister, please... stop...” Luna said, small tears welling in the corners of her eyes, “You sound like... *her*.”

“Her!?” Celestia exclaimed, “Why would you even say that, Luna? I’m not some nightmare trying to plunge the world into eternal darkness. I’m trying to protect us from psychopaths and criminals.”

Celestia was more surprised than angry at Luna. She was surprised that her sister would compare her to that monster spawned from jealousy and hatred.

Celestia lowered her voice slightly, smiling at her sister again, “You know that I would never let anything happen to you, Luna. Now please, don’t worry about all of this. I promised you that I would fix my mistakes and intended on doing just that. This will all be over soon.”

Luna turned and walked away from her sister and toward the door on the far end of the room. *I know that, sister, and that’s exactly what I’m afraid of. I’m afraid that when this is all over, you’ll find out that you’ve just made another mistake.*

# Chapter 8

“Alright, I’ve given us enough time to get out of the city, now I want to know who’s responsible for all of this! Who was the filthy scoundrel that nearly cost me my life!?” Thunderhorn yelled, startling the ponies inside the stagecoach as he glared around the interior.

“Calm down, general. We can all hear you.” Vortex smirked, “Although I have to admit, I’m a little bit curious myself.”

“Don’t you dare think I’m going to take you out of the equation, you egotistical brat.”

“Don’t make accusations you can’t back up!” Goldenroot interrupted, glaring at the grey unicorn, “You don’t even know what you’re talking about! How do you know that anyone here is actually a traitor?”

Vortex smiled faintly, embarrassed that Goldenroot was defending her, admittedly, discourteous actions.

Thunderhorn snorted, “We wouldn’t have lost our jobs and been banished from our homeland if someone wasn’t a traitor.”

“No,” Goldenroot replied with a deathly serious expression, “but don’t you think there’s more to it than just a traitor? I don’t think that anyone would want to betray both Princess Celestia and their country for promises of power.”

“Why does this always have to be a game to you, Goldenroot?” Wind Dancer asked, gently sobbing as she leaned against the wall. “We lost our homes, our fortunes, our fame... What was wrong with the way things were?”

The small carriage went quiet as the five ponies just sat and listened to the pegasus sobbing in the corner.



“It was you, wasn’t it, Goldenroot?” she asked quietly, breaking the silence, “You were the one helping Prance, weren’t you?”

There was a momentary pause as they all turned to look towards the pale green stallion. He slowly lifted his hoof to his face and started to rub the bridge of his nose, letting a deep sigh escape his lungs.

“Yes, but it’s not...” he started.

**“I knew it was you, you filthy mongrel! How dare you destroy everything I worked so hard to obtain!”** Thunderhorn interrupted, jumping up from his seat and throttling the stallion with his magic.

**“Stop it, Thunderhorn! I won’t watch you turn into a murderer!”** Crescendo shouted while using his own magic to break the unicorn’s grasp.

Thunderhorn reluctantly complied, falling back onto the bench and putting a hoof up to his face. Goldenroot coughed and rubbed his neck, while Vortex just sat and stared at the stallion in disbelief.

“Besides, I would rather hear him explain himself.” Crescendo continued.

But before Goldenroot could say anything, Prairie Star started to laugh in her corner of the stagecoach. She just giggled away as everyone diverted their attention towards her.

“Are you alright, Prairie Star?” Crescendo asked.

“I thought I had everything under control.” she replied with a strange smile. “But in the end, I wasn’t really doing anything was I? The whole thing was completely out of my hooves and it all turned into a nightmare.

“I sacrificed so much for this, so much of my life, my happiness, even my own personality... I remember that stallion I met so long ago. He was so handsome... so sweet... but I was just too boring. I had spent my entire life learning how to react to both exciting and depressing news in complete monotony that I couldn’t even remember how to have fun so I just sat and watched him go. Watched him leave... I couldn’t even cry about it when I got home. I didn’t even know how to do that anymore...”

The mare continued to stare outside the window and started to laugh quietly.

“You’re all so sad that you lost your precious houses and your beloved money, but you still have what’s important, don’t you?”

Tears started to form in the corners of her eyes as she turned around and looked away from the window and into the carriage at each of the ponies inside.

“I don’t have that.”

She turned back towards the window and gazed outside again.

“But at least my life is depressing enough now that I can remember how to cry...”

Prairie Star closed her eyes gently and started to sob uncontrollably, her golden hair obscuring her face. Her startling reaction had even surprised the usually overdramatic Wind Dancer, who now sat upright and completely motionless in her seat.

Vortex leaned over from her seat and wrapped her arms around the mare. No one had ever seen her like this. No one could have ever imagined the kind of effect that something like this might have on a pony, but Prairie Star’s entire life revolved around the council.

As a young filly, she grew up believing that the council was one of the most important organizations in the entire country and she had spent most of her life trying to work her way in. Unfortunately, unlike the other members, she was not a celebrity in any way, shape, or form and she was completely ignored in the elections. So the only chance she had was to apply for the director position, which only required a nomination from the princess. While she would not actually participate in the voting procedure, she still felt like she would be making a difference and perhaps, someday, she could become a proper member.

But the position required every single aspect of the personality she did not have. She was an excitable and emotional mare who reacted to

almost everything in a spectacular fashion. It was only through determination and intense training that she was able to contain these feelings and establish her legendary monotony. And once she had that, Princess Celestia was more than happy to give her the nomination and, when it became available, the actual position. But now that the council was gone and she was banished from her country, she had lost her dreams and with it, everything she believed in.

They remained in silence for a few hours while the coach just bumped along the road, nearing ever closer to their destination. Not until Prairie Star had finally stopped sobbing and drifted off into a deep sleep, did they once again start to question Goldenroot's involvement.

Vortex, still holding onto the sleeping pony, glanced over at the stallion with a worried expression, "So what *were* you doing? Why did you want to help Prance overthrow Celestia?"

Once again, the focus of attention returned to Goldenroot as he replied, "I was only ever trying to get the commoners involved in the council. I *was not* trying to overthrow Princess Celestia, I don't even know where that came from. I don't know whether it's a lie or just a misunderstanding, but it's not the truth."

"You mean you didn't know what they were trying to accomplish?" Crescendo asked, slightly taken aback.

"No. I had no idea. To be honest, I still can't believe that's what they were trying to do."

"So what do you believe?" Vortex asked, holding the sleeping mare more tightly between her forelegs.

"Well that's kind of difficult to explain on its own, so I'll go back to the beginning. You see, some time ago when the drought had first started, I was approached by Le Roi Pierre at my home. Naturally, I was a bit curious since we rarely ever have any foreigners in the country and having the monarch of any country on your doorstep is quite the honour. I was told that he was trying to keep his visit very low profile. He didn't really want the general public to know that he was here."

Thunderhorn scoffed, "And you didn't find that at all suspicious?"

"Actually I did, but then he told me why he had actually arrived. You see, he came to see Princess Celestia."

The other ponies exchanged several surprised glances.

"Why would he want to see Celestia?" Crescendo blurted, asking the obvious question.

"Le Roi Pierre told me about the situation in his country and how they were having problems acquiring all the resources they needed. They relied heavily on trade with their surrounding nations and when the largest country in the world refuses to trade with you, it's hard to make a living.

"He only wanted to know why we wouldn't trade with his country."

"Why would he need to come all the way to Equestria to do that?" Vortex asked.

"Well it sounded like he wasn't really asking... He was begging..." Goldenroot replied. "His country had spent the last two hundred years trying to establish proper trade routes with us, but every single proposal was turned down and they were finally getting desperate."

"Why wouldn't Princess Celestia just pass the law and get it over with." Wind Dancer asked, jumping into the conversation and rolling her eyes a little. "It doesn't seem like such a bad thing."

"It wasn't Princess Celestia's fault." Thunderhorn interjected. "It was ours. As far as I'm aware, Princess Celestia both proposed and approved every one of those laws. The council, however, refused to sign any of them. It wasn't worth our time or effort to get wrapped up in the outside world."

"Exactly." Goldenroot said, nodding his head slowly. "Le Roi Pierre was trying to get Princess Celestia to convince the council, but she couldn't do anything. The council was stubborn and refused to change their opinion. I was part of the council when one of those proposals went through, as well as Crescendo and Thunderhorn; however, I was the only one to vote in

favour of it. That's exactly why Le Roi Pierre came to me. Princess Celestia had actually pointed him in my direction."

"Thunderhorn and I had been in the council long enough to see three of those dreaded proposals. No one ever wanted to deal with all the problems it would create..." Crescendo said, shaking his head. "I say, Goldenroot, this is getting more confusing the more I hear about it. It seems like Princess Celestia knows a lot more about all of this than she lets on, so why does she seem to have such a convoluted understanding?"

"I think Goldenroot is lying." Thunderhorn exclaimed.

"Why would I lie now?" Goldenroot asked. "If I wanted to lie about this, why would I wait until the very end and explain to you that I'm responsible? I won't gain anything from lying to you now."

"Alright, I see your point." Thunderhorn admitted, "So why would Princess Celestia believe we were the cause of the drought?"

Goldenroot frowned slightly, "I was partly responsible for the drought. Not for starting it, but for making it worse. You see, I explained to Le Roi Pierre that the council was stubborn and unwilling to change. I talked about how I had hoped to expand the council to include everyone in Equestria, not just the nobility. I wanted everyone to have a voice in the government, but the rest of the council did not. It's much easier to just sit in your house and watch the world go by from your window than it is to actually step outside. You feel comfortable and safe, free from all the world's problems.

"He just smiled at me and said, 'No one will change if they don't have to. Sometimes you have to create the catalyst for change. You have to set their houses on fire and force them to step outside.'"

"And the drought was your fire..." Vortex remarked, quietly interrupting the stallion.

"Yeah..." the pale green stallion responded, nodding his head. "A natural disaster inspires fear in your heart. That fear forces you to try and fix the problem before it gets worse. In Equestria, we have been mostly sheltered from these natural disasters. Princess Celestia's power and wisdom lets her fix almost everything before it can get worse and even

when problems do exist, she shields us from fear. She tries to hide the truth. I knew that for a fact from my experience with the arboreal virus. I was knighted for *saving the world*, but no one even knew it was ever in danger.”

“So you sabotaged the country and made the drought worse to help pass both your laws.” Crescendo said, trying to bring him back to the point.

“We paid teams of pegasi to prevent certain weather patterns from entering the country. Some rain still got through, but we were keeping enough back to stop the crops from growing.”

“Do you have any idea how much damage you caused with all of this!?” Thunderhorn asked, shaking his head.

Prairie Star stirred in her sleep, adjusting her head slightly as she reacted to the unicorn’s noisy response.

“Ponies lost their homes, some almost died.” he continued, trying to keep his volume to a minimum.

“No one was supposed to get hurt.” Goldenroot answered, “We had organized for Prance to send provisions to help everyone, but I never expected the nobility to end up buying all of the supplies they sent. They took everything, far more than they needed.

“I was worried, so we stopped worsening the drought and let everything return to normal. However, not before Princess Celestia sent Twilight Sparkle to Prance. I don’t think she knew what I was actually doing, but I think that she was trying to get us, the council, to realize that we needed to trade with them. She already knew the answer to our problem and she was trying to convince us indirectly.”

“But we didn’t listen.” Crescendo replied.

“Yeah. Only I knew the truth, but I couldn’t tell anyone. If I did, I risked being discovered and I would probably be thrown in jail for treason.”

“Or exiled...” Wind Dancer scoffed, rolling her eyes and glancing out the window.

Goldenroot frowned and rubbed the bridge of his nose again.

“So I just stuck to the plan and tried to get everyone to vote for the law to involve the commoners in the council. After that was passed, we would all have to run for re-election. When the new council was formed, Equestria would recover on its own now that we weren’t sabotaging it and the public would believe that the drought was improving due to the changes in the council. I, being the one to first suggest the idea, would be regarded as a national hero and an important political figure. I would have an incredible influence and I could convince everyone to establish the trade routes with Prance.”

“And what if you didn’t get re-elected?” Thunderhorn asked.

“I was giving every single pony in Equestria the right to vote, something that they’ve wanted for generations. It’s very hard to believe that I wouldn’t get re-elected after that.”

“So what? You just wanted to become some kind of national hero?” Vortex asked, turning to watch the countryside pass by outside the window. “This was all just some kind of ego trip for you?”

“I didn’t really want to be a hero, Vortex.” he replied, dropping his head slightly. “I just wanted to make a difference. Ever since I got involved with politics after the forest fire, I wanted to do something like this. I thought this was my only chance and, even though it seemed like a more elaborate way of making an impact than I wanted, we weren’t making any progress in the council.”

“Two hundred years... They had been trying to establish trade routes with us for two hundred years and our ignorance was the only thing standing in their way. The situation with the commoners and the council has roots that go much deeper than that. I thought this was the best thing to do... I never wanted to hurt anyone.”

“Fair enough, Goldenroot.” Crescendo said, shrugging. “So Le Roi Pierre is a die-hard patriot and you’re an arsonist and a lost visionary. That doesn’t explain why Princess Celestia would think that Prance is trying to take over the world.”

The stagecoach came to an abrupt stop and jolted the ponies inside. Prairie Star batted her eyelids and leaned away from the wall. Vortex smiled at her gently and slowly removed her forelegs from around her waist.

“No it doesn’t. That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you. This doesn’t make any sense.” Goldenroot exclaimed, “Something else is going on here and now I’m afraid that we’ll never find out.”

The door to the stagecoach swung open and the two guards looked inside.

“This is your stop, traitors. A land with no name, owned by no country.” one of the guards announced with a brash tone.

Wind Dancer was the first to step out, glaring at the two as she left. Neither she, nor any of the other council members, appreciated being called a traitor. The others followed suit, stepping out into a dense forest. Having travelled all day, it was now dark outside. The thick pine trees of the woods rose high above their heads, partially masking the glowing moon and stars in the serene night sky. Dim lights shone out from the windows in the small village off in the distance and a bumpy dirt trail leading to the village was covered erratically in little stones and patches of moss and grass.

*Is this where we have to spend the rest of our days?* Goldenroot thought, watching the lights flicker in the distant windows of the town. *Cast out, we’re intended to be lost and forgotten and live like savages in the middle of nowhere?*

The guards slammed the stagecoach’s door shut and returned to their place behind the wagon, the two ponies in front making a wide arc as they turned the carriage around and started the long journey home.

“So what exactly are we supposed to do?” Wind Dancer asked looking around the group in confusion.

“We should probably find some food and lodging first. We can figure out what we’re going to do in the morning.” Goldenroot replied.



“Does anyone have any money?” Thunderhorn asked.

The other ponies all just shook their heads.

“Wonderful...” he sighed, “I’m so glad we were all prepared for this.”

“How could you possibly be prepared for something like this?” Vortex said under her breath.

“Regardless, we should still find an inn.” Crescendo said, “Perhaps we can work out some kind of arrangement.”

~

At the base of the cliff from which Canterlot was situated, a vast army was forming. The sea of golden armoured soldiers blanketed the ground. They had pitched thousands of tents, sticking out at regular intervals and disturbing the peaceful tranquility of the green fields they occupied. It had only been one week, but it was more than enough time to gather the bulk of the army and only a few remained to keep vigilant watch over the various cities and towns around the country. It wasn’t conscription, but it may as well have been. All of Equestria had been devastated by the drought and its entire population had been cowering in the corner, afraid of the distant enemy they could not see with their own eyes. So when it was revealed that Prance and the council were responsible for the drought, they were eager to fight back. Now they had a common enemy to direct their anger and sorrow towards, more than happy to eliminate the pointless squabbling amongst their own kind. They could do nothing against the drought, but they could something against Prance. They could punish them for the sorrow and pain they had endured. Everything that they had lost, Prance would be held responsible for taking.

Celestia, perched on the towering balcony above, monitored their progress and tried to keep an accurate measure of their numbers. It was well over twenty thousand now, not nearly as many as the armies of legends, but more than enough to accomplish the task that had been laid out for them. In truth, she had no intention of actually taking Prance for her

own, ruling over it like she did with Equestria. She wanted to free the nation from the tyranny of their imprudent ruler, but there was something else that ate at her insides like a horrible disease. It was a feeling that she struggled to contain, a thirst that she refused to quench. It was a thirst for revenge and, like the soldiers below, she wanted to make Le Roi Pierre pay for his crimes.

She wanted to make him pay, but she knew she couldn't. She couldn't let her anger and hatred for a single pony take control. It was an unreasonable desire that could only lead a pony to madness, so she just watched. She watched and planned out her careful advance upon her northern neighbour. Everything had to go according to plan or she would only become the cause of more pain and misery for the ponies in the nation she protected. They had suffered enough already under her selfish neglect.

Behind her, a familiar purple pony slowly approached. Carefully moving one hoof after another and trying not to startle her teacher, Twilight stopped just beside her.

"Hello Twilight." Celestia said pleasantly, still keeping an eye on the golden mass of soldiers below.

"You seem awfully calm about all of this, Princess Celestia." Twilight remarked, turning a concerned glance towards the alicorn.

"I have to be. They depend on me for their strength. They may be soldiers, but they are far from fearless and it has been centuries since Equestria was part of any major conflicts. None of these soldiers have any real battle experience. At best, they might have some familiarity with petty bar fights."

"But doesn't that mean you've just been doing a good job of ruling over our country? You've lived for so long, yet you've avoided so many wars. I never would have imagined that I would be seeing this in my lifetime."

"Unfortunately, that only makes the problem worse. It's exactly as you say. No one could have imagined this and that only means we're unprepared."

The two silently watched the soldiers move far below the castle. From a distance, they looked like a powerful army, but Twilight could see the real ponies below. Some were scared, regretful of the positions they had signed up for. Others were too worried about the kind of amazing stories they would tell when they returned in a few weeks, completely ignorant of the danger that waited for them.

“I don’t suppose you’re here to try and convince me to change my mind.” Celestia asked, breaking the silence as she finally turned to face her student.

“I’m not really sure what to believe anymore, princess.” Twilight replied, letting her head slowly fall towards the floor. “I still want to believe that there’s another, better way, but I’m starting to understand that there isn’t. I came, not because I wanted to try and convince you of anything, but because I wanted to know that you’re absolutely certain that this is the right decision.”

“We are by nature, very near-sighted creatures, Twilight. We always want to do what we think is best at the moment, but we never really take the time to stop and think about how our decisions are going to affect the future. Sadly, the future is almost entirely unpredictable so how can we ever be sure we’re making the right decisions?”

“I’ve always believed quite strongly that we can’t. We can never be absolutely sure that we’re making the right decisions and that’s exactly why we have to take such a near-sighted approach to everything. We can only do what we believe is right at the moment and hope for the best.”

“So you only think this is the right thing to do at the moment? What if you change your mind?”

Celestia smiled faintly and turned back to stare across the horizon. The rolling hills and forests leading away from the castle and into the distance painted a beautiful picture on the landscape.

“You are and will always be more than just a student to me, Twilight. If I have to do this to protect you, my sister and everyone else in Equestria from harm, then I believe this is the right thing to do. I don’t think I could ever live long enough to regret protecting the ones I care about.”

Twilight moved closer and nuzzled her head up against the side of Celestia's neck. The alicorn smiled more brightly and moved her wing around the unicorn, pulling her closer.

"When will you be back?" Twilight asked, not daring to look up at her teacher.

"As soon as I can be." she answered, "I hope to be back in a few weeks, but I can't be sure. Nothing ever really seems to go according to plan, does it?"

Celestia turned her head down towards Twilight and smiled, the unicorn reluctantly returning the gesture.

"I don't really care how long it takes, princess." Twilight said, closing her eyes and pulling herself closer to the alicorn. "I just want you to come back."

"I will never leave you alone, Twilight. I won't make that mistake again."

~

It was a dark and overall depressing place, doing nothing to help lighten the mood. The floor, made of rickety wooden boards that unevenly covered the dirt beneath, squeaked curiously as it moved under the pressure of a pony's hooves. And, located in the basement, it was nearly freezing to the touch, in spite of the unusually warm autumn weather waiting just outside the building's walls. Shelves stacked chaotically with old books and documents detailed the otherwise boring walls on either side of the room. At the far end, however, was a single painting that glowed like a lantern in a dark cave. It was ugly, horrendous even, but that's exactly what made it so interesting to look at. It was a picture of a burning village, smeared across with poorly illustrated flames and lifeless ponies. They just seemed to stand there and watch the flames consuming their houses, displaying no emotions or reacting at all to the terrible disaster taking place

before their eyes. It was the only thing in the room that gave it any character and what character it gave was miserable and unwanted.

The innkeeper had graciously given them all a room to sleep in and enough food to keep their stomachs from complaining, but the old stallion wasn't about to give away his best accommodations to a bizarre collection of ponies that just seemed to appear out of thin air in the middle of the night. So they had all slept in the basement with its completely chilling atmosphere and just as unpleasant beds. Thin sheets were laid out across a hard mattress, only just barely adequate in covering their bodies and protecting them from the night. It was entirely comparable to the dungeon in which they had spent their last night in Equestria, just less ominous and fear-provoking.

The event had changed them all, leaving them with invisible scars and constant reminders of their grim situation. None of them really knew what was going to happen next, which was exactly why they all seemed to have just given up. They couldn't return to their past life, it was too far gone and their last experience left many of them with a sour taste in their mouths and no desire to revisit their home country. They could live here, but they had nothing. Politicians with few survival skills, they were as good as beggars. Finally, as a last alternative, they could leave and go somewhere else, the fate that Crescendo had resigned himself to.

"Where are the others?" The dark brown unicorn asked, as he fumbled with the supplies in his bag.

"Vortex is out in the forest with Prairie Star." Goldenroot replied, getting up and walking over to his colleague. "Wind Dancer and Thunderhorn are still out trying to find ways to make some money."

"They didn't want to see me off, then?"

"Prairie Star has been having a difficult time ever since the incident in the stagecoach. I don't want to force her to do anything right now and I'm grateful that Vortex is spending so much time with her."

"And Wind Dancer and Thunderhorn just don't really care?" the unicorn asked, grinning slightly and chuckling. "They both still want to go back to Equestria, don't they?"

“Why wouldn’t they? It’s their home isn’t it?” Goldenroot asked with a hint of irritation in his voice as he watched Crescendo organize his things.

“I like to think of this as an excuse to go on a very long vacation. It’s almost like someone has given me permission to explore anywhere in the world, except Equestria. And I’m alright with that. I’ve already been there anyway.”

Crescendo stopped fiddling with his bags and glanced over towards the pale green stallion standing near him. He smiled brightly and chuckled to himself before turning serious again.

“I guess I’m just too old to deal with this anymore, Goldenroot. I just want to go out into the world and enjoy myself a bit. That’s something I never really had the time to do. So much of my life revolved around music and the council and now...”

The unicorn hoisted the bags up and over his head, letting them come to a slow rest on his back before releasing his grasp and letting them sag over the side of his body.

“Well it’s kind of like you said, isn’t it? No one ever really wants to leave the comfort of their own home, but if someone sets it on fire then you don’t really have a choice.”

“I’m sorry, Crescendo.” Goldenroot apologized, letting his gaze drop from the unicorn. “I guess I just thought that everything would go according to plan. I really believed that I was going to help everyone.”

“I’ve heard that one before.” Crescendo said, grinning slightly. “Don’t get me wrong, I do blame you for what happened, but I’m just not angry about it. I’m far too old for that and there are far more important things to worry about than revenge.”

The unicorn started walking towards the door leading out of the basement and into the rest of the building. Slowly pulling it open, he turned around and glanced at the stallion standing in the center of the room.

“You’re a good pony, Goldenroot, but you made a really poor decision. I may not really care, but you should find a way to make it up to everyone else. Or, at the very least, you should find a way to make it up to *her*.”

The unicorn let the door gently close behind him as he stepped outside, leaving Goldenroot alone in the silence of the small room.

Vortex wasn’t angry with him, like Thunderhorn and Wind Dancer were. No, what she felt was more of a sense of disappointment, like he had failed her in some way. Goldenroot had wanted to apologize, but he didn’t know how. They had lived here for almost a week now and he could barely even work up the courage to look at her, let alone say anything, so how could he possibly apologize to her for destroying their lives and disturbing the peace of an entire country?

The stallion only just decided to sit down on his bed to give it some more thought when several short, precisely spaced knocks arrived at the door.

*Did he forget something?* he thought, rolling his eyes and continuing on to the bed.

The knocks at the door continued, identical to the last.

“Oh, just come in already!” he shouted angrily, tilting his head towards the door, but not bothering to look back.

“Is this a bad time, Sir Goldenroot?” a graceful, but anxious voice asked through the door. “I can come back later, if you like.”

Goldenroot paused for a moment, completely unable to recognize the voice on the other side of the door, ***Sir Goldenroot!?***

The door sighed heavily as it opened and the stallion just stared at the pony in the doorway. She was not completely unlike Wind Dancer and he would not have given a second thought to calling her by that name if it weren’t for a few defining characteristics. Her coat was undeniably the same white, but her mane and tail were a darker shade of indigo instead of the light blue hair that gently cascaded down Wind Dancer’s body.

Surprisingly, however, it was just as expertly groomed, if not even more so than the mare who claimed to spend hours on her hair every morning.

And yet, despite the difference in hair colour and appeal, what stood out most boldly was the absence of her wings and the presence of a horn on the top her head. Indeed, she was a unicorn and not a pegasus like the mare he had worked with in the council.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Rarity. I’m one of Twilight Sparkle’s friends?” she said, leaving the last part as a kind of question and hoping that the stallion would recognize the name of Celestia’s star pupil.

“Yes, I know Twilight. She’s Princess Celestia’s student. What do you want?” Goldenroot replied, still staring at the brilliant unicorn standing at the entrance to the dark pit that he now called his home.

“You *are* Sir Goldenroot, are you not?” she asked, staring back at him curiously.

“Not anymore, I had that title revoked.”

“Well actually, that’s part of the reason I’m here.”

“I don’t want to be called that anymore, Miss Rarity. I’m not the hero everyone thought I was and I just want to be left alone.”

Goldenroot started to push the door closed, but Rarity held it open with her magic.

“Please, this is very important.” she insisted, releasing her grasp once he stopped pushing.

“Alright then.” he sighed, turning around. “I imagine this is going to take a while. Do you want to sit down, Miss Rarity?”

She cautiously walked into the room and stopped, carefully investigating the uncomfortable and filthy mattresses on the floor and then the strange objects around the room. She only stopped when she arrived at the peculiar picture hanging on the wall.



“Miss Rarity?” he asked again.

“Umm, I think I would rather stand.” she replied, pulling her eyes away from the painting and flashing a nervous smile at the stallion.

“Yeah, I don’t like it either, but I haven’t really had much of a choice.” Goldenroot said, frowned slightly as he lay down on one of the beds, “What did you want to talk about?”

“Well I was *actually* hoping that you might help me.”

Goldenroot laughed, “What could I possible do?”

“I understand why you might find this humorous, but I really do *need* your help. You see, Twilight Sparkle...”

She paused and slowly turned her head to the side as she tried to think about what to say next.

“She’s not really...” she continued, “Well, she was *supposed* to come and see us in Ponyville, but...”

“Listen, Miss Rarity, I may live in a dark hole in the middle of nowhere, but I don’t want you to waste my time. I know Twilight has been depressed since her journey and she spends a lot of time with Celestia now, but that’s not really my problem. So if that’s all you’re going...”

“I don’t think she ever actually came back from Prance.” Rarity blurted out, interrupting Goldenroot midsentence.

# Chapter 9

“Oh, pardon *me*.” Rarity said, lifting a hoof to her chest apologetically, “I really shouldn’t have interrupted you like that. I just got carried away.”

Goldenroot was sitting in a stunned silence, unable to completely grasp what she had just said. He was just staring at the unicorn with a blank, unintelligible look on his face.

“What... What do you mean, you don’t think she ever actually came back from Prance?” he asked, tilting his head to the side.

“Not so long ago, just before I made the trip out here to find you, I was involved in a series of events that, while seemingly dull enough at first, led me to believe this was the case.

“The first was a visit from Princess Luna at my home in Ponyville. Strangely enough, she had arrived alone and unannounced with only a single question that she wanted to ask me, ‘Has Twilight Sparkle come to visit you recently?’

“Understandably, I was quite confused and even upset with her question. I thought she was suggesting that Twilight had turned into a ghost or something equally as awful. Of course, I don’t believe in such nonsense. Ghosts...”

“You mean she never actually came to Ponyville?” Goldenroot asked, pulling her back to the point before she got carried away.

“She died, Sir Goldenroot...” Rarity stated with a pained expression, “We held a funeral for her.”

The unicorn turned her head away from the stallion as the heartbreaking memories started to return. Her eyes began to water, but she simply closed them and breathed deeply, the air entering and exiting her lungs shakily as she neared the point of breaking down.

Intrigued and confused by her response, Goldenroot ignored her fragile emotional state and continued to press her for answers, "But Princess Celestia has been with her for the past few weeks."

Rarity took another deep breath and attempted to gather her thoughts before answering the stallion. Convinced that she wouldn't shed any tears in front of him, she turned back and tried to maintain a serious expression.

"Unfortunately, that's what I came to realize as well. After Princess Luna had left with a rather concerned look on her face and a complete reluctance to explain why she was asking such strange questions, I decided to express my concerns to Princess Celestia.

"I wanted to know what was going on, but when I arrived in Canterlot I came to realize that a horrible event was just about to take place."

"The war is my fault, Miss Rarity." Goldenroot intervened.

"Listen Sir Goldenroot, whatever skeletons you have in your closet can wait until I've finished explaining what I need to. After I explain, you may have a different opinion about everything that's happened."

Goldenroot reluctantly restrained his thoughts while the mare waited silently for him to give her his full and undivided attention.

"I realized that Equestria was going to war with Prance, a fact that Ponyville was obviously being sheltered from, and I was curious why." she continued, "It seems that they were being held responsible for the drought, but I didn't really believe that. Why would they send us food and supplies if they were only trying to conquer us? And furthermore, why would such a small nation try to pick a fight with us when their defeat seems inevitable?"

Goldenroot almost opened his mouth, but he was met with a stern glare from the unicorn.

"So now I was only more curious about the question Princess Luna had asked me. Upon arriving at the castle and the entrance to Princess Celestia's private chambers, the guards at the door were absent and the door was left ajar. I didn't want to be so rude as to just barge in, so I waited for a moment while I contemplated knocking. *You* see, knocking isn't the

proper way to address a member of royalty, it is tradition to confront the guards outside the door and be given their permission and, if that is acquired, a formal announcement of your arrival, but of course *you* already know that don't you. But while I deliberated the idea, I could faintly hear a voice from inside the room. It was Princess Celestia and she was talking to someone.

"Now believe me when I say that I'm never one to eavesdrop, but I *shamefully* let my curiosity get the better of me at this moment. These were the exact words I heard from inside the room."

She lowered her head, trying to remember what was said and attempting to elegantly clear her voice before she looked directly at the stallion and continued on.

"We are by nature, very near-sighted creatures, Twilight. We always want to do what we think is best at the moment, but we never really take the time to stop and think about how our decisions are going to affect the future. Sadly, the future is almost entirely unpredictable so how can we ever be sure we're making the right decisions?"

"Unsurprisingly, I was swept away by my emotions when I realized that the princess was talking to Twilight Sparkle, whom I thought to have perished. I rushed into the room and peered out over the balcony with tears in my eyes, ready to be reunited with my long lost friend.

"But I did not see my friend on the balcony, Sir Goldenroot. No, what I saw was a much more disturbing image.

"There was only one pony standing there. Princess Celestia was alone, calmly standing on the balcony, peering out over the army gathering below and talking to no one at all. At times, she would even pause for long periods as if she were waiting for a response before she continued to speak. She would then answer these unspoken questions and at last, she moved to embrace some invisible pony beneath her wings."

"So it was a ghost!?" Goldenroot asked, his heart nearly bursting out of his chest.

“Don’t be so juvenile!” she exclaimed as tears started to form in the corners of her eyes, “I think the tragedy of Twilight’s death was too much for Princess Celestia to handle. She won’t accept that her student, whom she treated so much like a daughter, just disappeared.

“I believe that Twilight Sparkle *did* die in Prance, Sir Goldenroot. The Twilight Sparkle that existed in Princess Celestia’s bedchamber was an illusion. It was an imaginary creation that she used, and is still using, to help deal with the pain of her loss. And while some of what this delusion says may very well be the truth, the rest is obviously all lies. I have no idea what’s going on inside her head, but reality is beyond her grasp.”

This new realization was too much for Goldenroot. His vision blurred and the room started to fade out of existence. The sound of Rarity’s voice grew quiet and became difficult to understand.

“Are you alright, Sir Goldenroot?” Rarity asked, regaining her composure and glancing at the pony with a genuinely concerned expression.

He was going to pass out. Everything that he had done had created a catastrophe far worse than anything he could have imagined. He was responsible for Twilight Sparkle’s death, that sweet, innocent filly who was sent all alone to help solve the problem he had created. He was responsible for the insanity of arguably the most powerful creature in the world and her inability to accept the tragic death he induced. He was responsible for the resulting war with a peaceful nation that had only wished to help its citizens acquire all the resources they needed to survive. He was personally responsible for everything that was tearing the world apart. If the drought had been a horrible plague on Equestria, then this was an inconceivable monster that he had no possibility of stopping. What could anyone do to stop this disaster from getting worse? Was there any hope left at all?

With those last questions clouding his mind and pulling him away from reality, the brilliant white of Rarity’s coat seemed to explode and fill his entire field of vision. A simple, dazzling white, it quickly distorted into a strange, sickly grey and finally into a black as dark as the night sky.

~

“I think he’s finally waking up.” a voice announced.

Goldenroot’s vision was still too hazy to recognize the dark blue blotch that hopped out of its place in the bed beside him as he regained consciousness. He groaned loudly as he rolled onto his back and blinked rapidly, the ceiling above slowly coming into focus.

“You’re very lucky that you were lying down, Sir Goldenroot.” another voice, which he recognized as Rarity, proclaimed, “I had no idea this would have such a powerful effect on you.”

“Miss Rarity?” he asked as he rolled over onto his side and gazed out into the room.

As he set his eyes upon the white unicorn, he noticed several familiar faces in the room. Vortex, standing to her right, appeared to be quite distressed, but was desperately trying to conceal this fact from the stallion. Prairie Star, who was standing very close beside the pegasus, had a similarly worried expression on her face, but, in contrast, she was making no effort to hide this detail from him. Thunderhorn and Wind Dancer were also in the room and stood to the left of Rarity. And now, in such a close vicinity to her doppelganger, Wind Dancer’s defining characteristics were much more pronounced. Their stylish, but delicate manes that rolled down from the top of their heads were similar shades of the same blue, but Rarity’s hair was visibly darker. Folded gently along her side, Wind Dancer’s feathered appendages seemed to pull the stallions eyes towards them and distinguish the pegasus from the unicorn standing beside her. However, despite their differences, they were still unquestionably alike.

“Are you two related?” he asked, moving his hoof rapidly between Wind Dancer and Rarity.

The two mares looked at each for a moment and started laughing hysterically. As they did, a smile forced its way onto each of the other three ponies faces and they joined in on the excitement. Thunderhorn shook his head and rolled his eyes, while Vortex smiled exuberantly. Prairie Star merely covered her mouth as she chuckled away quietly.

When the five ponies finally calmed down, Wind Dancer turned to the stallion and asked, "Would you like some more time to rest, Goldenroot?"

She wasn't particularly rude about it. She even appeared to have some legitimate concern for the stallion, which was bizarre given the circumstances he had put her in. And, while it was appreciated, it only brought Goldenroot back to the grim reality. Princess Celestia was hallucinating that her student was still alive and well and this figment of her imagination had somehow convinced her to wage war on Prance.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Rarity." he said, resting his head against the dirty mattress and closing his eyes. "This is all my fault. I... I..."

"Do not talk such rot, Sir Goldenroot." Rarity exclaimed, interrupting his grovelling.

Surprised by the reaction, Goldenroot's eyes snapped open.

"Your companions have been kind enough to explain to me the full extent of your situation." she continued with a very strict tone. "And like our dear princess, you have made the foolish mistake of placing all the blame for these events on yourself."

Goldenroot pulled himself upright and cast a humiliated glance at the unicorn, "But I was responsible for your friend's..."

"You are not responsible for that, Sir Goldenroot, and nor should you be blamed for it." Rarity interrupted.

She walked closer to the stallion and lowered her head to his level on the mattress below.

"My friend's passing was a tragedy that I won't soon forget," Rarity explained in a miserable, but soothing tone of voice. "But I do not blame you for it. You are not a murderer, Sir Goldenroot. I truly believe that within every inch of my heart. It was a terrible accident and nothing more. You cannot be blamed for an accident."

"But what about the princess and the war and..?" Goldenroot asked.

“The only thing you can be held responsible for is manipulating your country and lying to your friends and fellow council members.” she answered, “And while that may sound like a truly terrible deed, I am not so naïve that I can completely overlook your intentions. From my understanding, you were trying to accomplish what no one else could. While you foolishly, and I really feel that I must emphasize my point here, **foolishly** sacrificed the happiness and well-being of others, you were willing to give up everything you possessed as well.”

She smiled gently at him and lifted her head, backing away from the mattress.

“Now, you can either continue to grovel in your regret and self-pity or, if you’re well enough, you can get up off that *filthy* mattress and help me.” Rarity said, returning to her strict tone.

Although he was still shocked by the unicorn’s reaction, he pulled himself up off of the floor and onto his hooves.

“Do you all know what’s going on as well?” Goldenroot asked, looking around at the other ponies.

“While you were passed out, we had more than enough time to exchange our depressing stories.” Thunderhorn said, smirking.

“Alright then, what do you suggest that we do, Miss Rarity?” Goldenroot asked, turning his attention to the unicorn.

“Unfortunately, I have no idea.” she admitted, “That’s exactly why I came to see you.”

Goldenroot sighed heavily, “How did you even find us?”

“The guards told me.”

“They just *told you*? I thought they were sworn to secrecy.”

Rarity smiled pleasantly, “I’m very persuasive.”



Goldenroot just smiled back and chuckled quietly.

“Well let’s consider what we need to accomplish.” he announced, turning serious again, “We need to confront Celestia and stop her from waging war with Prance.”

“I’m afraid it’s already too late for that.” Rarity frowned, “The army has been deployed and is on the border of Prance as we speak.”

“Then we need to lure them back. Can we get Princess Luna to help us?”

“Princess Celestia won’t listen to her sister. She’s already tried to stop her and failed.”

Thunderhorn laughed quietly to himself as he listened to them bicker.

“Did you forget that I was a general, Goldenroot?” the old unicorn asked, diverting the attention in the room. “I think I know what we have to do. The only thing that is going to bring Princess Celestia back now is another war. What we need to do is start a riot right in the middle of Canterlot.”

“Are you crazy!?” Vortex shouted, finally jumping into the conversation. “How is that going to help!?”

“We can use it as a diversion and lure the princess back to the castle. She won’t have the bulk of the army behind her and we’ll have the element of surprise. If we’re careful enough, no one even needs to get hurt. Most likely, we can convince some of the nobles who were angry with the decision to eliminate the council to help us. After we gain some support, we’ll ambush the guards around the castle and tie them up. With all the guards subdued, we can create some general chaos, nothing major or irreplaceable of course, and wait for Princess Celestia. When she arrives, we can confront her and put a stop to all of this.”

After hearing the full extent of his plan and having no better ideas of their own, the ponies in the room silently agreed.

“But we’re going to need a plan for when we confront Princess Celestia.” Goldenroot said, “We’re not just going to be able to tell her that she’s gone completely mad. She either won’t believe us or she just won’t accept it.”

“After what I saw, I think the only option may be to imprison her.” Rarity said. “This is something that she has to come to terms with on her own and we have to be prepared for the worst possible situation.”

“How can we possibly imprison an alicorn?” Vortex exclaimed.

“Actually, we have always been prepared for that situation.” Thunderhorn said, “During the time the council was in power we were able to construct a magical prison that can contain an alicorn.”

“Why would Celestia ever allow something like that to be built knowing that she and her sister were the only ones who would ever be contained?” Goldenroot asked.

“It was originally part of an elaborate plan to bring Nightmare Moon back from her banishment several hundred years ago.” Thunderhorn explained, “While the council approved of the idea at first, they cancelled the plans before they were able to come to fruition. It just wasn’t worth the risk.”

The plan was to have Nightmare moon return to the planet and subsequently imprisoned in a magically altered cell below the castle. Celestia truly believed that her sister was still somewhere inside the monster that tried to drown the world in an eternal night and she wanted to help her. If she returned to Equestria then, just maybe, she might be able to restore her true form.

The arrangement seemed simple enough and the princess was able to convince the council to start constructing the cell. But it took a surprisingly long time, nearly ten years, and when it was finally completed and then tested by the princess herself, the council decided to cancel the plans. They just didn’t consider it to be worth the risk. If Princess Celestia ever faltered, even for a moment, they chanced changing the world forever. The entire planet would be cast into an eternal night and it would be nearly impossible to save it.

The cell was almost entirely forgotten in the depths of time. Apart from Princess Celestia, for whom it remained a constant memorial of her beloved sister and her failed rescue attempts, only a select few members of the royal army knew about it and that had conveniently included General Thunderhorn. It was preserved for the rare case that it would ever be needed, either as a prison for Nightmare Moon or some other nameless horror. And as it was becoming evident to them all, that horror was none other than Princess Celestia, the creator herself.

“Then why wasn’t Nightmare Moon imprisoned there on the day of her return?” Rarity asked with a puzzled expression. “Twilight predicted that she would return and so did Princess Celestia, so why weren’t you prepared for it?”

“From my experience, the royal army never took the rumours that we found in dusty old books seriously.” Thunderhorn scoffed, “I don’t think anyone other than Twilight Sparkle and Princess Celestia expected anything to happen.

“But if Princess Celestia had expressed her concern to us, I think we would have considered it to be a serious threat; however, I believe that she secretly wanted to have the opportunity to see her sister again and she didn’t *want* to prevent her return. Letting the council know anything about this would only jeopardize that opportunity.”

“I don’t think anyone can really blame her for that.” Goldenroot said, “Having to banish your only living family member to the moon would be a difficult fate to accept.”

“Tsk, tsk.” Rarity slowly shook her head, “It seems that you have yet to truly understand my point, Sir Goldenroot. Both you and Princess Celestia have very similar personalities. You seem to think that the ends always justify the means.”

“Do you really think you are so wise that you can criticize both our decisions so harshly, Miss Rarity?” Goldenroot said, glaring at the unicorn, “If you do, I think you are sorely mistaken.”

“Perhaps, but are *you* really so arrogant that you believe you have nothing to learn from this?” Rarity responded with a curt smile. “I am only trying to help you, Sir Goldenroot. I’m trying to stop you from doing something you will regret.”

“Then why, may I ask, are you so comfortable with the idea of starting a riot in the capital?”

Rarity’s expression fell and she let out a deep sigh, turning her head away from the stallion and towards the rickety wooden floorboards.

“I’m not, Goldenroot.” she said disconcertedly, “But while I believe that the ends do not *a/ways* justify the means, I’m afraid that we have very little choice in this matter. We have to act as quickly as we can or we will face a terrible end. Princess Celestia has become extremely dangerous and she’s nearly unstoppable.”

“Well then, keeping that in mind, I think we ought to leave.” Thunderhorn remarked.

“This is all very interesting, but I don’t want to run the unnecessary risk of being executed.” Wind Dancer said, breaking the pace of the conversation and lying down on one of the mattresses. “So as much as I would love to return home, I think I’m going to sit this one out.”

“You’re not going to help?” Goldenroot asked. “What about...”

“Oh please, Goldenroot.” she interrupted, “I’m only going to get in the way. I am, at heart, a dancer not a soldier.”

Rarity laughed pleasantly, “And I’m a tailor. How does that make me anymore suitable for this?”

“Because you’re not a coward, Rarity.” she explained, “I’m sorry, but I’m just not capable of doing this.”

“I don’t want to go either.” Prairie Star added quietly, stealing everyone’s attention. “My life was just depressing in Equestria and I’m actually starting to really like it here. I don’t really think I would be much help anyway.”

Vortex looked surprised, but she just smiled at the pony standing beside her. Prairie Star had taken it the hardest and she was just happy to see that she was recovering from the turmoil.

“Okay.” Goldenroot replied, nodding his head. “I can’t force anyone to come.”

Diverting her attention away from the pony beside her, Vortex spoke up, “So what, we’re just going to walk right in? Won’t someone recognize us?”

The others just paused as they thought about their predicament. If they were spotted in Equestria, they would be put to death for returning from their banishment against the princesses’ orders.

But before they could give it too much thought, Rarity whisked away the bed sheets and the horn on her head began to glow iridescently. Working with such haste that it was almost impossible to follow, she turned the simple bedding into stunning, and perhaps a bit too extravagant, cloaks with large hoods that could easily cover their faces whenever they deemed it necessary. Flawlessly cross-stitched at the seams to increase the weight on the edges and the durability of the fabric, the garments were connected around the neck with a broad silver chain that was held in place with two large sapphires on either side, though where the jewels had actually come from was a complete mystery.

Slipping the cloaks over each of the ponies’ heads, including herself and the ones who had decided not to join them, she beamed back at them in anticipation.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked, “I thought it was best to keep it simple since we’re trying to remain inconspicuous, but that shouldn’t stop us from looking good.”

“Miss Rarity, these are gorgeous.” Prairie Star said, staring at the garments with wide-eyed adoration. “But we don’t need them, we’re not coming.”

“I didn’t want anyone to feel left out.” she smiled.

“How did you wash them?” Vortex asked, “These things were so gross!”

“And where did you get these sapphires?” Goldenroot asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you that.” Rarity responded, batting at her long hair, “I can’t give away all my secrets.”

The other ponies just smiled at her reaction. She was indeed a very interesting pony.

“Well, I guess this is it.” Goldenroot said with a kind of disappointment, “If you two aren’t coming with us, I find it highly unlikely that we’ll ever see each other again.”

Wind Dancer just smiled, “Oh, I fully expect to see you again, Goldenroot. Although Miss Rarity doesn’t hold you responsible for everything that happened, I believe that you are required to clean up this mess you created. And when you do, I expect you to come and tell me so that I can return to my home.”

Goldenroot smiled, “I’ll do that.”

Turning to face the light brown mare, still standing quietly beside Vortex and hiding behind her golden hair, Goldenroot slowly approached her.

“I’m sorry, Prairie Star.” he said with a solemn expression, “I know that doesn’t mean a lot right now, but I’m afraid I’ll never have a chance to do anything more. I’m sorry that I ruined your chances at realizing your dreams.”

“Don’t feel bad about it.” she answered, moving the hair away from her face with a hoof and trying to smile, “It wasn’t really such a bad thing. I think I was trying too hard to live up to my childhood fantasies and I never really realized that I just wasn’t enjoying it.

“Like you and Celestia, and perhaps everyone in the world, we all have some kind of dream stuck in our heads at some point in our lives,

some kind of utopia. I really thought I could get there, to that perfect world in my imagination, but I was losing so much along the way. Now that I've finally lost everything, I feel like I can start over and I'm kind of looking forward to that. I want to experience all the things that I missed out on when I was younger and I want to find someone else that I can share all those experiences with.

"So, although my utopia came crumbling down around me, it wasn't such a bad thing after all and I'm beginning to think that the utopia I dreamed up wasn't actually what I wanted anyways."

Goldenroot smiled gently. He still wasn't sure if he had learned anything about himself, but he had learned a lot about the ponies all around him. He discovered the dreams and aspirations that they each held and how they were so radically independent from each other. They all had something different to gain and something different to lose.

Vortex hugged the golden-haired pony for a moment and Thunderhorn nodded suggestively towards the door. The four ponies left the room, leaving Prairie Star and Wind Dancer behind them. Making their way up the stairwell, out of the building and onto the dirt road outside, they left the small village behind. The flickering lights slowly faded out of existence as they ventured ever further on their way to Equestria, but what little time they had spent there had served an important purpose. They were a bizarre collection of perhaps unlikely companions, but their parallel ambitions persevered. They had to stop the sinister fate of their homeland and prevent the severe repercussions it would have on the world as a whole.

They walked in careful silence with their hoods pulled over their faces, afraid that someone would discover their presence, but they had much more to fear than mere discovery. They lingered on the blade of a knife, their path clear and in a straight line, but every step they took was more dangerous than the last. The country they had been banished from was fast approaching and they were all afraid of what lay waiting for them. It was no wonder then that Vortex isolated herself from the group, dawdling behind the other cloaked ponies and watching the edge of the forest as it passed by. The trees had started to thin out, but it was still difficult to see more than a few feet into the wooded wilderness.

Taking note of her leisurely pace and curiosity of the forest, Goldenroot began to realize that she had more on her mind than just their journey. She was thinking about him and about how he had acted over the past few days. Unsure if anything he could say would put her at ease, but still willing to try, Goldenroot slowed his pace, allowing him to fall behind and match the steps of the dark blue pegasus behind him.

"I never really had the time to apologize to you, Vortex." he said, turning his head in her direction.

She pulled her gaze from the quiet ambiguity of the forest and glanced hesitantly at him. Her amber eyes flickered in the dim light breaking through the canopy and washing over the ground unpredictably, the course shadows that the leaves created moving slowly along the dirt.

"I don't believe that." she said, changing the direction of her gaze, "You had more than enough time to apologize, you just chose not to."

Goldenroot turned to watch the anomalous shadows dance along the dirt path, "I was worried that you wouldn't forgive me."

"And maybe you should be. I'm not going to forgive you as easily as the others have." she said harshly, looking back at him with an unyielding glare, "Apologizing now won't change that."

"But, Vortex..." he replied, his eyes starting to tear up as he realized what she had said, "I..."

He lifted his heavy stare upward, prepared to pour his heart out for the mare he had grown so attached to and willing to do anything to convince her to forgive him.

But as his eyes fell upon hers, he noticed something unusual. Her expression didn't seem to fit the gravity of the situation that she was implying at all. She was smiling. No, she wasn't just smiling, she was laughing at him. She had convinced him that his actions were completely unforgivable in her eyes and she was just laughing!

"You're soooo gullible, Goldenroot." Vortex said, her smile illuminating her face.



“Why would you do that!?” he asked, angry that she had been toying with his emotions.

She stopped smiling and met his gaze directly, “Because now you know how I felt.”

In one sincere sentence, Goldenroot felt his anger completely evaporate, “I’m sorry, Vortex. I should have told you what was going on.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“Are you... are you angry about it?”

“Oh yeah, big time.” she said, “At first I was really sad too, but then I realized that I was just letting my emotions get the better of me. I thought you didn’t trust me and then I thought you were just lying about what you said when we were in the prison. I thought you didn’t really care about me at all and it was just some big act, but then I realized...”

She smiled again and laughed a little, “You’re a terrible actor.”

Goldenroot just smiled.

“But although I’m angry about it all, I’m too excited about this adventure we’re going on now to worry about it.” Vortex continued, “So you can find a decent way to apologize to me later. I expect a present, probably... something expensive.”

“Wait, you’re *excited* about this?” he said in shock.

“Of course! We’re going to start a riot!” she said, winking at him, “It’ll be all kinds of fun.”

“I can’t believe you.” he said, “We could die!”

“Oh, there’s a million different ways to die, Goldenroot, but there’s only one true way to live.” she said with an almost humorously serious expression, “You have to make the most of it and enjoy every single day. Even the worst day of your life has some good parts to it.”

“Okay, now I definitely don’t believe you.” he said, shaking his head, “What about when we were publicly humiliated in front of everyone in Canterlot and maybe even all of Equestria?”

“Yeah sure, we were publicly humiliated in front of everyone in Canterlot and maybe even everyone in Equestria, but...” she raised her hoof and pointed it at him as she tried to make her point, “We got to be publicly humiliated in front of everyone in Canterlot and maybe even everyone in Equestria. That’s pretty cool, not many ponies can say they did that.”

Goldenroot broke out laughing as he plodded along the road, “Oh yeah, that was soooo much fun!”

“And...” she continued, raising her hoof and pointing it again, “We got to ride in a stagecoach, watch you get strangled by Thunderhorn... and I got to leave the country for the first time in my entire life.”

Goldenroot was laughing so hard he hardly understood what she had even said. She certainly knew how to make a depressing situation entertaining.

~

Celestia ambitiously walked at the head of the group of armoured ponies whom were growing more anxious and fleeing by the day. She was worried too, but not for the same reasons. They worried for the battle ahead of them and the uncertainty of the dark forest that surrounded them, while she worried about what would happen when she finally confronted Le Roi Pierre. Would he try to fight her despite the impossible odds against him? Or would he try to weasel his way out of it and deny his involvement, claiming falsities and misunderstandings had led her here?

She pushed her uncertainties aside and tried to focus on the task in front of her. Part of her plan had been to split up the army into three separate subdivisions. Her army was large enough that she believed any one of the regiments was more than capable of meeting the entire army of

Prance head on, so the split gave them significant tactical manoeuvrability. While Prance was tied up defending one area, the others armies could advance on the capital and assault it with little resistance and avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

The bulk of the army, which she now stood at the head of, was taking the most direct route that travelled through the Splinter Forest. It was the very same forest that her dearest student had been ambushed in and that fact left an uneasy feeling in her stomach. But her unease was keeping her alert and vigilant and, upon hearing a peculiar rustling in the trees nearby, she stopped in her tracks. The soldiers behind followed her example, but being as inexperienced as they were, they started to talk quietly amongst themselves in anxiety and fear instead of being silent like they should have been.

*I should have known that we would be ambushed in the Splinter Forest, she thought, turning around to face the ponies waiting behind her. It would have been better to go around and avoid this. These ponies aren't trained to deal with these sorts of situations. They're barely trained at all.*

"Soldiers of Equestria!" she announced with a booming voice, "Defend yourselves!"

At that very moment, hundreds of figures leapt out of the dense forest around them. Thin layers of mud were covering their bodies and concealing the bright, silver armour that protected them. It was truly a horrific sight to behold. They attacked the unprepared Equestrians in unison, using the spiked metal horseshoes on their hind legs to kick at them with an impressive force. The ponies caught in the sharp metal talons were hurled like cannonballs into their comrades, knocking them onto the ground and leaving them stunned. The ones that were hit directly were left with horrifying bloody wounds across their bodies, deep punctures that bled uncontrollably and exposed the bone under their skin.

These ponies knew how to fight and how to react. They knew exactly what they were doing, but the Equestrians had almost no clue. And though the golden armoured soldiers outnumbered them by thousands, too many were overflowing with fear and panic and were unable to properly respond to these monsters that emerged from the sinister forest walls. They rushed in blindly and tried to push the attackers back against the trees, while the

ones that were able to maintain their composure recognized the advantages of drawing them out into the open where their large numbers would serve a better purpose.

While the earth ponies could only mimic their attackers' forceful kicking as an offensive, the pegasi soared around the battlefield, constantly dropping towards the grounds and tackling the ambushers and otherwise causing general disarray among their numbers. What unicorns existed among them were made obvious, hurling crowds of enemy soldiers high into the air or thrusting them against trees with such force that their armour simply crumpled like paper under the weight.

And amongst all of this pain and suffering, it seemed like the princess was just standing, stricken with a paralyzing fear of what was happening all around her. While she was indeed frightened by this display, her long life had passed through many wars in its time and to assume that she was simply doing nothing at all was thoughtless. She was concentrating and gathering her strength, preparing to unleash a terrible magic power over all of the assaulting ponies and stop this madness before it got worse.

One of the attacking soldiers yelled out, telling his comrades to stop the princess and break her concentration. Rushing over to the alicorn, a silver armoured pony kicked at the joint in one of the princess' hind legs, a deafening crack filling the air as the bone completely fractured. Her leg, now unable to support the weight of her body, buckled and sent the princess tumbling towards the ground. But in that moment, the entire scene was blinded in a bright flash of light. The trees of the forest around them came alive, groaning and wheezing as they moved. Their long, rigid arms reached out into the battle and took hold of every one of the silver armoured assailants, pulling them away and holding them prisoner against the thick bark on the trees. They tried to struggle, but the trees only grasped them more firmly.

When the light subsided, the trees had once again become motionless objects, but were still tightly holding onto the attacking soldiers and preventing them from moving even a single muscle. The Equestrians, noticing that the battle had ended, started to rush around almost as chaotically as when the battle had first begun. Some ran to their injured friends and family, shouting for help and trying to do whatever they could to ease their pain. Others moved to look in bewilderment at the enemy

soldiers suspended high in the trees above, some still trying to free themselves from their prison.

From her position on the cold ground, Celestia let out a blood curdling scream and fell to her side, shaking uncontrollably as she turned her head to look at the blood soaked leg jutting out awkwardly from her body. The pain was unbearable and for the first time in over a hundred years, she felt like she was going to pass out.

Soldiers all over the battlefield immediately turned their attention away from whatever they had been doing and rushed to their princess' side, crowding around her as they tried to help.

"Someone find a doctor, the princess is injured!" a stallion yelled loudly, looking around the crowd.

Several of the ponies frantically ran away from the group and starting yelling for help, but at that very moment, Celestia's horn shone and the injured leg was wrapped in a bright iridescent light. Gritting her teeth and trying to focus on what she was doing, the princess carefully rearranged the shattered bone fragments in her leg and formed them into their original shape. Then, carefully gathering all of the blood around her leg and separating it from the dirt, she pulled it back into the veins and sealed her wounds.

She had done this exact operation before, but never on herself. It was a difficult and wonderful process that left all the panicked ponies around her completely speechless as they watched in awe as the light faded away and revealed the flawless appendage beneath. Breathing deeply, she rolled onto her stomach and got up off the ground, gritting her teeth as she flexed the stiff muscles in her healed leg.

"Princess Celestia... are you alright? Do... do you need any help?" a wide-eyed soldier asked, still stunned by the magnificent display of magic that had taken place.

"I am fine. Thank you." Celestia responded quickly. "Now who needs help!? Where are the injured?"

"What about the enemy soldiers?" a blue stallion asked.

“Leave them. The injured ponies take priority.” she said firmly, “Anyone that will survive without my help should be attended to by a medic instead. I cannot help everyone.”

The large group of ponies surrounding her acknowledged this and ran off to look for those in need of immediate aid while the princess took flight and searched from the sky.

The scene from the ground was terrifying, but the scene above was unimaginably worse, so many were injured or dead. It was exactly as she feared, Prance had been preparing and educating their soldiers in the art of war, but Equestria was completely unqualified for this. She could only hope that the detachments which had ventured to the west and east would avoid any conflicts. If they had to face anything comparable to what had happened here, their fate would be much worse.

# Chapter 10

As the sun receded over the landscape and signalled the end of the day, only a few hours separated the four cloaked ponies from Canterlot. They had passed through the border to Equestria and, once again, they were in their homeland. Yet despite their return, the country didn't feel like home. The wave of nostalgia that they had expected to wash over them upon seeing the familiar landscape was absent, hidden in some dark shadow. If anything, the scene had triggered a troubling recollection of their plan and how poorly established it really was. It left so many questions unanswered. How would they actually stop Princess Celestia when she returned? How would Princess Luna react to their plan? Would it all be too much, even for their combined strength, to handle?

"We're going to need Princess Luna's help with this, aren't we?" Goldenroot asked, giving voice to the apprehension they all shared, "Even if we get a hundred or a thousand other ponies to help us, we don't have any chance of stopping Princess Celestia without her sister's help. Only another alicorn is going to stand any chance of stopping her."

"But how can we convince her to turn on her own family?" Rarity asked earnestly, "Even if she knows that her sister is hallucinating, that she's gone mad, will Princess Luna admit it? Will she be willing to throw her in a cage like some animal?"

The question was one that they were all worried about. They were sisters and the bond they shared was nearly untouchable. They would do anything for each other, so why would one so readily lock up the other?

"I didn't want to have to ask Princess Luna for her help, because I was afraid of how she would react." the white unicorn continued, "For all we know, she may throw every one of us in the dungeon for merely suggesting the idea."

"We don't have any other options." Goldenroot explained, "We need her help."

“Don’t be so sure, Goldenroot.” Thunderhorn replied, staring at the stallion. “There is one other alternative, an artefact capable of storing massive quantities of magic. We could use it to stun the princess long enough to get her in the cell.”

“I assume this was another one of Princess Celestia’s creations?” Goldenroot asked. “Something she created to help her sister?”

“Yes.” Thunderhorn answered, “She thought it might convince the council to change their minds. If regular unicorns could harness a power capable of matching that of the alicorns, then they would have another way to stop Nightmare Moon and the plan to bring her back would not seem so dangerous.”

The old unicorn sighed deeply.

“But, like the prison, the council changed their mind to follow through with the plan shortly after its completion. Because of the danger that it posed, it was hidden away. It has the potential to level mountains and drain oceans so, if we’re not careful, we could destroy the entire city and everything in it.”

Rarity stopped in her tracks and glared at the old unicorn, “I refuse to take that chance, Lord Thunderhorn. Nothing is worth putting so many innocent lives in danger. We need to convince Princess Luna to help us or else find another way.”

Thunderhorn paused and turned to face the white unicorn, “What about the war? What about the lives lost from that? We only need to be careful and we can prevent any catastrophes.”

The other two ponies stopped as the unicorns started what they all knew would be a heated debate.

“I agree with Rarity. It’s not worth the risk.” Goldenroot exclaimed, “I’m hardly even willing to start a riot. Blowing up the capital and everyone in it is out of the question. I’ve already caused enough harm to this country...”

“What if we have no other choice?” Thunderhorn asked.



“Where is it?” Vortex asked abruptly, “With any luck, we won’t have to use it, but we should be prepared for anything. We don’t have to make our decision now, but if we find it and have it ready, we can leave our options open.”

“We can find it in the lowest catacombs of the castle, far below the dungeon we were held in.” Thunderhorn explained, “But it will be heavily guarded and it’s locked away behind a magical barrier.”

“Well obviously you must have some plan to remove the barrier or you wouldn’t have mentioned this thing, so how can we get past it?”

“I have a book in my house that explains both how to remove the barrier and how to actually use the artefact.”

The entire group was stunned by the sudden realization. Why was Thunderhorn in possession of something that he himself described as having the potential to level mountains and drain oceans?

“You mean you have instructions to a doomsday device in your basement?” Vortex asked, interrupting the awkward silence.

“It’s not what you think.” Thunderhorn hastily intervened, “Princess Celestia gave me the book when I was still a general of the royal army. Although I suppose her trust was misplaced as I completely forgot about it until just now...”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t condone this.” Goldenroot interrupted, “If the Equestrian army is already on the border than we can’t afford to waste any time.”

Realizing the irony of what he had just said, the stallion started on his way down the path again. The others followed quickly, attempting to match his pace and determined to continue their argument.

“Why should we have to put all our eggs in one basket?” Vortex remarked, “You and Rarity realize the importance of convincing Luna and you’re both much more persuasive than Thunderhorn and I are.”

The old unicorn gave her a quick, rude glance.

“You can go see Luna and try to convince her while the general and I find this artefact thing.” she continued.

“That’s not really such a bad idea.” Rarity admitted, “Although I refuse to let you use this dangerous artefact in anything less than the most extreme circumstances, I think it’s important for some of us to stay away from Princess Luna. If she tries to throw us in the dungeon, then at least the others can still find a way to stop Princess Celestia.”

Goldenroot shook his head, “I don’t think we should split up.”

“We’re only wasting time if stick together.” Thunderhorn scorned, “Vortex and I will go to my manor and retrieve the book and then we’ll go grab the artefact. I don’t know how much time you’ll need to speak with Princess Luna, but it should only take us a couple of hours. However, we should organize a rendezvous somewhere safe.”

“Can’t we just meet you at your home?” Rarity asked.

“I don’t know if it’s safe there. Considering the fact that we weren’t supposed to come back, ponies may have looted my property. If we run into anyone, even a common thief, it will be all too obvious to them who we are.”

Thunderhorn’s words distracted the former council members, pulling them away from the important details of their journey and letting them drift away to their former lives. The fond memories of peaceful evenings spent alone, reading or just enjoying the quiet and gratifying nature of their unadulterated solitude, the cherished time with close friends and family sitting around a table, appreciating a home-cooked meal and each other’s company. Everything that was brilliant and respectable about the simple independence of their lives was defiled by the disturbing notion of other ponies rooting through each of their personal belongings. They were pitiable scavengers, taking everything they held dear for the sole purpose of their inane material value and stepping on their precious memories like they were merely dust and ash. It was contemptible and heart-wrenching; almost bringing tears to their eyes as they slowly trudged along the dirt path.

“How do you know they won’t have taken the book you need?” Rarity asked, jerking them away from their diversion and back to the focal point of their discussion.

“I hid the book under the floorboards in the basement.” Thunderhorn replied, “I never told anyone of its existence, so they won’t find it until they start pulling my house apart, piece-by-piece.”

“What about the tavern in the noble quarter?” Goldenroot suggested, returning their thoughts to the rendezvous point. “They’re open fairly late.”

“You’re thinking in the right direction, but you need to lower your standards a little, Goldenroot.” Vortex said, smirking slightly, “A group of hooded ponies will stick out like an earth pony in Cloudsdale. We should go to The Ivory Bear instead. It’s right in the middle of the common quarter and there’s a huge white bear on the sign so it’s pretty hard to miss. They’re open all day long and the ponies keep to themselves, so we shouldn’t run into any problems.”

“I know the place.” Thunderhorn said, nodding his head, “I’ve been there on occasion. They make a good stew and their drinks are cheap and of a reasonable quality, though I doubt I will be drinking anything tonight. This is too important to be intoxicated for.”

“I’ve never actually been inside, but I’ve seen the sign a few times before.” Goldenroot said, “What time can we expect you to be there?”

“What time is it now?” Thunderhorn asked.

Goldenroot just shrugged.

“I think I might be able to help you with that, actually. Twilight taught me a spell for telling the time.” Rarity exclaimed with a kind of bittersweet happiness, her joy plagued by the memories of her dearly departed friend.

She stopped and began to focus the magic around her horn. Simultaneously, Vortex turned away and seemed to lose herself in the bright, white moon above their heads. As a bright violet clock started to form in the air in front of the unicorn, Vortex snapped back to attention.

“Seven twenty-three.” said the pegasus proudly to the other members of the group.

The other ponies just looked at each other with strange expressions while the clock started to take shape. The hands, starting at the twelve, began to spin around the face and come to slow stop. The little hand pointed towards the seven and the larger hand pointed towards the space in between the four and the five.

Goldenroot laughed hysterically and fell to the ground while Vortex just smiled boastfully at her near pinpoint accuracy. The other two ponies exchanged puzzled glances.

“How exactly did you do that, dear?” Rarity asked, maintaining her confused expression and turning to the pegasus.

“Hey, you have your secrets and I have mine.” the blue mare responded smugly.

The two unicorns smiled and rolled their eyes as they started down the path again. Goldenroot, still laughing, rolled over and hopped back to his feet, wiping the joyful tears from his eyes.

“With any haste, we’ll be done and at The Ivory Bear at eleven o’clock sharp!” Thunderhorn yelled, not caring to turn his head around to face the two ponies behind him.

~

Tactically, it was a foolish decision. Princess Celestia had left a large portion of the main regiment behind to both guard the enemy soldiers that were captured and assist their badly wounded allies in the fight within the Splinter Forest. Between the casualties of the war and the able bodied soldiers that were left behind, only half of the regiment remained. The alternative had been to execute the enemy soldiers and leave the wounded behind to fend for themselves. That was the tactically intelligent decision, but a horribly ruthless one nonetheless and Celestia would not succumb to

the sickness that filled her veins. She would not let her hatred and lust for revenge take over and turn her into some kind of monster, but the sensation was undeniably growing stronger. Prance had killed so many of her soldiers and injured even more. They even had the audacity to directly attack the princess and cause her the immense pain that, although completely healed now, left an indistinct reminder whenever she flexed the muscle. To have the bones in your leg shattered like that was nearly a mortal wound and usually necessitated amputation of the damaged limb, so having it all heal so quickly was jarring to say the least.

Walking with a swift, but polished gait, the princess crested the large, rolling hilltop. The flowers that blanketed the ground at their hooves were brittle, wilted and dead, a sign of the changing weather and the fast approaching winter season. The princess recognized the little plants; they were daisies, simple white flowers with a cheery yellow center, but they did not appear that way at the moment. The once wide petals were stringy and drooping with a strange pale brown colour spotting the edges. The dazzling yellow center had lost all of its beauty, replaced with a parched and unsightly brown.

Stopping, the princess peered out over the hilltop and down into the valley below. It was covered in the same flowers and what she imagined to have been a beautiful sight at one time, was now putrid and revolting. The horrible brown continued along the ground all the way to the walled city and the black pillar jutting up into the sky. The rumbling clouds in the skyline were not black, but they were a menacing dark grey colour. And although it would not rain on the day they stormed the walled city, the scene decorated her thoughts with angst and despair.

A burgundy pony with a black mane and grave look about his face had been following the princess closely and had just now stopped beside her. He had a deep gash cut into the side of his golden armour that revealed the plain silver metal beneath, a memento of the battle in the forest. A general of the royal army, he had been watching the rear of the battalion when they were attacked, but after discovering that the princess had been injured, he had refused to leave her side.

The princess had found his concern mildly ironic. She was leading him and everyone else into the fires of war and exposing them to all the dangers that followed and yet they were worried about her health? Those

who had friends or family members injured in the fight had hurriedly rushed to their side and had just ignored the princess when she cried out. So did they care about her well-being out of some misplaced sense of honour and duty or was it a real emotion that they felt? Was she like a mother to them, even after placing them in a scorching fire like this?

“Princess Celestia, we have reached the assigned meeting point a days travel from the capital city of Prance.” the general noted, saluting the princess as he spoke.

“Let the soldiers rest awhile, General Redhoof.” the alicorn replied with an eerily monotonous tone as she gazed out across the landscape, “We have enough time to rest for a moment while the other detachments catch up with us.”

The general nodded and signalled to the army behind them. The golden mass of armoured ponies, which had been so attentively following the princess, immediately dispersed along the hillside. They removed their bags and gathered food or water, talked quietly amongst themselves or simply collapsed out of exhaustion.

She was pushing them too hard. They had travelled so far in such a small time and the inexperienced troops were growing weary and agitated. They weren't used to this kind of travel, but neither was she. And although she was able to prevent the pain of her burning muscles with magic, she was quickly reaching the point of mental exhaustion.

She turned to face the army behind her and sat down, content to just look out across them as the group bustled with activity. They weren't the same ponies that she remembered from before the war. They weren't just tired, they were depressed and scared. They knew what they had to do and so they pressed on, but she recognized that they all just wanted to go home. No longer did they talk about the war. They did not talk about their fear of the battles ahead of them or the excitement of coming home as heroes. Instead, they talked about what really mattered, their friends and family. They talked about their homes, wives, husbands, daughters, sisters, brothers, and parents. They talked about the little fillies and colts as they played in the yard just outside their house. They talked about the simple gratifications of a hard day's work and relaxing afterward. They talked about what they once had and what they longed to experience again.

*They don't fight for me. They don't really care about me, nor should they,* the princess thought as she listened to them converse quietly. *They fight for what they have. They fight to protect everything that's sacred in their lives and they know that, even if they die, they died fighting for a better life for someone else.*

*Is that what the soldiers of Prance believe as well? Do they believe they are fighting for a better future for their country or do they know the truth? And if they knew the truth, would they be willing to fight for it?*

"They're not really so different from the flowers, are they General Redhoof?" she asked, expressing her thoughts verbally and turning to the general who was slowly wiping his brow.

"I'm sorry, your highness, but I'm not really sure what you mean." he answered.

"The flowers; they are wilted and dead now, but they had a beautiful and peaceful life in the past, didn't they?" she continued, staring out across the soldiers, "They're not really so different from the flowers."

"Please, your highness, do not talk about such things. You know that every soldier here is happy to fight for you. They know they're doing the right thing."

*You trust in my judgement so willingly, general, but I'm no longer sure that I trust in it myself,* she thought.

Noticing her concern, the general tried to ease her mind with a curt smile as another golden mass appeared on the horizon to the east.

Rising to her hooves, the princess pushed away her thoughts and turned to the crowd of ponies on the hillside, "Equestrians, your brothers and sisters of the eastern battalion have arrived! I expect you to show them a warm welcome as they are no doubt as weary as you are!"

Murmurs of excitement drifted around the group and they shifted their attention to the east. The ponies were a pleasant sight, a reminder of the others that were fighting just as hard as they were. But as they drew ever

closer, both the soldiers and the princess noticed that there were far fewer soldiers than they remembered. Whereas the main battalion was at half strength, the eastern battalion looked to be at nearly a third of its original size.

*Have I really underestimated our enemy so much?* Celestia thought, frowning at the eastern battalion that was approaching. *Or have I overestimated our own might?*

The princess waited in silence as the troops eventually made their way up the hill and towards her. Friends and family members, separated by the subdivision and reunited at last, rushed towards each other, greeting them warmly. Others seemed to panic and rush around the crowd, looking for someone who, whether left behind in the forest or met with a much crueller fate, was obviously not there.

A dark green, female pegasus made her way up the hill and saluted the princess with a nervous expression, "Major Swift Wing, reporting, your highness."

"Where is Lieutenant Colonel Silvermane?" Celestia asked bluntly.

The pegasus lowered her hoof, "Colonel Silvermane has fallen in battle against Prance. As second in command of the regiment, I assumed command of the eastern division."

"And what of the rest of your battalion, major?" General Redhoof asked with a grim expression, expecting a similar fate to have befallen them.

"A large number of our soldiers were injured in the fight, sir." Swift Wing replied weakly, "We left some of our medics behind to assist the wounded and some of our soldiers to protect them. The rest are unfortunately... more permanent casualties."

"I can only hope that the western battalion has better luck." The general commented, "With only five thousand left in the central division and about..."

"Nineteen hundred, sir." the pegasus interrupted.



The general swore under his breath.

“What the hell happened out there!?” he demanded.

“I... I think they were expecting us, sir.” she answered, “They ambushed us in the mountain pass when we were most vulnerable. We hardly had time to figure out what was going on before we had taken nearly a thousand casualties.”

“There’s no way they could have predicted our movements exactly! I think we have a spy among us.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. They know their land well and they take advantage of it. They are not foreigners to war and strategizing. Predicting our movements would not be impossible for them.” Celestia intervened, “This only goes to show how prepared they were for our arrival. They knew we’d have a large army and the Splinter Forest, the mountain pass and the canyon to the west are choke points on the three most direct routes to the capital. But there isn’t any cover in between here and the capital, so I don’t think we should expect anything more until we lay siege to the city. They know better than to face us out in the open.”

“Do you think the western battalion was ambushed as well, princess?” Swift Wing asked, here gaze nervously darting from the princess’ face to her hooves.

“I’m not sure, but if they don’t show up by the morning, we will have to leave without them. We can’t afford to give the enemy any more time to prepare.” the alicorn replied, “Until then, we need to rethink our strategy. Our large numbers are only working against us, causing unnecessary casualties and slowing us down.”

“We have enough troops to blockade the city. We could defeat them with simple attrition warfare and wait for their inevitable surrender as they run out of food and resources.” the general suggested.

“If their leader truly is as cruel as I imagine him to be, he would rather watch every last citizen starve to death than surrender to us.” Celestia responded glumly, “I don’t want that to happen.”

“However, I can lead a small team of pegasi and assault the pillar through the windows. Le Roi Pierre will be somewhere in that tower and if we confront him directly then their army will have to surrender. They cannot function without their leader.”

“I don’t think you should put yourself in danger like that, your highness. You’re going to lure every soldier in the city to your position.”

“We will still need to siege the castle, but it will be more of a distraction from our true intent than a necessary point of entry.” the alicorn admitted, “I would much rather end this quickly if possible and I have no qualms about putting my own life in danger. This is as much my fault as it is theirs and these ponies have already suffered far more than I could have ever imagined.”

The general sighed lightly, trying to mask his concern for the princess’ safety.

“I would be honoured to assault the pillar with you, Princess Celestia.” Swift Wing said, jumping back into the discussion.

“Thank you, Swift Wing.” Celestia smiled softly, “I will also need you to find eleven other capable pegasi to assist us. You are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Th... thank you, Princess Celestia. I’ll start gathering the pegasi immediately.”

The pegasus turned, bolted into the crowd and start shouting orders to the group, rounding up all of the pegasi and bringing them to one side of the group.

“General Redhoof, I will need you to lead the assault on the castle walls.” The princess explained, “We lack the capable supervision necessary to split the army into smaller sections and attack separate gates, so focus your strength on the front gate.”

“And what if I push through the main gate?” he asked.

"If you get passed the main gate, they will retreat their forces to the tower. Unfortunately, we don't want that so I don't want you trying to penetrate their defences until after the first hour. Given one hour, I'm sure that will be enough time to determine my fate."

"Your highness, you can't..."

"Under no circumstances, will you turn away. Even if I should perish, I want you to stop this lunatic. Do you understand, general?"

"Your highness, I don't..."

"Do you understand!?" she repeated, glaring at the burgundy stallion.

"Of course, your highness." Redhoof confirmed, "And what if the western battalion arrives?"

Celestia took a moment to think about the question he had posed. If the western battalion arrived, would it change her plans? Probably not. She was more concerned about their well-being than the military asset they provided her with. She just wanted to know that they were alright and that they had only been delayed for some fantastically dull reason. The very thought that more ponies had perished from her tactical stupidity was horribly dismal.

"If Lieutenant Colonel Dark Cloud survived and has sufficient numbers to do so, tell him to attack the western gate."

"Of course." The general replied, "Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I'm going to satiate my appetite. I haven't eaten in days."

Celestia just nodded and turned back to the black tower on the horizon, *one way or another, Pierre, this will all come to an end, but how deep a scar do we leave behind us? Will the passage of time prove me to be a saviour of your country and its freedom and you a ruthless, insane dictator pursuing some goal that was merely an illusion of your mind? Or will it be the opposite? For theirs are the only beliefs that really matter, not ours.*

~

The streets of Canterlot were cold, dark and empty. The lights that fervently lit up the city at this time of the evening were all but extinguished, their inhabitants gone or simply too worried about their families and friends to stay up late into the night, only pretending to be careless and joyful. The nobility quarter, however, was a strange contradiction to the activity in the grim capital. The bright lights washing out into the wide streets and meticulous gardens illuminated the two cloaked ponies as they made their way across the district. It was completely different and, in its own way, insulting to the ponies that fought beyond their borders. These nobles, with their posh lifestyles and gleeful negligence to their duty and honour, were avoiding the war altogether. Not that they didn't care, they just didn't want to be involved, the slightest hint of danger scaring them away from the prospect of serving the nation they lived inside. For some there were other reasons as well. Indeed, some of these ponies felt betrayed by Princess Celestia's recent decisions and they were acting this way in a silent rebellion against their monarch. They believed that the council should not have been eliminated, that a few ponies should not pave the way to their own disaster and that the public voice remained a necessary ingredient of the political choices made in their country, regardless of how private that public really was. With their democracy taken, they felt no particular attachment to their country anymore. They felt no need to participate in defending a government that no longer seemed to represent their interests. And so, these deserters of their own country, these ponies that chose not to fight in the war to the north, were entirely apathetic of the pain the rest of the city felt.

"I've never been to your house before, general." Vortex said, her small grin barely visible under the hood of her cloak, "Is it as fancy as most of the places around here?"

Thunderhorn sighed deeply, "It was when I left it."

The old unicorn stopped and gazed out upon the spectacular mansion in front of him, Vortex coming to a sudden halt when she realized that this striking building was his home.

"This... this is your place?" she asked doubtfully.

The building was not how he had remembered or Vortex had imagined it to be. The massive, blocky house had the word 'traitor' written across it in bright red paint, which against the blue walls and white trim, was painfully noticeable. The many windows were all smashed and broken, shards of glass littering his yard. The door was removed from its hinges and rested unpleasantly on the flowerbed to the right of the doorway. The trees and plants in his garden were burnt and destroyed, the scraps of foliage decorating the cobblestone path to the entranceway in an assortment of greens and browns. The sight was almost stomach churning and it left a foul taste in the unicorn's mouth.

"I had not expected them to desecrate my property, only take the valuables and leave the rest as it was." he responded irritably, stepping over the scattered shrubbery and approaching the doorway, "It's almost hard to believe that someone would do this to anyone."

Vortex said nothing, following the general through the opening and into his home to further inspect the damage inside the building. It wasn't any more pleasant than the view from the outside and the walls displayed several more intense crimson words. Most were merely crude phrases and insults to the general, but one seemed to stand out among all the others and draw her gaze.

'Why?' it read.

*Even I'm not sure I know the answer to that question,* she thought, pulling her eyes away from the red paint and hurrying to catch up with the unicorn.

The old stallion was making his way around the corridors, stopping only just before the stairs as his own gaze was stolen away, not necessarily by the vandals, but by a simple, nearly untouched picture lying on the hard wooden floor. The frame was damaged in one corner, the glass cracked, but none of that affected the memory inside. It was a quaint photo of two smiling ponies, one a much younger image of the old stallion, the other a violet unicorn with long black hair hanging to one side of her face and brilliant light blue eyes.

Catching a glimpse of what had caused the unicorn to stop, Vortex interrupted his focus, "Is that you?"

"Yes." he replied quietly, "From about thirty years ago."

"Who's that you're standing with?"

There was a long silence as the old pony lifted the picture into the air, levitating it gently in front of his face with his magic.

"She was my wife." he finally answered with a strangely pleasant tone, "The reason I became a soldier... a general... a politician... No one ever becomes a soldier and puts their life at risk without a reason..."

"She was my reason."

He set the photo on a table nearby and continued down the hallway.

"Unfortunately, disease is something that no soldier can fight. If I had known what would happen, then maybe I would have become a doctor, but as we've both seen, life rarely ever gives you much foresight on the world." he said, opening the door to the staircase that led deep into the dark basement below.

"I'm sorry, Thunderhorn. I didn't mean to..." the pegasus apologized, not moving from her place in the hallway.

"You don't need to apologize for anything, Vortex." he interrupted, his horn flaring and lighting up the dark stairwell, "Even just a moment with her was enough to last a lifetime. I miss her now that she's gone, but I'm not going to give up. She wouldn't want that."

Taking his first step down into the basement, he stopped and turned around to look back at the pegasus who seemed rather shocked to see the old unicorn react like that.

"But don't you dare tell Goldenroot any of that." he insisted with a grin, "I like him thinking that I'm just some stubborn old conservative jerk."

He continued down the staircase with Vortex following close behind. The pegasus smirked when she thought about the pale green stallion and his never-ending feud with Thunderhorn.

The basement was nearly untouched in comparison with the rest of the house. There was no graffiti; the tiny windows near the ceiling were still intact and the work bench and tools sitting in one corner of the otherwise empty room were covered in a thin layer of dust.

“Doesn’t seem like they even bothered to come down here.” Thunderhorn said, “I guess they were bad carpenters too.”

Vortex smiled more brightly at the strange old unicorn, but she still couldn’t shake the feelings from their earlier conversation, *is he just messing with me?*

He walked towards the center of the room and started pulling the nails out of the floorboards one after another, setting them on the work bench in the corner. Lifting the heavy board out of the way and setting it to one side, he pulled a dusty old tome out of the cavity and placed it on the work bench.

“Now, let’s make sure this is actually the book we need.” he mumbled, opening the cover and searching the pages.

Vortex wandered closer and looked at the pages as he flipped through and eventually stopped at a single page.

*Locked away in that orb of her own being, she held it, now it holds her. She fought against us in times past, but what did she seek? They believe her a power hungry tyrant. We believe her a neglected and forgotten filly and so we wrung our knowledge so that we might birth her anew, redeem her in their intolerant eyes.*

*Time had aged only a little, but we loathe her absence and so much longer we cannot wait. It burns at our tendons, screams in our ears, pulls at our limbs and cuts into our heart like the sharpest of knives. So created, was the prison of our own holding and demonstrated within ‘twas our own capture, so that she might be nearer to us, so that we might have but one*

*chance to see her stealing eyes, those delicate circles of blue so much like the one in the night sky, in ours once again.*

*But when the time was met, 'twas a terrible fate that they would reject the most opportune moment that we had dreamed. They tossed aside our ambition, denied our 'gamble', they told. Our own sister, too powerful and wicked for us to contain? Prithee, tell us what has befallen you, dearest council? Dost thou not care for our kin's wellbeing? No, not so, they plead. Their duty is to protect this nation, not to endanger it. What protection lies in unleashing a monster to the world? What protection do we provide in sacrificing the peace so that one might live anew?*

*We would not accept this heavy fate for our immortal sister. To live in thy lunar prison forever more would surely pull us and our sister to pieces and drive a stake through our sanity. 'Tis our own fault, this fate of yours. We led thee astray, therefore, 'tis our duty to lead thee back. Our youngest creation, a jewel of most glorious capacity, the crystalline orb now holds the key to thy redemption. We sought a power to match our own and this orb follows it to the very tooth and claw.*

*"Now they will not find us so fearsome, their fate so uncertain, for they hold the power to keep us both." thought we.*

*'Twas foolish to think it, such nonsense in our mind. They do not wish to see us and our sister together again. They do not wish to put our conscience to rest.*

*"If 'twill not provide us with a key, it mustn't provide us with anything at all." said we to these barbarians against our will.*

*"Our most glorious one, we mustn't destroy what took such length to create. For now, 'tis a key we can use and a key it must remain." the portly one answered back, almost maliciously so.*

*So now this jester of our aspiration and his devilish cohorts keep us and that infernal orb in the castle cellar, leaving it to mock our efforts with its presence. To us, 'tis a key no longer, for now 'tis our own undoing and will unlock no doors. We should have known better of ourselves. They are the principal of disaster. Their greedy hooves stole away the commoners'*



*voice under our own negligence. We thought if we had walked with them, they would walk with us, but 'twas not to be.*

*We took a precaution, locked it away, sealed it with magic they know not how to eradicate. We think it best to keep it out of their reach, at least for this present time.*

*But they know now how this orb operates, so then we must as well. So that time doth not erase our memory, we wrote the directions in this magic book, protected from the damage of time and hidden away for safe keeping. Look to what follows, for it holds our secret.*

“Yes, this is the book I’m looking for.” Thunderhorn said, taking note of the magic spells written below, “It tells us how to disengage the magical barrier and how to use this ‘crystalline orb’. It seems like we only need to fill the orb with our magical power and it will store it so that it can be unleashed all it once. We’ll need to find at least a dozen other unicorns to help us fill the orb, but that shouldn’t be difficult.”

“This is Princess Celestia, right?” Vortex asked, almost completely ignoring his words, “Doesn’t she sound kind of... crazy to you?”

Thunderhorn laughed, “She wasn’t crazy when she wrote this, Vortex, she was just angry. She wrote this immediately after the council rejected her plans to free Luna from the moon hundreds of years ago, consequently that’s also why she’s using such an ancient and difficult tongue. But after spending the last decade working on this plan and then simply getting a ‘no’ from the council and a refusal to destroy all the dangerous artefacts that she had created for it, I think it was reasonable for her to be angry at this point.

“However, I was a little surprised she didn’t change it all when she gave me a copy of what is essentially her diary, but when I asked about it, she just laughed and said, ‘I like to keep things around that remind me and everyone else that I’m still just a pony on the inside. I have emotions, just like you and just like you, I’m vulnerable to overreacting every once in while. I think it’s important to remember that.’

“She really is a good pony, Vortex. She’s only trying to help us, but everything that’s happened over the past few months was just too much for

her to handle. I'm sure we can find a way to bring her back to her senses, it's just going to take some effort on our part."

"I hope so, Thunderhorn." the pegasus replied, shaking her head and starting up the stairs, "This is turning into a real mess."

~

"We're lucky there's only one, but how are we going to get passed him?" Goldenroot asked, watching the armoured pony from around the corner of a building.

"*Well*, you may have forgotten, but I haven't been branded a traitor just yet." Rarity answered, "I'll distract him and you can sneak around."

Goldenroot chuckled quietly, "Do you ever think you're exploiting your own persuasiveness, Miss Rarity?"

"Oh, *most certainly not*, Sir Goldenroot." the unicorn replied with a curt smile, lifting off her hood and fixing her long, delicate hair, "A proper mare deserves those benefits."

Goldenroot smiled at her reaction and watched in silence as she gracefully walked out into the open and then towards the guard. After a moment, and as if on cue, the unicorn seemed to pull the guard's attention away from the entrance and towards the moon above. Noticing the opportunity, Goldenroot slipped around the corner and approached the doorway, hugging close against the stone wall as he neared the opening.

"I'm sorry miss, I agree it's really quite romantic, but you're distracting me from my work." the guard said, starting to turn away from the moon and back towards the door.

"Oh, well... umm..." Rarity panicked, noticing Goldenroot stopped and standing wide-eyed near the doorway.

Her horn shone dully and she lifted the pony's helmet off his head and tossed it into the courtyard in the opposite direction of the pale green stallion, the metal clanging loudly against the hard rock as it landed.

"Oh, I'm so *sorry*, I didn't mean to do that." she exclaimed loudly as the pale green stallion ducked inside the castle and out of sight.

"Honestly, miss!" the guard yelled, "I don't have time for your nonsense! Is there, or isn't there something you want from me!?"

"Oh, actually yes, I need to see Princess Luna." she said meekly.

"Just go!" he said, pointing through the doorway, "I'm sure she can handle one obnoxious unicorn."

"Now see here!" she replied, annoyed that the guard had insulted her elegance, "I am not..."

She stopped when she noticed that Goldenroot was giving her a strange look, his eyes like saucers from around the doorway, and decided it might be best not to anger the guard with something so trivial.

"Alright, sorry." she said quickly.

Embarrassed, the unicorn rushed past the irritated guard and inside the castle. When she had made significant progress down the hallway, Goldenroot ducked out of a corner and walked up beside her.

"I thought you were going to kiss him for a moment there." he smiled. "And then, not a moment later, I thought you were going to kick him in the face."

"Oh please, Sir Goldenroot, he was far too gruff and unkempt for my liking." she said, scrunching up her face, "Even in times of absolute distress, a mare mustn't lower her standards."

"And calling me *obnoxious* of all things! That is something entirely worthy of a swift kick to the face."

Goldenroot smiled more brightly as they quickened their pace down the hallway. When they finally arrived at the door, they were surprised to see that there wasn't a single guard standing outside the moon princess' room. In fact, the entire hallway had been completely devoid of any other ponies whatsoever.

"Now what do we do?" she asked, staring at the closed door, "This is the exact same predicament I was in before and we all know how well *that* turned out..."

"I don't think our situation necessitates a formal acknowledgement." Goldenroot said, pushing open the door and walking into the room, "We just have to hope for the best."

"Sir Goldenroot!" she exclaimed accusingly, "I thought you knew better than to barge in on a princess like that!"

Goldenroot rolled his eyes, *Do you even realize how hypocritical that is? You did the exact same thing!*

Hearing Rarity's voice, the princess, who was standing on the balcony and peering off into the distance, turned around to face the two cloaked ponies standing in her bedroom.

"Oh! My dearest apologies, Princess Luna. That was so *very rude* of us." Rarity apologized, bowing her head slightly.

"I already know why you're here." the alicorn said with an empty expression.

"You mean you already know that your sister is..." Goldenroot replied, trying to find the right words to finish his sentence with.

"Insane?" Luna replied coldly, turning back to look off the balcony.

The word seemed to linger in the air around her, the princess losing herself in a storm of her own emotions. The very thought of her sister pierced her heart and filled it with misery, yet it did not bring tears to her eyes. She hated how her sister had fallen to the whim of an illusion and how she had done nothing to stop it, but she was not angry. Instead, she

could only be described as beautifully mundane. She showed no joy, no sadness, no anger, no regret, no emotions whatsoever, but in her heart, she felt everything at once.

Celestia was her sister, her family, her friend. She was the sister that forgave her for breaking the trust they shared for what seemed like an eternity, for terrorizing the world in her own selfish ambition. She was the family that she grew up with, who protected her and inspired the courage and hope necessary for her to overcome the grief of their parents' passing. She was the friend that knew how to make her smile, make her laugh and showed her the beauty of the amazing world they lived in. Without her, she would be so very different, the entire world would be so very different.

But now that sister was gone, snatched away by the very same emotions that she had worked so hard to help Luna overcome. She was caught in a whirlpool of deceit and hallucinations. The world was convoluted in her eyes and she was convoluting herself to match it.

"Then you must also realize that we need your help." Goldenroot said, removing his hood and attempting to provoke a reaction from the paralyzed princess.

"First, you must answer me this," Luna asked, turning to the stallion and stepping towards him, "why was the drought so terrible, Goldenroot? I know that Celestia knew why, but she would not tell me. She only gave me the very same canned response that she gave everyone else, that Prance and the council were responsible for it and everything else that's happened.

"So I want to know, is it the truth? Are you really responsible for this?"

Goldenroot stared back at her with an indecisive look in his eyes, *Should I lie to her and pretend that I don't know what happened? Should I fake my innocence so that she might help us?*

After much contemplation, a grim look formed on the stallion's face. He had reached a conclusion about what he would tell the princess, but he wasn't sure if it would ultimately prove to be the correct one.

“I was responsible for that, Princess Luna.” he said, admitting the truth. “But I alone was cooperating with Prance and worsening the drought, the other council members are innocent.

“I wanted to expand the council and our political system to include the commoners. I wanted to restore the equality and efficiency that your sister had intended for the council to have. At the same time, Prance wanted to establish trade routes with Equestria. They were in desperate need of resources they did not have and they needed our help. We both had our goals and we both thought that worsening the drought was an obligatory action to get around the inefficiencies and stubbornness in the current council.

“It was a mistake, I know that now and I regret my decision. But even if no one ever forgives me for it, I still want to try and fix the problems I have created. I want to apologize for what I’ve done, but I need your help.”

Luna turned back towards the balcony and watched the dazzling night sky as she pondered his explanation, *Then she wasn’t really lying to me after all.*

The two ponies sat in silence as they waited for a reply, the princess ignoring their existence completely. She had all the answers now, but it only seemed to tangle her understanding of the truth even more.

“I cannot help you, Goldenroot.” Luna said, still watching the night sky, “You toyed with our lives and hurt innocent ponies so that you might further your own ends. Because of you, my sister is fighting a losing battle with her grasp on reality. She cannot discern truth from lies and I’m beginning to think that neither can you.”

She turned to the stallion and fixed a piercing glare into his eyes, “You say you want to apologize, that you want to help and make things right again, but if you really want to help, you’ll stay out of our affairs. You’ll leave us alone and you’ll go back from whence you came.

“It may take precious time, but she will come to her senses. I will make sure of it.”

“Please, Princess Luna, surely you must realize that this war has to end before any more ponies’ lives are put needlessly in harm’s way?” Rarity pleaded, “They’re fighting a senseless war! It has to come to an end.”

“And what exactly do you suggest I do about it?” Luna asked, “Call the army back? She will only march them time and time again and we will only be dragging on these already tragic circumstances.

“I do not think that she is that far from the capital now and, soon enough, it will be over and I can pull her back into our reality, no matter how harsh it is for her to face. But only when this ends, will she give me the attention I so desperately need to do so.”

“I’m sorry princess, but I won’t accept that fate for our country or for theirs.” Goldenroot replied, “We can still stop this before it gets any worse, but we may need to imprison your sister to do so.”

The alicorn focussed a truly smouldering look of disgust upon the pony in front of her.

“That seems to be your solution to everything, isn’t it?” she said harshly, “We make one mistake and you want to send us away forever and let the infinite passing of time be our judgement.

“Would you have her sent to the moon? Seal her in a prison of stone? What cruel fate have you planned for her to spend the rest of her days as a victim to?”

“Princess Luna, please listen to us!” Rarity begged, a deep concern in her eyes, “We would never want to imprison her endlessly like that. You must believe that our goals are the same. We only need somewhere safe to confront her and convince her of the truth, but as you stated, that will take time and I doubt she will accept it willingly.

“There is a magical prison below the castle that we can use. If we can only just talk to her, then perhaps we can stop this.”

“Then throw her in prison if you must, Rarity. I will not interfere with your plans nor will I play any part in them.” the princess exclaimed, turning

back to the balcony. "She may be insane, but she is still my sister and my family and I refuse to help the traitor, who has sent her and everyone else into this nightmare, banish her even further. Do not forget that he is the reason your friend is now dead."

Goldenroot's determined expression fell immediately upon remembering the poor young filly that had disappeared on her journey to Prance.

"That was an accident." the unicorn stuttered, her lips trembling. "He cannot be held responsible for that."

"Not everyone can be as generous with their forgiveness as you are, Rarity." the alicorn replied.

"I'm sorry, Princess Luna." Goldenroot affirmed to the best of his ability, given the circumstances. "But even if it is against your will, I will not just give up. We will find some way to stop your sister without your help."

Concluding that the princess would not aid them, the two ponies left her in the bedroom alone, gently closing the door behind them. The ruler of the night silently gazed out over her stars, bright holes in the dark blanket of the tranquil atmosphere, and surrendered to her anguish.

*What has become of us, sister?* she thought, warm tears trickling down her face, *Are we to be feared by everyone and loved by no one? Must our lives always be filled with such despair?*



# Chapter 11

“So what’s the plan, general?” Vortex asked, looking excitedly at the gruff old unicorn walking beside her. “Can we just bust in there and cause a ruckus? I want some action.”

The two ponies were making their way towards the huge palace, their hooded cloaks concealing as much of their defining features as was possible. The building ahead of them was customarily a bastion of hope, representing every ounce of confidence the citizens had in their nation. But the usually bright palace was shrouded in the darkness of the night and consumed by the fears of war. The few lights decorating the walls were dimmed and an uneasy feeling hung over the building like a thick fog.

Trying to ignore the depressing sight, Thunderhorn was keeping his gaze focussed on the cobbled path ahead of them, which drifted away from the main entrance and the irritated looking pony guarding the doorway.

Thunderhorn had a brown saddlebag hanging loosely over his side. Inside were the collection of items that he had gathered from his home before they left, all of which he considered to be completely necessary for the next part of their plan.

“Don’t be so brash.” he scoffed. “You know that we can’t afford to attract any attention to ourselves until after we’ve started the riot.

“We’re just going to sneak in there and sneak out. If we run into any guards, I can use magic to knock them out quietly and we’ll tie them up with the rope I brought. As long as the patrol schedule hasn’t changed from what I remember, no one should come across the guards we’ve tied up until after we’ve started the riot and by then, we won’t care who comes across them.”

The pegasus rolled her eyes, “I have absolutely no confidence in my ability to tie knots, Thunderhorn.”

“Fine, let me worry about that part then.” he replied.

Continuing around a corner, they passed several small bureaucratic buildings and storehouses packed tightly against each other. Dimly illuminated by the streetlamps, the structures themselves were completely dark and abandoned. They were simple, identical boxes with few notable characteristics. Other than the slight differences in the colour of paint on the walls and doors, which was entirely dull and unoriginal, only the signs firmly attached over each doorway could be used to differentiate between them.

“When we get to the artefact room I’ll dispel the barrier, we’ll grab the orb and then meet the others back at the Ivory Bear.” Thunderhorn continued.

Vortex scrunched her face, giving the unicorn a strange look, “Then what am I doing?”

“What time is it?”

Pausing, she lifted her head and looked up at the sky. Its reflection perfectly visible in the mare’s amber eyes, the moon’s luminescent sheen was only partly obscured by the clouds above.

Turning back to the unicorn, she announced, “Ten thirteen.”

“Good.” he promptly replied. “Then we have exactly forty-seven minutes to do this.”

The unicorn smiled briefly, turning off the path into a dark alley that seemed to lead nowhere. Walking directly to the end of the alleyway and stopping at an indistinct section of the stone wall, he glanced around the obstruction with a hint of confusion.

“You still haven’t told me what I’m supposed to do.” Vortex asked, her voice showing her annoyance.

“Haven’t I?” he replied, leaning in towards a section of the wall. “You were supposed to help me tie up the guards and keep track of the time, but you already explained to me that you can’t help tie up the guards.”

“So I’m here... to help you tell the time?” she asked with a blank stare.

“You’re doing an excellent job.”

“You do know that I can’t tell the time indoors right?”

“You can’t?” he asked, turning around to face the pegasus. “Then I guess you really are useless.”

The old unicorn smirked and turned back to the wall.

“You know, you really are a stubborn old conservative jerk, Thunderhorn.” she replied angrily.

Thunderhorn laughed quietly, his horn glowing dimly as a thread of magic seeped through a tiny hole in the stone wall. The line of magic gradually spread, making the entire wall glow a brilliant blue colour. A moment later, the wall started to shake and shift in place. A thin cloud of dust crumbled off the wall and started to sprinkle onto the ground in a slow shower and, one by one, the stone bricks pulled themselves out of place and started forming a neat pile on the ground, just to the right of the old unicorn.

Vortex watched this entire event unfold in silent admiration, her mouth hanging open ever so slightly and her eyes maintaining an unblinking gaze on the wall. This new hole in the wall had created a perfect entrance into the palace. It led directly into a small, uninteresting room, but with the room’s door slightly ajar, giving her a limited view of the hallway outside, she could see the familiar staircase that led down into the lower catacombs of the castle.

“How come I didn’t know about this?” Vortex asked, turning to Thunderhorn and blinking several times in quick succession.

“Why would you need to know about a secret entrance that you wouldn’t use or even be able to open?” the unicorn asked.

“Well... what if I was curious?” she exclaimed with a stoic expression. “And as a former member of the council, I’m insulted to know that you’ve

been withholding such valuable information from me. First the magical prison cell, then the crystalline orb and now a secret entrance?"

"Well, quite simply," Thunderhorn said, "it wasn't valuable information at the time."

The unicorn walked towards the door leading out of the room and peered into the hallway, checking to make sure that they hadn't alerted any of the guards. Satisfied, he instructed the pegasus to step inside the room. After the blue mare had entered, he reached out with his magic and the pile of bricks by the entrance started to shift and move to fill the opening they had created.

"Besides, I didn't trust you with that information," he continued.

"And you do now?" she asked almost enthusiastically.

*Because we all know how very trusting you are, Thunderhorn, she thought to herself with a quaint smile. You're the same pony that gladly accused me of being a traitor little more than a week ago.*

As the stone wall stopped moving and the last few bricks fell into place, Thunderhorn hurried back to the door and glanced around the hallway once more.

"Now I don't really have much of a choice," he admitted. "I still think you're too confident and brazen for your own good. One day you're going to get hurt acting like that."

Vortex's enthusiasm deflated quickly and a small frown formed on her face.

*How predictable, she thought. Even when the world hangs in the balance he's just as obnoxious as the day I met him.*

Thunderhorn motioned for her to follow as he rushed out of the room and started to descend the staircase leading down into the depths of the castle basement. The torches placed periodically along the walls cast strange shadows on the solid rock steps. The light they provided was bleak

and inadequate, making it impossible to clearly see more than a few feet in front of them.

“But I wasn’t really all that different when I was your age.” Thunderhorn added, grinning back at the pegasus. “And I reckon there were more than a few grumpy old stallions complaining about my actions.”

He chuckled quietly to himself and Vortex found herself smiling reluctantly, still unsure of what to make of this strange old pony and his drastic change of personality.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairwell, the two were met with a pair of large, steel doors, pockets of rust scattering the surface of the old metal. Small barred windows on each door gave them a limited picture of the narrow passage just on the other side. Unfortunately, the dismal view of the other side was all too familiar to the unicorn and pegasus that cautiously peered through them. The dark corridor was surrounded on either side with ancient prison cells, a depressing reminder of the short, but terrifying time they had spent within the castle’s dungeon.

“I don’t see anyone on the other side.” Thunderhorn noted, surveying the hallway through the barred window. “With any luck, the majority of the guards will be at war and not down here guarding the nonexistent prisoners and watching over these dusty old cells.”

The unicorn pushed on the door lightly, the old metal frame creaking loudly as it opened, causing both of the ponies to cringe.

“I find it hard to believe that they don’t have a single prisoner down here.” Vortex remarked.

“We were probably the first real criminals Princess Celestia has had to deal with in over a hundred years and our punishment was little more than a permanent vacation.” he explained. “Perhaps that says something about the society we live in, but it says even more about the princess. She’s done an impressive job at containing the criminal activity in Equestria. The fact that most of us weren’t even responsible for the crime we were accused of only serves to reinforce my appreciation of her accomplishments.”

Vortex thought about what he had said for a moment before glancing around at the empty cells. It was exactly as she remembered, cold, dreary, and unwelcoming, but it strangely brought a joyful smile to her face. While it was indeed a terrible part of the castle, it held a special place within her heart. For it was down here, when she thought her life was at its end, that she had finally worked up enough courage to express her feelings to that peculiar green pony.

*Stupid Wind Dancer*, she thought, her smile collapsing, *she ruined my moment... mostly...*

"Why are we even down here?" a voice asked, barely audible from around the corner.

Hearing the strange voice, Thunderhorn stopped and stuck out his hoof to hold the distracted pegasus beside him in place.

"I'm actually glad I don't have to fight in the war." another voice replied, slightly louder than the other. "It sounds too dangerous."

"Don't be so pathetic. You're a soldier!" the first voice exclaimed loudly. "You're not supposed to be afraid of danger. You're supposed to be a fearless warrior, eager to jump into the heat of battle."

Thunderhorn could hear their hoofsteps, the armour clanging methodically against the stone floor. They were only a short distance away now.

"That's ridiculous." the second mocked. "We're only temporary replacements for the real soldiers that have gone off to fight in the war. We're not fearless warriors and I'm certainly not eager to get into any fights."

Thunderhorn started to focus his magic, the horn on his head darkening until it was as black as the night. A dark cloud of mist rapidly formed in the air above his head and wafted gently around the corner and down the hallway, towards the two guards that were fast approaching their position.

“Oh come on! You have to be at least...” the first voice continued before coming to an abrupt halt.

The dark cloud hanging in the air distracted him from his point and the hallway was engulfed by a strange silence as the two guards stared at it curiously.

“What is that thing?” the first voice asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know what it is!” the second voice replied in anger. “But are you really trying to convince me that you’re not afraid of going to war or getting into fights with dangerous criminals, yet you’re afraid of a dust cloud? That’s the most... ridiculous... thing...”

Several loud clanging noises filled the air as the two soldiers slipped out of consciousness and hit the floor, their helmets flying off and rolling noisily around the corridor.

Thunderhorn and Vortex quickly turned around the bend and approached what appeared to be two very young pegasi in ill-fitting golden armour.

“These are just colts...” Vortex said.

“Most likely, they wanted to join the army, but were turned away for being too young.” Thunderhorn guessed. “The recruiting officer probably gave them this post instead to keep them occupied. I was worried this might happen. It was part of the reason I didn’t want to just ‘bust in and cause a ruckus’.”

The old pony sighed gently and opened the flap on his bag, pulling out a long piece of rope and throwing it carelessly on the floor in front of him.

“These two aren’t going to hurt anyone. I’ll tie them up and then we’ll put them both in one of the nearby cells.” he continued.

*Better they get tied up and humiliated in the basement of their own castle than end up dead fighting for a war they don’t even understand,* he thought.

The unicorn quickly hogtied the two young pegasi and loosely tied their muzzles shut so they wouldn't draw any attention when they awoke. After this was done, both Vortex and Thunderhorn each picked up one of the ponies and carefully set them on the beds in one of the prison cells.

Thunderhorn closed the door behind them, not bothering to lock them in, *I don't think they're going to cause us any more problems. They'll probably be too afraid to leave that cell when they wake up.*

"Do you think they're the only ones?" Vortex asked with a troubled look on her face. "I mean, do you think there are more little ponies like this? I don't want any of them to get hurt in the riot..."

"I don't know." he replied with a frown. "I know that the ones guarding the artefact room will be trained guards, but I really can't tell if the ones patrolling the city are going to be this young. We need to be careful and try to avoid any fighting.

"But it's more important that we focus on getting that orb. We can't afford to waste any time worrying about this right now."

Thunderhorn pulled his eyes away from the two ponies and rushed down the hallway, towards the great steel door at the far end. Vortex followed closely behind as they opened the door and hurried down the staircase.

"As I remember, there should be four guards outside the room." Thunderhorn whispered. "They're guarding one of the most dangerous possessions in the country, so they're extremely well trained."

"But we can just use that fog thing of yours to knock them all out, right?" Vortex asked quietly, glancing at the old unicorn.

"No." he replied promptly. "They'll know exactly what that is and they'll know how to dispel it before anyone falls unconscious. Instead, I'm going to have to ask for your help."

Vortex smiled brightly, "Oh, so you do want my help after all, do you?"



“Don’t get cocky.” he replied sternly. “We need to exploit their disadvantages. I’m going to focus my own magic and use it to protect you from their spells. You need to rush in and take out the unicorns as quickly as you can; there should be two of them. Avoid the earth ponies. They’re too well trained for you to handle them both.”

“Well, I don’t know about that...” she smirked.

“Afterward,” Thunderhorn continued. “I’ll jump in and use my magic to knock out the two earth ponies like we did with those two colts. Without the unicorns, they won’t be able to protect themselves. Do you understand?”

Vortex nodded quickly, trying to hide her passionate enthusiasm.

“OK then. We need to be absolutely quiet from now on so that we don’t alert them.”

The blue pegasus lowered her hood and discarded the cloak on the floor, shaking her head and stretching herself out as she limbered up for the encounter. While she appeared to be eager about the idea of fighting the soldiers, she was silently apprehensive and avoided looking directly in her companion’s direction. Putting your life in danger, for any reason, was not something that anyone ever looks forward to.

Approaching the end of yet another long hallway in the dimly lit catacombs of the castle, they were met with a set of large doors almost identical to those leading into the prison. These doors, however, were lacking two distinctive features that the ones they encountered before had. The metal on the doors was flawless and looked as if it were inspected and replaced at regular intervals to maintain its structural integrity. The doors were also missing the small barred windows so the two had only their imagination to use as an indication of what waited for them in the adjacent room.

Both ponies stopped just before the door and, noticing that the entrance was locked, Thunderhorn weaved another thread of blue magic out of his horn. The thread of magic snaked its way into the lock and the unicorn closed his eyes as he tried to imagine the tumblers inside. And after a few moments of intense concentration, the magic melted away and

the unicorn opened his eyes, turning and nodding slowly at the pegasus waiting quietly, but impatiently, beside him.

The reaction of the mare was puzzling to say the least. A warm smile crossed her face, but faded almost as quickly as it arrived. Her eyes darted from the door to Thunderhorn and then back again, the unicorn sporting a much more obviously apprehensive look.

And, as if gaining confidence from the visible trepidation of her companion's posture, she burst into the room and immediately took note of her surroundings. Time seemed to slow as her gaze lashed around the room, focusing on each of the ponies within, one after another, and brushing past the brilliant, but opaque violet barrier directly across from her. As Thunderhorn had suspected, there were two unicorns, one noticeably older than the other, and two earth ponies with a significantly more intimidating stature.

Contradictory to what she expected, all four of them were in very relaxed positions around the room. The two unicorns were sitting at a table, playing cards. The younger pony had his head propped up with one hoof, while the older pony was focusing deeply on the five cards floating in front of him. The two earth ponies were exact opposites of each other in terms of their alertness. One was dozing in the corner and the other was intently watching the doorway that she had just come out of. He was the first to react, shouting loudly and causing the others to leap to their feet, the unicorns releasing their grasp on their cards, letting them sprinkle onto the ground. The most alert pony rushed towards her quickly, but she was faster than he was and jumped out of the way as he leaped at her.

A bizarre sensation of pure ecstasy coursed through her veins. It was a fantastic mixture of adrenaline, fear and Thunderhorn's magic. With her heart pumping fervently in her chest, the soldiers around her moved liked they were weighed down with lead. Hovering in the air, her eyes skipped to the two unicorns, the old one was trying to hold her in place, but his magic just flowed off her body like water. The younger was lifting the table and preparing to hurl it in her direction while the drowsy earth pony in her peripheral vision was still trying to collect his senses.

Beating her wings and pushing the air away from herself, she moved against the wall and out of the way as the table brushed past her and

shattered against the doorway. Pushing against the wall, she sent herself flying towards the older unicorn, the pony unable to react in time as she launched him into a wall.

The younger unicorn dropped to the ground, allowing the drowsy pony to jump over him and push off his back, hurling the full weight of his body towards Vortex. But once again, she was too fast for the bulky soldiers and she propelled herself up to the low ceiling above. Not a moment later, she pushed back off the ceiling and sent herself rocketing towards the ground and the unicorn beneath her. The young unicorn reacted quickly and shielded himself with a magical barrier; the pegasus' hoof crashed into the malleable barrier and sent her flying towards the wall by the door and straight into the most alert pony of the bunch, who prepared to catch her as she flew in his direction. But the strange feeling inside the pegasus gave her indomitable reflexes and she twisted her body around, landing a hoof squarely in his face and knocking him against the wall. Moving quickly, she took advantage of her momentum once again and flew back towards the young unicorn who was preparing some kind of lasso out of his magic. The unicorn hurled his lasso around the pegasus and attempted to throw her against the wall using her own momentum, but the lasso disintegrated as soon as he tried to tighten it over her. Surprised and left with no way to defend himself, the pegasus landed a hoof into the side of his head and sent him flying against the drowsy earth pony, the two colliding and sending a loud metal clanging sound resonating around the room.

Exhausted from the ordeal, Vortex's balance immediately faltered as she touched the ground and she tumbled onto the floor in a lump.

"Thunderhorn!" she shouted to the door.

The unicorn released his magic around the pegasus and rushed into the room, ready to subdue the remaining ponies. But as he entered the room and trampled over the remnants of the wooden table, like Vortex, the sight he encountered was not quite what he had expected. All four guards were lying unconscious around the walls with the pegasus collapsed in almost the exact center of the room.

While she had been a member of the Wonderbolts, the old pony knew that, despite being physically demanding, the job did not require any

fighting. It was all just a show, a performance for those willing to buy a ticket, and the combat ability that some ponies had begun to expect from them was merely coincidental. Their occupation had given them the courage and finesse that was necessary in battle, but in fact, many of the Wonderbolts were still terrible fighters. They were just too predictable or slow to react when they were confronted with a combat situation. So how Vortex had become such an incredible combatant over her relatively short life was a complete mystery. Perhaps it had something to do with her personality, her quick thinking and unpredictable nature making her more than capable of busting a few heads whenever she deemed it necessary.

“I think you can come in here now.” she said, a curt smile forming on her face as she stared at the ceiling and panted heavily, desperately trying to catch her breath.

The old unicorn hurried over to her and crouched down, “Are you alright, Vortex!?”

The mare’s smile grew and she laughed heartily.

“That was too much fun!” she exclaimed between breaths. “We’ll have to do that again sometime.”

“Vortex, are you hurt!?” Thunderhorn persisted.

“No... just tired.” she explained, lifting her head up slightly to look back at him. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

The unicorn sighed heavily, “That magic barrier is a personal concoction of mine. It’s something I learned a long time ago and it requires an enormous amount of concentration and practice to perfect. It protects against nearly every type of magic known, cushions physical attacks and heightens one’s senses considerably.

“I must admit, I had never actually tried using it on anyone other than myself before and when I was using it on myself, I couldn’t move or I would break my concentration so I wasn’t sure if it would work properly.”

“Great...” Vortex replied nervously.

Thunderhorn smiled faintly and reached into his bag, pulling out the book they had collected from his manor and setting it on one of the chairs.

“I had originally intended to use it on my wife in an act of desperation. I thought that it might give her a chance to escape, even if it meant sacrificing my own life to do so.”

“Yeah. Well...” the pegasus wheezed. “If it’s okay with you... I think I’m just going to lie here for a while.”

She closed her eyes and continued to breathe heavily, her chest moving up and down rapidly.

“Take your time.” he said, flipping through the book. “We’re not going to be able to tie these guards up; the unicorns would break free in no time, so I’m going to seal them all behind the magical barrier instead. They won’t know how to get past it.”

“Okay.” Vortex apathetically replied, rolling onto her side.

Thunderhorn stopped at the page in the book that described how to remove the barrier and started to focus his magic towards the violet, glasslike obstacle separating them from the adjoining room. His horn turned a dazzling green colour and a concentrated beam of light shot directly at the center of the barrier. The violet changed into a fiery red and thin cracks scattered across the barrier. When the fractures covered the entire surface of the magical obstruction, the wall shattered and the fragments fell to the ground in a small heap.

Vortex ignored her exhaustion and rose to her hooves. With the barrier gone, the contents of the room were revealed, leaving the two ponies completely awestruck at the sight in front of them. The tiny room itself, which was composed of simple stone bricks like the rest of the castle, was immaculate and not a single particle of dust touched its surface. In the center of the room was a small crystal ball, about the size of an apple, resting on a small pillow and placed on top of a pedestal. The orb itself glowed with a dull, but wonderful orange light and was covered in engravings of a similar, but visibly darker colour.

Approaching the glowing artefact slowly, Thunderhorn read the words covering its surface.

*My beloved sister, my only family, I would toss aside my immortal life, my royal blood, and everything else I own for you, the one true constant in my world.*

“She didn’t write this in the royal tongue.” Thunderhorn remarked, reading through the words once more. “At the time she wrote this, it meant a lot to just throw away your pride and humble yourself like that for someone else. It really shows how much she cares about her sister.”

Both ponies continued to stare at the orb as it shined in the confinement of the small room. Once again realizing where they were, Thunderhorn snatched the crystalline sphere away from the pedestal and placed it inside his bag.

“Help me drag them into the room.” he said quickly, gesturing towards the unconscious guards. “We need to get back.”

As they rushed around the room, pulling the ponies through the opening, Vortex laughed, “We can’t forget about these guys. They’ll be fine for a day or two, but after that we’ll need to get them out of here.”

“I have no intention of leaving some of the best of the country’s soldiers locked in here for longer than a few hours.” Thunderhorn said.

When all the ponies were inside the small room, the old unicorn turned his attention back towards the book resting on the chair. Soon enough, a violet beam of magic shot out from his horn and started to gather up all of the fragments on the ground, placing them each in their former positions and returning the barrier to its original, but cracked form. As the magical wall changed from red to violet, the cracks started to recede and eventually disappear entirely.

“Now, as long as we don’t run into any surprises, we should make it back on time.” Thunderhorn said, placing the book back in his bag and heading towards the door.

~

Goldenroot slowly rotated the cup around in circles between his hooves, the warm, cloudy liquid sloshing gently at the bottom. He was never very fond of tea. The amount of effort it took him to drink the hot beverage properly, carefully holding the cup in between his hooves and lifting it up to his mouth for a sip, was usually too much to justify any satisfaction he received from it. But tonight, he didn't care about the aesthetics of 'proper tea consumption' and simply slurped the liquid through a long straw that protruded out of the cup awkwardly. His rudeness was, however, hideously inappropriate for their current situation.

Rarity was still upset; the moon princess' words had damaged her faith in their plan and in herself. She was thinking of the pony sitting across the table from her that she was now closely affiliating herself with and of the pony that months ago, had disappeared without a trace. Twilight was gone and now she was sitting in a scummy bar with a conspirator, attempting to cause a riot and overthrow the princess. Had the world really changed so much in so little time or was it her? Was she really trying to save what little sanity was left on this planet or, like Celestia, had she changed and distorted herself to match the cruel destiny she was held captive in?

"They're late." Goldenroot noted, looking at the battered clock on the wall. "It's unlike either of them to be late."

Rarity gave no reaction, simply staring into her own tea with an uncertain and apathetic disposition.

Goldenroot hesitated for a moment before looking at the unicorn directly, "I'm sorry about what happened, Miss Rarity."

The white unicorn looked up from her cup and across the table, right at the stallion. Now so late into the night, her usually sparkling blue eyes had a dull red tinge with an almost swollen appearance to them and her hair was ever so slightly out of proportion from its usually pristine glamour.

"I know you said that it wasn't my fault, but I'm not really sure that I believe you." he continued. "I was still a part of what happened to your

friend and I need to apologize for that. I'm sorry about what happened to her and Princess Celestia and I'm sorry about what's happened to our entire country.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but if we actually pull this off and restore the council, I don't think I should be any part of it. I don't think that would be the right thing to do after what I've done."

The gentle ambiance of the room took over and the sound of clinking glasses, hoofs tapping gently against the wooden floor and playful laughter of the tavern's other patrons was the only thing that separated them from complete silence.

Rarity's glum expression turned away from the green stallion, back down to the table and into her cup.

"I'm trying not to hold you accountable for this disaster, but I suppose you're right," she said in a hollow tone. "I'm not really as forgiving as I try to be and a part of me really hates you for what you did. But I know you didn't intend for this to happen, so I do appreciate the gesture, Sir Goldenroot

She lifted her gaze back up from her tea and smiled faintly at the pony across from her, but the expression was fragile and short-lived, disappearing almost as soon as it arrived.

"I only wish I knew what happened to her," she continued. "Why did she just disappear? Where did she go and why did Prance have her belongings? Why doesn't anyone have any idea what happened to her? It's all just so... strange..."

"There must be something in her belongings that can help us find some answers," Goldenroot said, "After we're done with all of this, I'd like to help you find those answers, Miss Rarity. It's the very least I can do."

The white unicorn lifted the teacup to her face. After taking a very brief sip of the hot beverage, she set the cup gently down on the table and smiled.

"I would certainly appreciate your help, Sir Goldenroot," she replied.



As soon as the stallion was able to return the smile, the door to the Ivory Bear opened and two familiar figures entered the building. Under the shadow of her hood, Vortex smiled exuberantly as she rushed over to the table and sat down.

“We got it!” she exclaimed joyfully.

But her expression quickly changed from joy to a look of sheer disgust.

“Are you two drinking tea in a pub?” she asked doubtfully, turning to Goldenroot. “And you’re drinking yours with a straw? What’s wrong with you!?”

Realizing how ridiculous they must look, Goldenroot and Rarity revealed embarrassed expressions, first to each other and then to the blue pegasus.

Thunderhorn smirked from underneath his hood as he approached the table casually, “I assume that since you’re here that we’ll have the princess’ help?”

“Actually, no.” Goldenroot replied despondently. “She won’t help us, but she won’t interfere either.”

“It almost sounds like she hasn’t actually made up her mind yet.” Thunderhorn replied, his smile falling. “Then what are we going to do? We can’t afford to wait for her decision.”

“We need to use the artefact.” Rarity said.

The other ponies looked at her in surprise.

“You’re okay with that?” Goldenroot asked doubtfully. “Honestly, I thought you would be the last one to agree to use that thing.”

“If Princess Luna didn’t want us to stop her sister, she would have locked us up for trying.” the white unicorn replied with assurance. “I think that, even though we don’t have her help, some part of her wants us to go through with this. And if the orb was created for this very purpose, then

Princess Celestia would have taken the utmost caution in creating it. I do not think she would spend so much time creating something that does not work”

“Well if you’re convinced, then so am I.” Goldenroot responded.

Vortex slammed her hooves on the table aggressively, startling even the loudest patrons of the tavern as the teacups rattled and spilled a large portion of their contents.

After noticing the attention she had drawn to herself, she lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned into the table, “Then it’s about time we started a riot.”

Goldenroot couldn’t help but smile at her, but the unicorns were apprehensive. They still weren’t sure that they would be able to even remotely contain a full-scale riot in the capital, let alone find a way to start one.

“Then this is what we need to do.” Thunderhorn intervened, leaning into the table.

~

“Nobles of Equestria!” Goldenroot shouted as the four ponies burst into the largest tavern in the nobility quarter of Canterlot only moments before it was about to close for the evening.

Each pony threw off their cloaks, discarding them onto the floor of the large, bustling room. The tavern was a huge building and, even so close to the last dying hours of the night, there were nearly a hundred ponies inside staring back at them in complete confusion. Distracted by the interruption, they mumbled to each other in a desperate attempt to make sense of the situation.

“She has taken away your rights and your responsibility!” Goldenroot continued. “She has declared war on our neighbours to the north and banished your voice to the furthest reaches of the world. She claims she is

saving us from conspiracy and treason, but we all know that is not the truth.”

The whispers among the tables grew louder and more frequent. The crowd began to clearly express their wonderment of just who these ponies were and whether or not they were actually the council that they had believed to have been banished from their country little more than a week ago. If they **were** the council, what were they doing here now? What was going on?

“Tragedy has stricken our nation at its very heart! Our fair Princess Celestia has surrendered to the terrible hallucinations that now plague her mind and ravage her soul!” Thunderhorn cried, stepping forward. “Indeed, she is not the princess we remember. Surely you have seen her change and our country with her? Surely you have noticed that she believes the world is very different from our reality?”

“Now see here!” the barkeep exclaimed, stepping out from behind the bar and walking towards the small group of ponies at the doorway, trying to look as intimidating as possible.

He wasn’t very old, but he could hardly be described as a young pony. A fairly large unicorn, his thinning black mane ran carelessly down his neck and along his fading orange coat. His eyes were a passionate blue and desperately tried to pull the attention away from an obvious scar on his lip, a wound that had likely been the result of getting kicked in the mouth at one point or another.

“I won’t have you coming into my bar, spouting this rubbish and upsetting my customers! You speak as if our princess has gone crazy, but I seem to recall that you’re the very same ponies that we condemned for almost the same reason not too long ago.”

The crowd smiled and sneered at the group they had been taking so seriously. Some of them rolled their eyes and turned back to their table, diverting their attention away from the four ponies at the entrance as they resumed their conversations.

“You think we’re crazy!?” Vortex shouted at the barkeep in disbelief.

“Do you really think that turning on your friends, family and the ponies you were all supposed to serve is anything else?” he snorted. “It’s true, I was sad to see our part in the political decisions of Equestria get taken away from us, but not you traitorous lot. You’re a disgrace to the entire country.”

“Don’t be so quick to believe everything the princess has told you.” Thunderhorn scorned, raising his voice to resonate across the entire building. “You can’t really believe that every single one of us would turn against you. What would we possibly gain from that?”

“I’m not one to question the aims of madness.” the barkeep laughed. “I’m sure you all had your reasons.”

“Then you must be mad as well.” Goldenroot said piercingly, stepping up to the barkeep with a smile on his face.

A few of the ponies who had looked away previously had turned back now. They might not have been willing to take sides in the argument, but they were more than willing to enjoy a good fight.

“You elected us did you not?” the pale green stallion announced. “You chose us out of everyone else to be your voice in the government. We’re as much a part of you as you are a part of us. Would we sever our own limbs and cut into our own soul? Would we turn against the very reason we have to live and decapitate ourselves out of greed? Would we come back to you now, knowing that we face our own deaths as a consequence of failure? Cowardly or not, no one would take such risk without good reason.”

More of the crowd had started to turn back towards them, intrigued by the skilful shouting match that was taking place at the doorway. Their hushed murmurs had all but stopped, with only a few of the less sober patrons still muttering to themselves quietly. Their drinks all rested peacefully on the tables in front of them, completely forgotten and insignificant in comparison to what was happening before their eyes.

Thunderhorn promptly joined in, taking advantage of all the attention they were receiving, “Princess Celestia told you that Prance, the country that helped us during our time of need, was trying to conquer us and slit our

throats in our sleep. But we are without a doubt the most wonderful, powerful, and influential nation on this planet. Who would dare to oppose us unless seeking their own destruction? Prance is not so different from our own nation, my friends. Its ponies do not wish to see their country plunged into the fires of war any more than we do. But now, both our countries are fighting and dying for a mere illusion, a façade of the mind.”

“I’m tired of your nonsensical ramblings!” the barkeep yelled angrily. “Get out now before I have the guards throw you out. I’m sure they’ll be more than happy to lock you up in the dungeon.”

The barkeep’s temper had elevated to a critical point and his patience wore thinner by the second. So after keeping silent the entire length of the quarrel, Rarity recognized that she had to do something before they lost all hope of convincing the nobility to their cause. They obviously wouldn’t believe the council as easily as she had originally hoped they would. They were too doubtful and, although most of the bar was now absorbed in the argument, no one was taking them seriously enough to support them in any way.

“Please, you have to believe we’re telling the truth!” she begged the barkeep. “The war is only getting worse and we don’t have much time left.”

The barkeep’s extreme irritation vanished, replaced with a mere annoyance as he and the entire building came to grinding halt and stared at the unicorn standing anxiously in front of the barkeep.

“For a moment, I thought you were someone else.” he replied with an unexpectedly calm demeanour. “But you’re not one of the council members, are you? So then how did you get wrapped up in their lies?”

“They did not convince me, nor did they need to.” she explained sincerely. “It was my discovery alone. I asked them for **their** help.”

Though she was speaking quietly, her voice was heard around the entire room. The orange unicorn seemed to be taken back by this sudden revelation. He found it almost unbelievable that she had somehow convinced the others to come back from their exile and fight so passionately for something that seemed so bizarre.

“Some of you may know that Princess Celestia’s student, Twilight Sparkle, was sent to Prance to help find a solution to the drought.” she continued, raising her voice a little. “She was gone for weeks, months even. But as time passed and the problems of the drought were eventually extinguished, many of us gave up hope that she would ever return. She just seemed to have disappeared.”

The barkeep listened patiently, curious to hear what she had to say and why she was convinced that the Princess was, of all things, insane.

“Eventually, some of her things were sent from Prance, yet she herself was still lost.” Rarity continued slowly. “A funeral was held for her, but the princess did not seem to grieve her student’s death. One might think that she was heartless, that she didn’t care about her, but perhaps she knew what would happen next. And in the dead of night, Twilight appeared as if out of nowhere and the princess was reunited with her student.”

“I’m already familiar with that story.” the barkeep interrupted. “Granted, it wasn’t made very public, but my occupation has certain informational benefits. However, what, may I ask, was the point of you telling me that, Rarity?”

Both Rarity and the former council members seemed surprised, yet also relieved by the amount of knowledge this orange unicorn had. It was reassuring to know that they wouldn’t have to explain every minute detail to him.

“That is who you are, isn’t it? The element of generosity I believe?” tilting his head as he stated the facts. “So then certainly you could be more generous with your explanation. What exactly does this have to do with Princess Celestia?”

“The point is that what you heard was a lie.” she replied rapidly. “Twilight never returned. No one knows where she is and the Twilight Sparkle that Princess Celestia believes to have returned is merely a hallucination caused by her grief.”

The barkeep frowned, “So then it’s true.”

Shocked by his extraordinary response, Vortex pushed Rarity out of the way and confronted the stallion directly.

“What’s the matter with you!?” she demanded. “You won’t believe a word of what we say, but you’ll eat up every single thing that comes out of her mouth without a moment’s hesitation?”

The barkeep returned a violent expression, “I do have reasons for my beliefs, miss. You just don’t know what they are yet.

“You see, before the war had started, this tavern was frequently visited by members of the royal guard. I didn’t mind them; they helped keep the rabble out. I even got to know one of the guards quite well. He was one of Princess Celestia’s personal escorts, so he’d spend a lot of time around her and he’d always have the most interesting stories to tell. On his one night off, he’d always visit my tavern and drink himself silly. As the night wore on, the things he’d say would become more and more convoluted to the point you could barely understand what he was talking about and I’d have to tell him to go home.

“However, one day he sat down and shared some particularly disturbing news. He tried to tell me that Princess Celestia had been talking to someone else, some mare, when he was sure that she was alone in her room.

“I just passed it off as simple paranoia and I tried to reassure him, ‘Whoever it is, she’s probably just sneaking by you. You know, using some kind of secret entrance that you don’t know about.’

“But he denied this quite quickly. He told me that he had been curious enough to actually look inside the room. He even said that he’d once poked his head in the room to investigate, but no one else was there.

“He said, ‘The princess was alone and she seemed to be talking to herself.’

“I didn’t know what to think about that. I thought he might just be going on another one of his intoxicated rants, but of course I wouldn’t actually tell him that. So I just listened while he quietly told me about all the things the princess had said to this ‘Twilight’.”

He paused briefly and glanced at Rarity with a troubled expression, the white unicorn recognizing the name immediately and sharing his concern.

“But after he told me that once, when he was in the throne room with her, the princess had abruptly rose from her seat, walked over, opened the door and asked him to step outside to give her and Twilight some privacy, I got a little freaked out. I had to ask him to leave.

“I said, ‘I think you’ve had enough to drink for one night, friend. Perhaps it’s time that you go on home.’

“He had a worried look on face, but he just got up and left without another word. I thought he was trying to skip out on his bill, but then I realized that he never had anything to drink at all. He was completely sober the entire time he was speaking to me. How could a sober pony speak such madness like it was the truth?”

He paused again and turned back to the white unicorn.

“You saw it too, didn’t you?” he said solemnly. “You saw the princess talking to this ‘phantom’, this imaginary pony?”

Rarity closed her eyes and slowly nodded.

“If you knew this, then why were you so doubtful of what we’ve been trying to say all along?” Goldenroot asked the barkeep.

“I was not willing to accept that my princess had gone mad unless I was absolutely certain. After everything she’s done for us, I think we owe her that.” he said plainly. “Unfortunately, it seems as though I have reached that point.”

The barkeep turned around and looked across the large gathering of ponies sitting around the room. For a group that had been drinking well into the late hours of the night, they were strangely alert and attentive and they waited in anticipation to hear what the barkeep had to say. Was he actually so convinced that he was willing to help them now? Could his opinion of them change so quickly?



“Alright! Everyone listen up!” the barkeep announced loudly across the room. “As much as I hate to admit it, I believe these ponies are telling the truth! Our princess and our country are in desperate need of our help and I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit around and do nothing about it.

“So I’m going to give you a choice. You can either help me and we can figure out exactly what’s going on here or you can get the hell out of my tavern!”

A few of the ponies quickly got up from their tables and rushed past him and out the door, but the large majority of the patrons stayed put. Some had apprehensive looks on their faces, but most of them seemed eager to finally do something. No matter what the truth was behind it, their situation was terrible. And after watching their country change so much in what felt like only an instant, they were ready to put an end to the illness that overwhelmed it.

“Now you better have a pretty good plan or I’m going to be disappointed with you lot.” the barkeep said. “I don’t like ponies that make me look like a fool.”

~

From her place on the balcony overlooking the city and the small, delicate lights beneath, Princess Luna remained a statue. The world was crumbling beneath her hooves and she just waited and watched it all from her room. But what choice did she have?

Long ago, when the world was young and she was just a filly, her sister had to make an important decision, not entirely unlike the one she herself was now confronted with. Celestia had to decide whether it was more important to protect her only family and the last member of her kind, or protect society as a whole and everyone who lived within it. Fate had decreed that she could not do both, one had to suffer while the other was allowed to persevere.

Her sister had eventually made her decision, but was it the right decision to make? If she could go back, knowing what she does now, would she change her mind, save her sister and sacrifice the world?

As she stared off into the darkness beyond the balcony, the question terrorized the moon princess' mind like a terrible storm, *Are these the very same questions you had to confront, sister? Is this the same torment that I so ignorantly put you through so many years ago?*

*Forgive me, Celestia...*

~

Adjusting his position on the uncomfortable bedroll, General Redhoof's eyes popped open for the fifth time that night. He, like everyone else in the camp, was worried about tomorrow and the thin mattress beneath him provided little more than a convenient place to toss and turn throughout the night. It didn't matter that he was the most important general in the Equestrian royal army; his position had little impact on his confidence when he had less than an hour of real battle experience. Everything had always been a drill, a measly simulation of what he sincerely hoped he would never have to experience during his lifetime. So now that it was all so very real, so very lifelike, he was scared. The pony that was second in command only to the immortal princess herself was afraid.

"General Redhoof?" a familiar voice called to him.

Under the bright light of the moon, a dark silhouette bled through the thin canvas of his tent. It was none other than Princess Celestia and she was standing, waiting just outside the general's tent. So late into the night, he knew that whatever she wanted to discuss with him was important. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he hurriedly threw off his covers and rolled onto the cold ground.

After pushing aside the cloth curtain and leaving his tent, he turned to face the princess, "Your highness, I was not expecting you for a few hours."

“How quickly can we be ready?” she asked, the anxiety just barely noticeable in her voice.

The general took a minute to contemplate the question before responding, “I think I could have everyone, including your strike team, ready in an hour.”

There was a brief moment of silence as the princess gazed off towards the black tower, its lights only just visible in the distance.

“Are you considering launching the assault immediately, your highness?” he asked.

She turned back to face him, her expression unchanged, “Raise the troops. We can use the veil of the night to our advantage. Try to keep the noise and the light to a minimum.”

The general nodded, “Absolutely, your highness. I’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

# Chapter 12

“The orb will take several hours to charge completely, but we shouldn’t let that stop us from starting the riot right away.” Thunderhorn announced.

The old, grey pony had just finished explaining the bulk of their plan to the large crowd of ponies around him and they were now standing attentively beside a large table. Levitating a small piece of charcoal in the air beside him, Thunderhorn was crudely marking locations on the map and attempting to illustrate the finer details of their strategy.

“Their numbers have been significantly reduced by the war and the few that remain are ill-equipped and ill-trained, so we should face little in the way of resistance.” he continued. “Vortex and I have even discovered that some of the guards are in fact, young colts.”

This new understanding sparked a series of nervous expressions and loud murmurs around the table.

“Calm yourselves, everyone.” the old unicorn intervened. “Just be careful. That’s all I’m trying to say. If you can, don’t hurt any of the guards. Just tie them up and get them out of our way. We don’t want to hurt anyone if we don’t have to.

“Now, we need to decide who is going where. First and foremost, I need nine capable unicorns that can help prepare the crystalline orb.”

Rarity poked her head through the dense crowd and turned to Thunderhorn with a hopeful expression.

“If it’s at all possible, Lord Thunderhorn, I would like to help you charge the artefact.” she said. “I would much rather avoid having to harm anyone.”

“Of course, Miss Rarity.” the grey unicorn nodded. “I assume you know both the teleportation spell and the magic transfer spell?”

“Well actually...”

“Really?” he interrupted, staring doubtfully at the very tired looking unicorn. “Nearly every unicorn in the nobility knows-”

He stopped abruptly when he realized that Rarity wasn’t a member of the nobility. And while every single noble unicorn went to a dedicated magic school and were taught many complicated spells in their youth, the unicorn in front of him probably never even had the opportunity to learn. Because the mare was so well-mannered and graceful, the general tended to forget about this small and unfortunately important detail.

Ashamed, Rarity frowned, “I’m sorry, Lord Thunderhorn.”

“That’s quite alright, Miss Rarity.” the old stallion replied curtly. “Perhaps when we’re done with all of this, I will find the time to teach you.”

The white unicorn smiled back at him.

“Back to the point.” Thunderhorn announced. “I need nine capable unicorns that know both the teleportation spell and the magic transfer spell to help me fill the orb. If it means anything at all, the job won’t put you in any real danger.”

Soon enough, several unicorns made their way to the table and approached the general, each affirming that they were willing and competent enough to help him with the orb. The general, however, suspected that their reasons were more to avoid the fighting than because they were actually accomplished magic users. It was a fact he would just have to live with. He didn’t have time to be picky.

“Good. Now the rest of you will split into two separate contingents.” Thunderhorn explained, directing their attention towards the map. “The first will set the supply depots on the west wing of the government quarter ablaze.”

He quickly circled the area in question with the piece of charcoal, leaving a dark ring on the map.

“This will draw out a large portion of the royal army still garrisoned in the city barracks.”

He promptly circled the location of the barracks.

“When they arrive, you should be able to use snares and other traps to catch them by surprise and keep them from getting harmed.

“The second contingent will assault the barracks shortly after the diversion has begun. When their central base of operations is in jeopardy, they should realize that they’re fighting a losing battle and call for help from Princess Celestia.”

“What about Princess Luna?” Vortex asked bluntly, the dark blue pegasus standing across the table from the general. “Are we sure she’s not going to try and stop us?”

“At this point, we can only hope that she won’t interfere.” replied Goldenroot, who was standing beside the general. “I don’t know what we can possibly do if she tries to stop us.”

Thunderhorn grit his teeth, “If we have to, and only if we absolutely have to, we might be able to use the orb on her as well. We’ve come too far and there’s too much at stake to just give up now.”

The pale green stallion remained silent, giving the unicorn a worried glance before directing his attention back to the map.

“Vortex, I want you leading the group that will attack the supply depots. Goldenroot, you’ll lead the group that will hit the barracks.”

“Hold on, general!” Vortex interrupted. “This is a life or death situation. I want to go with Goldenroot. I need to... protect him from danger...”

Vortex smiled and turned her amber eyes to stare at Goldenroot, the stallion blushing slightly and smiling back.

“Fine.” Thunderhorn complied. “But we need someone that can lead the group that will create the diversion.”

“I think I’m more than capable of keeping a few restless ponies in line.” the barkeep offered, pushing his way to the front of the group. “Let me do it.”

“Good enough.” the general said, ignoring the barkeep’s confidence. “Meet the others at the royal barracks when you can.”

“Alright then. You lot!” the barkeep announced, motioning to the ponies on one side of the room. “You’re coming with me.”

The barkeep stepped to the door with nearly forty ponies in tow. Stopping once he reached the doorway, he turned around and glared at the old unicorn that was currently immersed in the map on the table.

“I expect you to take care of my tavern, Thunderhorn.” he said firmly. “We may be starting a riot, but I don’t want to see this thing falling to pieces when I come back.”

Not bothering to wait for a reply, he swung open the door and rushed into the early morning air. It was just about one in the morning now, with the moon sitting high in the starry heavens above and the sun still hidden far below the horizon.

“Miss Rarity!” Thunderhorn called loudly, trying to make his words clear over the rumbling of hooves as the last of the ponies headed out the door.

The white unicorn’s head promptly turned in his direction.

“Can you go with them?” he asked. “I won’t ask you to participate in any of the fighting, I know that’s asking too much from you, but we need to try to keep an eye on them. I’m not certain how they’ll react once the fires start.”

“I’ll do my best.” Rarity replied, nodding quickly.

She started towards the door, but stopped and turned around, fixating her gaze on the three former council members still standing around the table.

“Before I leave...” she said, trailing off as she waited for their full attention.

The three ponies shifted their eyes from the map lying on the table to the elegant white unicorn.

“If anything should go wrong...” she continued with clear hesitation. “Please just come back here in one piece. I don’t want anything to happen to any of us. We’ve made it this far, we may still be able to stop Princess Celestia even if this plan fails.”

“I’m not going to let anyone screw this up now, Rarity.” Vortex smirked. “I would’ve thought you’d have more confidence in me by now.”

Rarity smiled apprehensively before turning around and hurrying out the door, trying to catch up with the group that was following the bartender.

“You’re still too brash for your own good, Vortex.” Thunderhorn scoffed as the door closed behind the unicorn.

“Sometimes that’s all it takes to get the job done, Thunderhorn.”

“Just take me seriously for once, you arrogant fool!” Thunderhorn scorned, furrowing his brow. “I’m not joking around. Just be careful out there and we won’t have to attend your funeral.”

The dark blue pegasus’ normally abrasive nature melted away and she lowered her gaze to floor, simply nodding in acknowledgement.

“Just make sure the orb works, Thunderhorn.” Goldenroot said. “When the rest of us are done with the dirty work, we’re going to need that thing.”

As if sparking some memory, the old unicorn pulled the book out of his bag and slammed it down on the table, opening it to the page with the detailed instructions about the crystalline orb.

“I’ll figure it out.” he said, staring into the book. “Now get out there and stop wasting time.”



Goldenroot turned to the pegasus beside him, her eyes hidden under her light blue hair as she just gazed down at the floor. Leaning in close, he whispered something into her ear. She smiled brightly and turned to face him as he pulled away, her amber eyes sparkling as they met his. Softly biting down on her own lip, she desperately tried to stop herself from laughing, the amusing reaction leaving a grin on the stallion's face as he cranked his head around to face the crowd of ponies behind him.

"Okay everyone, let's move out!" he shouted, trying to hide his smile.

Her joyful nature restored, the blue mare flew out the door with the pale green stallion following close behind. The rest of the group followed after and soon enough, the only ones left in the room were Thunderhorn and nine other unicorns that moved slowly up to the table to look at the general in anticipation.

"So what do you want us to do exactly?" a purple pony asked, trying to attract the old stallion's attention.

Thunderhorn pulled the small crystal sphere out of his bag and set it on the table in front of him. The artefact continued to glow with a weak orange light as it rolled across the surface and eventually came to a slow stop in the center of the table.

"It's quite simple, really." he explained. "The orb stores magical energy, so all we need to do is fill it with the magic of the spell that we intend to use on the princess. The magical prison below the castle is designed so that anyone can enter by any means they wish, but they can only exit if someone on the outside frees them using the release spell, so we only have to use the teleportation spell to imprison her inside the cell.

"Now, I'm sure you're all wondering how exactly we're supposed to store our magic inside the orb."

Thunderhorn concentrated for a moment, his horn slowly becoming enveloped in a dim yellow light.

"First, prepare the teleportation spell like you normally would, but don't envision a destination so that the magic lingers around your horn."

Concentrating once again, a darker yellow light formed around his horn. It snaked and weaved its way around his horn until it reached the very tip and shone with a bright luminescence.

“Second, begin to prepare the magic transfer spell while keeping your teleportation spell steady. When both are prepared...”

The darker yellow light started to form into a little ball on the end of his horn with magic lingering around his horn slowly absorbing into it. After the light around his horn had been completely captured within the ball, it lifted into the air and rapidly shot into the crystal orb. The orange light around the orb dissipated into the air and the dim blue light from the teleportation spell took its place.

“...just launch it into the orb.” Thunderhorn continued. “It now holds one concentration of the spell. We can always use the dimension spell to measure the amount of concentrations inside the orb at any time, so we never have to guess.

“Now, if he were to properly prepare himself, a normal unicorn could block the force of about five concentrations. A powerful unicorn could block the force of about ten. The most powerful unicorn to have been recorded in history could probably block about twenty.”

“Then what do you need us for?” a yellow unicorn snapped at him.

“Because in this book, the princess recorded that she was able to withstand one hundred concentrations with ease.” Thunderhorn admitted.

The unicorns around the table gasped and glanced at one another with fearful expressions. How could they possibly stand a chance at defeating such a powerful creature?

“At five hundred concentrations, she seems to have suffered some difficulty, but she could still withstand the blow.” he continued. “She writes, ‘Only when the crystalline orb held over one thousand concentrations of magical potential, could we no longer withstand its full force.’

“With some occasional rest and food, I believe that I am capable of filling the orb with three hundred concentrations before I completely exhaust myself. I don’t expect any of you to do the same, nor do I expect you to completely exhaust yourself, but if we can all put in one hundred concentrations, then that should be enough. After all, we should be able to catch the princess by surprise and she won’t be able to properly block the impact.”

“What if we accidentally fill the orb with a different spell?” a light blue unicorn asked politely.

“Thankfully, we don’t have to worry about that.” he sighed, realizing how disastrous it would be to have all their work ruined by one wrong move. “Now that the orb is filled with one kind of spell, it can only accept that one spell. Unless the proper erasing spell is used, all other magic that we try to transfer into the orb will be rejected immediately. So although you may have wasted some energy, it won’t corrupt any of the magic previously stored inside the orb.

Thunderhorn paused for a moment and glared slowly around the room.

“Now, you can eat, drink and rest as much as you need to, but stay away from the alcohol.” he lectured. “It inhibits your magical ability and we can’t afford to do that now, especially when most of you have already had more than your fair share of booze.”

Some of the unicorns rolled their eyes, while others simply nodded. After this acknowledgement, they started to focus their magic, bright coloured lights forming around their own horns as they prepared to fill the orb.

~

“What do you think?” Goldenroot asked, turning to look at the pegasus lying on the ground beside him. “Has something gone wrong? Should we just attack the barracks by ourselves and forget about the diversion?”

Goldenroot was sitting against the wall of a dark alleyway with a clear view of both the entrance to the barracks and the general direction in which he had expected the fires to start. So late into the fall season, it was starting to get cold and the dark blue pegasus had snuggled up close beside him, simply dozing away. And while he didn't think it was especially cold out, he was happy to have her so close by.

"They'll figure it out." she replied softly, keeping her eyes closed and repositioning herself closer against the stallion.

Goldenroot just smiled at her and turned back to watch the view from the alleyway.

Contrary to the muted reactions of these two ponies, the group they had dragged from their joyful revelry and into the middle of an all-out war were not quite so composed. They had been sitting outside the entrance to the royal barracks for more than an hour now, hiding in the shadows and simply waiting for the signal to begin their assault. They had pestered the pale green stallion infrequently at first, asking him how long it was going to take and what he expected to happen, but their questioning had grown from a simple anxiety to an irritating impatience. They had demanded to know what was going on and were even threatening to leave, but Goldenroot was carefully holding them back, promising them it would only be a moment longer when, in fact, he wasn't at all sure when or even if something was going to happen.

"Listen, Goldenroot." a crimson mare with a bright orange and pale red mane said, the irritation in her voice reaching its maximum. "Everyone has agreed that either we go in there now and forget about the others or we're leaving. And don't try to stop us by claiming that they're only going to be a moment longer because we know that's not the truth. We've been out here-"

"Fire!" a voice bellowed from near the barracks. "There's fire in the stock holds!"

"I was actually beginning to wonder if we'd be able to stall you long enough." Vortex said, leisurely rising to her hooves and gazing off in the direction of the fire.

The flames, which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, were immense. Thick smoke billowed into the air above the roaring, bright red inferno that was spreading quickly across the horizon as guards poured out of the barracks and rushed in the direction of the fire.

“Looks like I don’t have to worry about that anymore.” she continued as she stretched her muscles.

“Alright everyone.” Goldenroot said, trying to keep his voice down as he rose to his hooves and walked around the group. “This is what we were waiting for, but we need to wait a little longer. Wait until all of the guards that were sent to fight the fire are out of view and then we’ll rush in there and take care of the stragglers.

“Remember, we don’t want to hurt anyone if we can avoid it. Try to get them to surrender and we’ll tie them up and get them out of the way.”

The ponies that still lingered around the alleyway rose to their hooves, gathering the bags they had left lying around the path and slowly moving closer to the barracks. One-by-one, they counted the soldiers that passed by, first in a steady stream and then in a dwindling trickle. Altogether, they counted only twenty-five soldiers rushing out to extinguish the massive flames spreading over the stockpiles. Subduing those few soldiers would be an easy task for the ponies in the other group that had most likely set up enough traps to catch the first ten or fifteen soldiers without any effort at all, but it was disconcerting to the ponies waiting in the alleyway. Did this mean they would have to deal with more soldiers than they were capable of handling?

“Wait for my mark.” Vortex said enthusiastically, pushing off the ground and bolting into the air above the alleyway.

The pegasus paused, her place in the sky giving her a perfect view of the compound below. The royal barracks was actually a collection of buildings, but most were small, nondescript storehouses or training grounds for the soldiers. The main structure, however, was easily the largest and most important of the bunch and one of the few buildings in the government quarter that had a significant amount of character to it. Pushed tightly against the towering stone wall that encompassed the entire

compound, it faintly resembled the royal palace, with several attractive towers, windows, and balconies decorating the exterior. And at the base of the building, was a cluster of bushes and flowers placed in an appealing fashion around the large, wooden doors at the entrance. Having never suffered a full scale war on the capital, the original architects had obviously never realized the foolishness of placing structural weaknesses and arbitrary decorations on what was supposed to be seen and used as a fortress. On the contrary, the enormous wall and intimidating brass gate were constructed with a much more modern design and seemed to suggest that the building was never intended to be used as a barracks. But if that was true, and the building was essentially just a substitute, then why was such a critical part of the city ignored during its construction?

“Try and keep up, Goldenroot!” she yelled, turning her attention back to the ponies beneath her.

Beating her wings against the air, she propelled herself forward. Focusing her gaze on a single guard that stood distracted on a precarious balcony, she pushed harder against the air and sent herself soaring faster towards him. His gaze absorbed in the fiery inferno on the horizon, he didn’t even seem to notice the pegasus as she sped towards him with her hooves extended in front of her as she prepared for the point of impact.

Colliding into the soldier, she wrapped her forelegs around him tightly and sent the both of them tumbling over the railing. While the soldier screamed his lungs out and the two neared ever closer to the ground below, the pegasus smiled and swerved upwards at the last second, grazing the short bushes and changing her direction towards Goldenroot and the mob of ponies that were swarming out of the alleyway. Sailing over the stone wall and giving the wailing pony a light toss, she dropped him into the mob as they rushed to the huge, brass gate.

The guard’s expression went from absolute terror to one of bewilderment as he landed securely in the exact center of the group. His eyes darted around the crowd, which was almost as surprised as he was, before he cowered to the floor, holding his hooves over his head protectively.

“Please don’t hurt me!” he cried out. “I’m not even a real soldier!”

“I can’t tie knots!” Vortex declared, circling around the group once and speeding back towards the building.

One of the unicorns in the crowd quickly wound a length of rope around each of the guard’s legs while the others ran hastily past him and towards the open gate of the compound. The two armoured ponies, one a red pegasus and the other a yellow unicorn, standing at the entrance panicked and hurried inside, pushing against either side of the metal gate as they tried to close it before they were swept away by the assailants. But as soon as they had begun to close the gate, Vortex flew over the wall and dove straight towards one of the guards, landing forcefully on top of the yellow unicorn and sending the stallion crashing to the ground, with parts of his armour flying in every direction.

The red pegasus that had been pushing the other side of the gate closed stopped as soon as she heard the terrible racket and glanced from the dark blue pegasus standing triumphantly over her unconscious comrade to the fast approaching mob of angry ponies. Turning away from the assailants, she took off from the ground and started towards the open balcony.

A smile formed on Vortex’s face as she pushed off the body of the stallion below her and pursued the fleeing soldier. Catching the pegasus high in the air above, Vortex grappled onto her, trying to mimic her actions from earlier and swoop back down to toss the alarmed soldier into the mob so they could subdue her. Unfortunately, this mare was one of the few remaining trained soldiers in the city and she was far more alert and agile than the pony she had tackled before. The soldier shifted her weight and sent them both careening into the open balcony, the two pegasi immediately breaking free from each other as they landed on the solid, marble floor and slid to the opposite ends of the small, sparsely decorated room. Colliding with the wall, both pegasi leapt to their feet, crouching into an aggressive posture and glaring at each other with a passionate determination.

But as Vortex watched the pony on the other side of the room, trying to predict her movements, she began to realize that she recognized this strange, red pegasus. It was someone she had known very well, but hadn’t seen for a long time.

“How come you didn’t leave to fight in the war?” Vortex asked, smiling at the mare across from her. “All the good soldiers did.”

“Someone had to stick around to keep you punks in line.” the red pegasus retorted. “I can’t believe you’re actually behind all of this!”

The red pegasus darted towards Vortex, trying to catch her off guard, but she just jumped out of the way, leaping over her head, pushing off the wall and flying to the other side of the room.

“You just don’t understand the whole story.” the blue pegasus countered. “And even if I told you, I’m not sure you would be willing to believe me.”

“Try me.” the pony across the room retaliated.

The red pegasus, leapt forward and kicked forcefully at a chair in front of her, sending it flying in Vortex’s direction. The blue mare just barely managed to avoid the chair, landing on the balcony as it shattered against the wall.

“Prance and the council weren’t trying to overthrow Celestia.” Vortex hastily blurted. “One of our members, and only one, was working with Prance to worsen the drought, but they were only trying to get the commoners involved in the council again and establish trade routes with Prance.

“It’s really not as sinister as the princess makes it out to be and it’s definitely not something that’s worth going to war over.”

“What happened to you, Vortex?” the soldier asked sincerely, jumping back against the wall. “I voted for you because I believed in what you stood for. You said that you were going to help the youth of Equestria, the ponies that always got the short end of the stick. And when you actually got elected, I was so happy for you. I was so happy for our country. I thought things were finally going to change, but... but then all this happened and now... now you’re a liar and a fool just like everyone else in the council.”

“I know what Celestia told you and I understand why you believe her, but it’s not the truth.” the blue mare retorted. “I swear, I’m being honest with



you, Shock Wave. There's something going on behind the royal curtain that you don't know about."

"Then why won't you tell me!?" Shock Wave shouted.

Vortex charged at the mare, desperate to get Shock Wave to listen to her. The red pegasus simply ducked to the right as she flew by, but Vortex planted her hooves on the far wall and pushed off, coming straight back towards her from the opposite direction. This time, however, she caught the red pegasus by surprise and the two of them slammed into the ground.

"I'm trying to tell you! Just listen to me!" Vortex shouted, pinning the red mare to the floor. "Celestia isn't the same princess. She's different now. Something has happened to her and now she's completely lost her mind. We're only trying to help."

"We used to be friends, Vortex." Shock Wave said, once again ignoring everything Vortex had said to her. "You taught me how to fly and I taught you how to fight. Then you let this council crap get to your head and you forgot all about me. You acted like I never even existed! You were the only friend I ever had, Vortex, how could you just leave me alone like that!?"

Shock Wave used her hind legs to throw Vortex off her and back onto the balcony. The two pegasi jumped to their hooves simultaneously, crouching back down and glaring at each other.

"I... I never forgot about you, Shock Wave." Vortex replied, lowering the volume of her voice. "There was just so much that I had to deal with... You weren't the only one that thought I was going to make a difference. But when I discovered that no one would even listen to me, I... just kind of gave up. I couldn't bear to face you, let you know how much of a failure I'd been. I'm sorry, Shock Wave."

"Of all the ponies I know, hell, of all the ponies in the world, you're the last one I'd ever believe would just give up." the red pegasus scoffed.

"But things are different now." Vortex insisted. "I **am** making a difference. Things **are** going to finally change around here. And when this is all done with, I'm going to make sure that no one gets the short end of

the stick ever again. But until that happens, you just have to trust me. Please, Shock Wave."

Vortex lowered her guard and focused intently on the red pegasus still crouching in front of her. She didn't want to fight her friend. She didn't want to hurt her, but Shock Wave didn't seem to want to listen to her and she was running out of options.

"You were always one to put on a great act, Vortex." Shock Wave said calmly. "You could make anyone believe whatever you wanted them to. But I know you too well. I know you're lying to me and I won't just let you overthrow the government so that you can continue to fill this country with your hideous lies!"

The red pegasus soared towards the balcony, appearing as if she were going to tackle Vortex. The blue mare ducked to avoid the charge, but Shock Wave found her friend's movements too easily predictable. She flared her wings out to stop her forward momentum and kicked at the blue mare with a hind leg, hitting one of Vortex's forelegs and sending her tumbling off the balcony.

Like all of the soldiers in the royal guard, Shock Wave's hooves were adorned with thick, steel cleats and the blow to Vortex's leg was devastating. But the determined mare fought through the pain, gritting her teeth and flapping her wings fervently to slow her descent.

Catching a passing glance of her injured leg as she levitated in the air just below the balcony, Vortex could see that it was hanging from her body like the limb of a rag doll. She merely pushed the grotesque image out her mind and turned her gaze back towards the balcony, trying to find the red pegasus that had just seemed to disappear out of sight.

As Vortex scanned the area by the balcony, Shock Wave approached her from the complete opposite direction. She had taught Vortex how to fight and she wasn't about to be bested by her student. She moved quickly and without mercy, her eyes filled with an intense hatred. Vortex had betrayed her, lied to her and left her all alone. Now she had suddenly reappeared in the middle of an intense riot, trying to destroy everything she was sworn to protect, and she expected uncompromising trust and forgiveness and from her? That wasn't something the red pegasus was

willing to give, not now. And as her hooves connected with the back of the blue mare's head with a deafening crack, Shock Wave sacrificed the only friend she ever had.

**"Vortex!"** Goldenroot shouted in horror, breaking free from the mob below.

But he could only watch as the beautiful blue pegasus fell through the air and into the bushes below, the brittle branches snapping violently under her weight and leaving her broken body lying amongst the crushed yellow daisies in the flowerbed.

Shock Wave just observed the scene from the air above, turning her gaze from the disfigured pegasus in the bushes below to the fast approaching mob of angry nobles, *there's too many, even for me. The barracks is lost.*

With those final few thoughts replacing all remorse she had for her fallen friend, the red pegasus took off towards the royal palace. She may not be able to stop them, but she knew someone who could.

**"Vortex!"** Goldenroot called again, his eyes clouding as he ignored the ponies around him and ran to the pegasus.

The magnificent torrent of water on her flank, the fantastic vortex that the pale green stallion had watched so intently, so long ago, was barely visible through the ruined foliage, a thin stream of red liquid beginning at her flank and navigating its way down through the soil before finally dripping onto the stone floor at the stallion's hooves.

~

Setting up the traps to ensnare the guards that would be lured into their ambush was the easy part. It had only taken an exceptionally large amount of rope, and an hour later they had enough snares and nets set up to capture at least twenty soldiers. And although they expected more than that, the remainder could be dealt with using more conventional means. No, the hard part of their assignment was actually getting the fires started.

Igniting a fire seemed like a reasonably simple task, but starting a fire that was large enough to attract the attention of the majority of the soldiers in the royal barracks had taken quite a bit more of their effort. But after eventually discovering that one of the storehouses was filled to the brim with highly flammable oil, they lost all doubt that any fire they created wouldn't be big enough for their purposes.

When they were finally ready, they spread the oil over a dozen of the buildings and mere seconds after the oil was ignited, the storehouses erupted into a massive inferno. Shortly after the fires had started, a heavy, black smoke filled the air around the ponies. And though the smoke masked the ponies hiding in the shadows and waiting to ambush the unsuspecting guards, it made the usually simple task of breathing an exhausting effort.

"I said keep your head down!" the pale orange unicorn barked, pushing on the top of Rarity's head and forcing her to ground.

She knew that he was only trying to help, but the barkeep was far from gentle and he drove the white unicorn's head into the stones below, causing her to bite down hard on her lip. Her teeth cut deep into the soft tissue and a trickle of blood started to fill her mouth.

"Breathing in too much of this stuff is going to kill you." the barkeep insisted, not bothering to cast even a passing glance at the unicorn he had just injured.

Lying on her stomach, Rarity moaned, closing her eyes and moving her hooves to her injured lip, the crimson blood staining her brilliant white coat. Upon opening her eyes again, she noticed the dark red stains on her hooves and gasped in shock, only causing her to choke on the blood still pooling inside her mouth.

"I think they're coming." the barkeep said quietly, continuing to ignore the white unicorn even as she coughed violently on the floor beside him. "Get ready to spring the traps."

Sure enough, several ponies came into view on the edge of the horizon, their golden armour shining like beacons as they ran through the dark smoke. A few of the ponies had fire hoses slung around their backs,

but all of them were completely ignorant of what was about to happen to them as they just rushed blindly into the center of the ambush.

“Now!” the barkeep yelled at the top of his lungs. “Do it now!”

Rarity had stopped coughing only long enough to look up and catch a glimpse of the resulting mayhem. The ponies hiding amongst the burning buildings pulled on the long lengths of rope leading out of their hiding places and several nets jumped off the ground, trapping several of the confused guards and pulling them into the air above. Confused, the few guards that weren’t already trapped ran around wildly and stumbled into the snares, the rope tightening around their legs, lifting them up and dangling them helplessly beside their companions.

With most of the guards now trapped, the mob of nobles rushed out of their hiding places and charged out to meet the few remaining soldiers. The frightened guards, obviously unprepared to deal with the large gang of angry nobles, threw down whatever they were carrying and lowered themselves to the ground, pleading for mercy.

“Tie them up!” the barkeep roared, his powerful voice clear over the commotion. “Quickly now!”

The nobles did as instructed and hogtied the panicked soldiers. Once their legs were fastened together, the ponies rushed around the scene and started lowering the nets and snares, tying up the guards as soon as they touched the ground. Some of them offered resistance, especially the unicorns who managed to use their magic to throw some of the nobles to the ground or free some of the previously tied up soldiers, but after the barkeep knocked them unconscious with a strange mist, the rest seemed willing to comply with their captors and lay motionless on the ground.

“Well that was a lot easier than I thought it would be.” the barkeep admitted, wiping his brow while still trying to keep his head low, under the dark cloud of smoke.

Realizing that it was probably safe for her to approach, Rarity pushed herself off the ground and stumbled towards the group, still holding one hoof to her wounded mouth.

"I'm glad that no one was hurt." Rarity smiled faintly before starting to cough again.

"Speak for yourself!" the pale orange stallion blurted, finally noticing how severely he had injured the mare. "My apologies, Rarity. I guess I got too caught up in the moment. Are you alright?"

"No, not really." she admitted with a faintly humorous tone, trying to hide her incredible pain.

"Well, I may be a barkeep, but that's also part of the reason I managed to learn so much about healing split lips." he smirked, his horn lighting up with a dull orange light. "I only wish I had known this before I got this nasty scar on my own lip."

The light from his horn spread to the mare's injury, the magic weaving itself around the wound and slowly repairing the damaged tissue. Rarity lowered her hoof as the pain subsided and the bleeding suddenly stopped, honestly surprised that he had done such a good job.

"Oh my!" she said in shock, moving her tongue around her perfectly healed lip. "Thank you..."

She drifted off when she realized that she didn't even know the stallion's name.

"Firewater." he smiled, noticing her hesitation. "You really do live up to your title, miss. I can't honestly say that many ponies I've met would thank me for healing a wound that I was responsible for opening... Sorry I can't do anything about the stains on your coat."

"Well!?" a dark red pegasus yelled, startling the two as she walked over to the two unicorns and interrupted their conversation. "They're all tied up. What are we supposed to do now?"

"Oh, well now we need to put the fires out." Rarity answered with a smile. "And after the fires are out, we'll take these guards and meet the others at the barracks and then... well I suppose then you could all go home."

“Go home!?” another of the nobles, a yellow unicorn, scoffed. “So that’s it!? We served your purpose and we’re just done now?”

The yellow unicorn’s belligerence had attracted the interest of the entire group and now they were all standing around, listening to them bicker.

“Well no, not yet. We haven’t put the fires out.” Rarity replied, stating the obvious. “And I really do suggest we do that sometime soon before they spread.”

“That’s a terrible idea.” a blue pony muttered. “We’re trying to get the princesses’ attention, are we not? We should let the fires burn. The worse we make the situation, the faster she’ll come back.”

Several of the ponies in the group nodded their head and expressed their agreement with the blue pony.

“That’s absolutely correct!” the yellow unicorn added vehemently. “In fact, we should be out there getting more of the city involved in the riot.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Firewater scorned. “We’re not starting a war. We’ve done our part and we need to put these fires out. Do you really want to just let them burn? What if they burn your house down? What will you do then? Blame me?”

“The fires are not going to burn **our** houses down.” the dark red pegasus said, “The winds are blowing towards the common quarter. And who honestly cares if a few of the commoners’ houses burn down. The government always pays for it all anyway.”

“Please, everyone calm down...” Rarity tried to intervene.

“It’s the middle of the damned night! There are ponies sleeping in those houses!” the barkeep yelled, ignoring the white unicorn. “They’ll get caught in the fires and die if we don’t stop the flames!”

“Not if we move the riot to the common quarter.” the blue pony said. “No pony can sleep through a riot. We’ll just get a few more of the nobles from around the city involved and...”

“There are young fillies and colts in those houses!” the barkeep argued, his voice growing louder. “Don’t you realize everyone else left to fight in the war? The only ones still in the common quarter are the old, the young and the helpless. They can’t even fight back!”

“Perfect!” the yellow unicorn said. “Then no one will get hurt. They’ll all just abandon their homes and run away.”

Panicking, Rarity began to realize that she had become isolated from the dispute and that nobles were about to do exactly the opposite of what she wanted. They were going to let the fires continue burning and spread the riot further into the city. She was supposed to prevent this kind of thing from happening, but she felt so useless. They just kept bickering and arguing and the quarrel was becoming more one sided by the second.

“Are you insane!?” Firewater shouted, reaching out with his magic and grabbing hold of the yellow pony, attempting to use aggression to make his point.

But he was too forceful and his magic knocked the yellow pony to the ground, making the group explode into a flurry of activity. The dark red pegasus landed her hoof squarely into the side of the Firewater’s head and sent him flying to the ground, while the blue pony helped the yellow unicorn back to her feet, the rest of the group simply arguing amongst one another.

“Please, everyone stop!” Rarity cried out, trying to calm everyone down. “You can’t just burn down those ponies’ homes. It’s not right! It’s not fair!”

Rarity rushed into the middle of the crowd and tried to push the dark red pegasus out of the way as he approached the injured bartender. But as soon as she touched her, the pegasus shoved her out of the way and she fell to the ground.

“This is the only way.” the dark red pegasus said, glaring between the bartender clutching his head and the white unicorn hopelessly staring back at her. “We can’t afford to stop now, not while the princess is still waging a war in Prance and ponies are still dying. We need to get her attention and stop the fighting now. A life is always worth more than a few simple houses.



“Everyone who wants this plan to actually work, come with me! We’re going to the common quarter, but not before we round up a few more ponies to help us.”

“No! You can’t do this! Rarity shouted at the dark red pegasus as she tried to get back up.

The pegasus planted her foot softly on top of the unicorn’s stomach to stop her from getting up, “Don’t try to stop us. I don’t want to have to hurt you.”

With that final comment, most of the ponies left, leaving the two unicorns on the ground and a sparse few other ponies behind to watch as they went off to start a full-scale war in Canterlot. And as they finally disappeared out of her sight, the white unicorn began to realize how incredibly ironic it was. They had wanted this to happen since the very beginning. It was all part of the plan. They had wanted things to get a little out of control, but now that it was finally happening, she didn’t want to be part of it anymore. She just wanted them all to stop and the whole thing to end before anyone got hurt.

“I’m sorry, Rarity. I couldn’t stop them.” Firewater said.

The barkeep rose to his hooves and then reached out to help the white unicorn up. After pulling the mare up, he turned to face the small gathering of ponies that had chosen not to leave.

“To everyone else, thank you for staying.” he continued. “I’m glad that we still have a few level heads left in this world.”

The ponies just stared at him with concerned expressions, worried that they wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop the chaos that would soon consume the entire city.

“Rarity, I want you to go find Thunderhorn at my bar.” Firewater continued. “Tell him what happened and make sure he’s alright. Who knows what they might do now. They may even try to take the orb from him.

“The rest of us will take the soldiers and meet the group that attacked the barracks. We can’t just leave them behind or they’ll die from the smoke.”

“What about the fire?” Rarity asked, glancing towards the towering inferno and thick, black smoke that was quickly starting to spread to the small buildings beside the storehouses.

“We can’t stop it now. We don’t have enough ponies to extinguish a fire of that magnitude.”

“But...”

“Just go find Thunderhorn!” he said, raising his voice. “The rest of you, find some wagons. We need to get these soldiers to the barracks!”

Rarity flashed a nervous look at the barkeep before turning around and running off, leaving the ponies behind her as she ran to warn the old general before things took another turn for the worse.

~

Basking in the glow of the bright moonlight and carefully hiding amongst the small rocky outcropping that sat just a short distance away from the city’s walls, they waited for the precise moment to strike, the moment when they would all be too distracted to react and save their palace, and their king, from an ambush. Celestia stood in the exact center of the group with the twelve pegasi hugging close against the scattered boulders on either side of her. Being on nearly the opposite side of the city, they were some distance from the main gate and the worst of the fighting, but they had no difficulty hearing the conflict. What they heard most clearly was not the clashing of armour or the barbaric grunting as the two sides cascaded into each other, but the absolute terror that was overflowing over the stone walls of the city. Celestia knew that their assault on the front gate had to be convincing or Prance would immediately recognize it as a diversion, so the sounds of cannonballs soaring over the city and demolishing the buildings in their path, the blood-curdling screams of ponies as they tried to escape the catastrophe, the high-pitched wailing of

infants as they cried out for their lost parents and the loud, commanding voices of the army officials as they tried to keep it all under control was very real and utterly horrifying.

The princess lifted the small canteen of water off her neck and slowly revolved the lid until it popped off, gently clinking as it landed on the rocks below her. Closing her eyes and lifting the canteen to her mouth, she let the cool water gently trickle past her trembling lips and down her throat. As the steady stream subsided and the last of the water dripped onto her tongue, she tossed the receptacle away and onto the grass, spreading out her wings and glancing at the soldiers on either side of her. The pegasi took quick note of her action and, eyes darting to one another, they followed suit, stretching their wings and dropping their bags to the ground. Beating her wings against the air, the princess took off from the ground and emerged out from behind the rocky outcropping with the twelve other pegasi emulating her actions as they lifted into the air. And with one strong push, the winged ponies soared as one towards the black spire in the absolute center of the city.

*Soon enough, it will all be over,* the alicorn thought as she turned her head to observe the chaos below.

If the sounds they heard from outside the castle walls were any indication of the horror beneath them, she would have been prepared for the sight beneath her, but nothing could truly prepare her for what she saw. In her impressively long life, she had never seen such carnage, such destruction, and such overwhelming fear in the hearts of the ponies that she could not honestly say were so very different from her own. The old and the young, the brave and the cowardly, every one of them seemed to cower amongst the wreckage. The only ones who had nothing to be afraid of were the ones who had already paid the ultimate price.

*Why did it have to come to this?* She asked herself, pulling her eyes away from the ground. *What did I do wrong?*

“Princess!” Swift Wing cried out. “Look, it’s the western battalion and they seem to be at full strength.”

She wanted to be happy, to feel relieved that the ponies in the western detachment were seemingly unharmed, but the horror on the

ground below starved her from those feelings. As long as she knew that so many, even the ones she was supposed to hate, were suffering such an unbearable fate, she could feel no joy from seeing these soldiers appear on the horizon to the west. But as the obsidian tower filled her view, she was given little time to contemplate her thoughts. She had instructed the team to start from the bottom and work their way up. It was not the most efficient method, but it was thorough and they couldn't afford to overlook the king if he happened to be hiding somewhere in the palace.

Her horn glowing with a bright yellow light, the windows near the base of the tower cracked and shattered, the fractures of glass shooting into the building and shredding the silver-armoured guards that were standing in the way.

Rearranging their formation behind the princess, the pegasi soared through the windows and dropped onto the floor with a thunderous boom. The four guards that had been inside the main room had been torn to pieces by the glass and their bodies littered the floor in a pool of blood. The two guards that had managed to survive the barrage of shrapnel dragged themselves along the floor. They whimpered in pain and pleaded for mercy in their native tongue before they had their helmets kicked off and their lives viciously ended by one of the pegasi.

"Colonel Swift Wing, I want you to take your five soldiers and sweep the lower floor!" Celestia ordered, indifferent to the grotesque condition of the room and the swift brutality of the ponies around her. "If you find Pierre, leave him alive if possible and wait until we return. After you're finished, stop any of their reinforcements from pursuing us up the tower."

"You heard the princess!" the dark green pegasus shouted. "You three take the west wing, we'll take the east wing. Meet back here when you're done."

The princess pushed off the floor and then up the staircase with the six pegasi following in behind her in groups of two. The few guards that came rushing down the staircase were caught by surprise and Celestia hurled them over the railing and down the center of the tower or out one of the windows, their screams resonating in her eardrums as they helplessly tried to cling to the air around them and save themselves from their imminent demise.

As they reached the top of each set of stairs, Celestia would order a group of the pegasi to split off and secure the floor before climbing the rest of the staircase and meeting her at the top of the tower. It was strange, when she ordered them around the tower she referred to them all by name. She had taken the time to learn their names, Silver Cloud, Raindrops, Wind Whistler, Soarin, Lightning, and Purple Haze, but she didn't really know anything about them as individuals. They had all been fairly significant ponies at one point or another, but she couldn't seem to remember why. Was she really so jaded that she had forgotten everything about them but their ultimately arbitrary names?

When the last two had, although reluctantly so, left her to continue up to the last floor on her own, she reached the great iron doors on the top floor and came face-to-face with two strangely familiar figures. These two, however, she remembered for their defining characteristics and not their names.

The first was a yellow pegasus that lowered herself, crouching down and preparing to hurl her full weight at the princess while the second, an old unicorn with a fading orange coat, stepped back, his horn shining with a dazzling crimson light. They were ready for a fight, but the princess just stopped in front of them with an almost paralyzing stare focused on the ponies in front of her.

"Who... who are you?" she demanded, turning her gaze to stare directly at the yellow pegasus.

Her short orange hair was almost entirely hidden beneath her silver helmet and her light blue eyes reflected the light like sapphires in the cold room. She was exactly how her student had described her to be, every little description had been flawlessly accurate, so then why was she alive?

"You mean you don't remember us?" she asked with an aggressive tone as she relaxed slightly.

Even her voice was exactly how the princess had imagined it to be.

“You’re supposed to be dead.” the alicorn said, her hooves trembling as she looked back and forth between the two ponies. “Why aren’t you dead!?”

“Dead!?” she asked in disbelief. “Why would you possibly think that?”

“I think she was trying to have us assassinated, Catherine.” Daniel said, maintaining his hostile attitude towards the princess. “That’s probably who that Twilight Sparkle character was. She must have been an assassin!”

The princess stepped back, her legs shaking violently beneath her, “What..?”

“No, no, Daniel.” Catherine intervened, relaxing completely as she watched the princess. “Something’s not right about this. I think she honestly doesn’t know what’s going on, do you princess?”

The princess just shook her head slowly.

“Do you remember who we are?” Catherine asked.

“You’re the mare that helped my student... Twilight.” Celestia replied.

“Princess Celestia.” the pegasus responded. “I’ve never met anyone named Twilight.”

“No, you’re lying to me!” the princess stuttered. “You’re trying to trick me!”

“I swear to you, princess!” Catherine replied quickly. “I’m not lying to you. I’ve never met your student. I was one of the ponies that accompanied King Pierre on his journey to your palace several months ago, the other was Daniel. Perhaps you’ve mistaken us with some other ponies?”

Celestia’s horn flared up with a powerful yellow light, far brighter than the one still encircling Daniel’s horn. Her eyes burned brightly with the same yellow light, glaring at the two ponies as she slowly drew closer to them.

“No, you’re lying!” Celestia shouted angrily. “You know that you’ve failed. You know that your plans to take over Equestria have been trampled on and now you’re trying to weasel your way out of your punishment!”

“Princess, please!” Catherine screamed back, the pegasus backing away, now completely overcome by the terrifying figure approaching her. “That’s not true! I’m not trying to trick you! I’m telling the truth!”

“I won’t let you hurt her!” Daniel cried out.

The old unicorn fired a bolt of magic at the princess, but she simply teleported out of its path, letting the powerful magic fly past her and demolish the wall behind, the stones crumbling and cracking as the building started to tumble to one side.

“You can suffer the same grim fate that you so maliciously intended for my poor, innocent student, you horrible old menace.” Celestia said, turning to glare at the unicorn that was just recovering from the spectacular magical blast he had unleashed.

The princess reached out and wrapped her magic around Daniel tightly, squeezing the pony and making it difficult for him to breathe. With one swift motion, she snapped the horn off his head and dropped it to the floor, the pony screaming in agony as he watched the horn slowly roll across the floor towards the staircase. As the horn tumbled off the ledge, the unicorn vanished and reappeared outside the tower, his faded orange figure barely visible from the large hole in the wall as he was released from the princess’ grasp.

The broken horn gently clinked against the stairs as it picked up speed.

“Daniel!” Catherine cried out, her eye’s turning to the hole in the wall as she watched the pony start to fall down to the ground.

Meanwhile, the wall had begun to completely collapse and the ceiling above shifted in its place, startling the yellow pegasi and causing her to stumble and fall to the floor, her helmet falling off and tumbling out of the opening in the wall. The princess, realizing that she had to do something before the ceiling came crashing down around them, started to rearrange

the bricks on the wall of the tower, moving them from around the room to repair the hole and stabilize the tower.

The horn's gentle clinking had grown softer and more distant as it disappeared down the stairwell.

Turning her attention away from the hastily repaired wall, the princess just stared at the yellow pegasus sobbing on the ground, her beautiful orange mane now perfectly visible with her helmet gone. Her horn's glow disappeared, and with it, the passionate fury in her eyes.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Catherine." Celestia said softly.

The pegasus didn't bother to look up or say anything back to the princess as the tears continued to pour down her face. As she sobbed on the ground, she was carefully wrapped in the princess' magic before vanishing from her place against the wall, the yellow glow that had taken over the alicorn's horn dissolving in the air and eventually fading away completely.

*I think that Swift Wing and the guards at the base of the tower will be able to deal with one grieving soldier,* she thought, closing her eyes and breathing the air into her lungs deeply.

Opening her eyes, she turned to the set of black iron doors ahead of her. The entrance was locked, so the princess wrapped her magic around it and pulled on the massive set of doors, the stone cracking and complaining as it was finally ripped out of its frame. Gently leaning the door against the wall, she looked into the room. Inside was a single pony, sitting and watching her from a desk at the far end of the room.

"Princess Celestia." Pierre said calmly. "I don't suppose you'd mind knocking next time? It might save us both some trouble."

"You're awfully composed for a pony that's on his last leg." Celestia remarked, walking through the opening. "Don't you fear your judgement?"

"I failed my country and I failed every single pony that lives within it." the ruby red pony with the white mane replied. "I cannot fear the punishment I rightly deserve."



~

“Lord Thunderhorn?” Rarity called out, throwing open the door to the tavern and looking around the room for the old stallion.

Stepping inside, her eyes moved around the seemingly empty room. In the center was the large wooden table that they had all gathered around before leaving to perform their specific roles, the familiar crystal orb now glowing with a bright blue intensity on top. Lying on the floor beside the table was the old general, completely motionless on the ground.

“Thunderhorn!” she screamed, running to his side and leaning in close beside him.

“Ugh...” he groaned, slowly opening his eyes to stare directly at the white unicorn. “Rarity?”

“Are you alright, Lord Thunderhorn?” she asked. “What happened to you?”

“Those sorry, good for nothing drunks just left!” he said, gradually getting up off the floor. “There’s some kind of commotion going on outside and they got all worried and left me alone. Do you know anything about that?”

The general turned his gaze down towards the white unicorn’s hooves, noticing the obscene amount of blood staining her coat.

“I’m sorry-” Rarity said reluctantly before getting cut off.

“Rarity, what happened to you!?” the general blurted out. “You’re covered in blood!”

“The riot got a little out of control.” she admitted, keeping her tone. “I couldn’t stop them. They wouldn’t help us put the fires out and now they’re heading to the common quarter, trying to start a larger riot.”

“Well it looks like you put up a good fight.” the general mocked, leaning in closer to look at the blood spattering her hooves and face.

Rarity sighed and lifted a hoof, turning it over in front of her and inspecting the damage to her perfect white coat, “It’s okay. I’m not hurt.”

“Don’t worry so much about the riot. It’s not your fault that they ran off. Adrenaline and booze do weird things to a pony’s sense of right and wrong.” the old unicorn said. “And I’m sorry that I put such a heavy burden on you, Rarity. I guess I had just really hoped that we would have been able to control them. You should not have to feel responsible for their failures.”

“I just don’t want anyone to get hurt...” Rarity said glumly.

“Look, as long as we’re making a fuss, we’re making progress. We can only hope that things will take care of themselves when the princess arrives.” the grey stallion said. “And although I had to put a little more effort into charging the orb after those drunks left, I still managed to completely fill it, before passing out. So let’s go meet the others at the barracks, but first we should clean that blood off you so you don’t scare anyone on the way over there.”

Rarity simply laughed at the idea, but when they got to the bathroom and she had a chance to get a good look at herself in the mirror, she almost cried. Thunderhorn, who had exhausted himself the most from charging the crystalline orb, looked bad. His old age seemed to finally be catching up with him and he could hardly stand on his own, but Rarity looked considerably worse. Her eyes were a horrible, piercing red colour with blue mascara bleeding down her face; her hair, a tangled rat’s nest, dangling along her blood and soot stained coat in a lifeless heap. Once the absolute epitome of beauty, she was now a truly grotesque and almost painful sight to behold.

As she tried to wash herself off and hold back her tears, she wondered how it was even possible for things to just completely fall apart like they had. It had been only a little longer than a day, but she looked more terrible than she could have ever imagined. Even when she had fought off Nightmare Moon and Discord, she hadn’t looked this bad. So

what was so different about their situation now? What was happening to her and the country she lived in?

# Chapter 13

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright, Lord Thunderhorn?” Rarity asked.

The general was leaning on the white unicorn, one of his forelegs wrapped over her back while the two stumbled out of a dark alley and towards the royal barracks. Its huge metal gate was closed and flanked by two ponies, one of them easily recognizable as Firewater, the barkeep from the nobility quarter.

“Don’t worry about me.” the old stallion replied. “I’m just a little exhausted from all that nonsense with the orb. I never thought I would end up doing so much of the work by myself. ”

The two unicorns had tried to avoid the main streets as they made their way through the city. The calamity of the rioting was spreading quickly and it was too dangerous to be out in the open. More of the nobles had joined the rebels that had split off from the original plan, fighting against the soldiers in what they believed was a war to restore their rights in the government. At the same time, the commoners had fought against them, fighting back against the greedy aristocrats in support of their princess’ recent actions or simply trying to defend their homes from the anarchy. Now the capital was a warzone and the flames that had started it all were still burning. Without anyone to quell the fires, they were constantly taking more of the city, filling the air with a dark smoke that masked the stars and the moon above.

The palace and the royal barracks were the only real safe places left in the city. They were well defended and pushed away from the majority of the fighting that was now taking place all over the noble and common quarters, so the few stray ponies that decided to approach had always turned back quickly.

“Damn those unicorns!” the Thunderhorn grunted. “I knew we couldn’t trust a bunch of sorry drunks.”

"I understand their concern." Rarity said, her voice filled with regret as she began to remember how she failed to stop the fires and infighting from spreading over the entire city. "I don't think they expected the riot to threaten their homes and families."

"You have no idea how glad I'm going to be when we're done with this, Miss Rarity." the general sighed deeply.

"Thunderhorn, Rarity, are you two alright?" Firewater interrupted, walking forward to meet them. "You didn't get caught up in the fighting did you?"

"No, we're both just a little tired." Rarity answered, stopping and smiling weakly. "Thankfully, the orb is prepared and we should be ready to use it when Princess Celestia arrives."

"You mean **if** Princess Celestia arrives." Thunderhorn intervened. "We still don't know if she's going to come back."

"She simply must come back now, Lord Thunderhorn." Rarity said with confidence. "If Princess Luna refuses to intervene then this entire city will burn to ashes."

Thunderhorn frowned, refusing to comment on their grim circumstances.

"Where's Goldenroot and Vortex." Thunderhorn asked the barkeep, changing the subject.

The Firewater's weak smile fell quickly, "I was hoping I wouldn't have to answer that question."

"What happened!? Are they both alright?" Rarity panicked, jerking forward and causing Thunderhorn to stumble as he leaned against her.

"Goldenroot is fine." the barkeep explained. "Vortex is in the infirmary. She's still alive, but..."

"Where is the infirmary!?"

“Go right through the main entrance of the largest building and it’s the first door on your right.” he responded promptly.

“I’m sorry, Lord Thunderhorn.” Rarity said hastily, pushing away from the old unicorn that was leaning on her.

The elderly stallion stumbled, but managed to keep himself on his feet as he watched Rarity sprint to the door, throw it open with her magic and disappear inside. He cursed loudly and chased after her, limping slightly as he walked with the barkeep just watching him from the gate.

As he approached the open door, he noticed the crumpled bushes on his left. An assortment of trampled twigs, leaves and bits of blue hair were scattered around the ground, all of which was soaked in a sickeningly large pool of blood that forced the unicorn to look the other way. He swore again, much more loudly this time, and bolted through the door, pulling himself through the opening and stumbling down the hallway and into the infirmary, a large room with a small administration desk near the entrance and several smaller rooms with doors lining the hallway beyond it.

“Is she... is she going to be alright?” Rarity’s voice stuttered from inside one of the rooms.

Following the sound of her voice, Thunderhorn walked a little further into the medical centre and turned into one of the open doorways, his eyes immediately focusing on the heavily bandaged pegasus lying on a bed in the center of the room. Lying on her side, her sky blue tail was carefully laid out across the length of the bed, the long strands of hair resting softly on top of the sheets, but her mane was almost entirely hidden underneath the white bandages that covered the top of her head. The rest of her body was erratically covered. Most of her chest and all of her right foreleg were hidden, but the rest of her body remained uncovered, having suffered what appeared to be only minor injuries.

Vortex’s breathing was weak and strenuous. Her eye’s closed tightly in her sleep, her chest expanding as far as it could as she took long breathes. Thunderhorn recognized it as a sign that she had damaged one of her lungs, puncturing or injuring the organ in a way that it was rendered almost completely inoperable and forced the single, undamaged lung to overexert itself in its absence. He wasn’t sure what had happened to her,

but whatever it was, it was doubtful that she would ever completely recover from it.

Goldenroot was sitting on the floor next to the bed, the blue mare's face meeting his as he watched her with a pained expression. His eyes glimmered in the thin, mocking torchlight of the room, the stallion constantly trying to blink his sadness away as the warm liquid formed in the corners of his eyes. But his effort was in vein, only pushing the tears down the side of his face and sending them rolling down his cheeks like tiny rivers.

"From what I can tell, she has a fractured leg, multiple broken ribs, a few damaged internal organs and severe head trauma." a chocolate brown unicorn, mostly likely some kind of doctor, replied methodically. "The leg and ribs should heal over time with no permanent damage. The organs should be okay too, but she can't overexert herself for several months until that lung heals."

Rarity had her back to door, hiding her face from the general as she stood close to the pale green stallion. She seemed to be trying to comfort him, placing her hoof gently on his back, but it didn't seem to be helping.

On the opposite side of the bed was the doctor. Thunderhorn could tell she wasn't very experienced, carefully levitating a clipboard in front of her and quickly switching her attention from it, to Vortex, to Rarity, and then back again. It was more likely that she was only just a nurse and not a doctor, but during a desperate time like the present, they were fortunate to have someone with even that much experience.

"Now, the head trauma... I honestly don't know." the nurse replied hesitantly, running a hoof through her mane and down the back of her neck. "Any kind of injury to the brain is impossible for me to diagnose until she wakes up. If she's lucky, she won't have any permanent damage. If she's not... well I won't go into details, but please try to stay calm if she doesn't recognize you when she wakes up. You're only going to make it harder for her."

"She... she can't just have completely forgotten who we are!" Rarity shouted doubtfully, spinning to face the unicorn standing on the opposite side of the bed.

"I don't... I don't know..." the nurse stuttered, startled by the white unicorn's outburst.

But as Rarity faced the nurse, Thunderhorn could see the tears in her eyes and he realized that she wasn't really angry at the mare. She was angry at herself. Angry that her wonderful plan to save the world was falling apart and that she was responsible for all the suffering, destruction and death carried along with it.

"I'm sorry, but I have to check on the other patients. I'll be back in an hour to change her bandages." the nurse continued hastily.

The nervous, chocolate brown unicorn gathered up a few of the things lying beside the bed and rushed passed the old general and out the door. Her eyes darted around the hallway once as she slowly opened one of the doors and closed it behind her.

The nurse hadn't explicitly said so, but Thunderhorn knew what she meant. There was a good chance that Vortex's injury would be far worse than simple amnesia. And though he didn't know exactly what had happened to her, a significant head injury could cause paralysis in most of her body or send the pegasus into a deep coma that she might never fully recover from.

Turning his attention back to the scene inside the room, Thunderhorn noticed that the tears had started to build up more quickly in the pale green pony's eyes. He shut them tightly, sobbing quietly as he lifted a hoof to his head and rested it against his forehead. Thunderhorn knew what it was like to sit at the bedside of a sick loved one. It was a horrible feeling that ravaged your thoughts and burned through your veins like acid, knowing that you could do nothing to help them, knowing that, even though all your friends, your family, and the doctors and nurses tried to convince you that everything was going to be okay, the love of your life was fading away like a wisp of smoke on a windy day.

Rarity just fell backwards, sitting on the floor helplessly as she watched the young pegasus gasping for air on the bed in front of her, "I'm so sorry, Goldenroot."



~

“Princess!” Shock Wave yelled, throwing open the door to her chambers and bolting into the room.

Sitting on the balcony and slowly turning her gaze from the burning fires and screaming in the city below, the moon princess stared at the soldier whom had just barged in. Her gaze was cold and depressing, her eyes sharing their sorrow and emptiness as they shone strangely in the light of the fires.

“Princess Luna.” the red pegasus continued, ignoring her unsettling gaze. “You have to do something! There’s a rebellion within the city’s walls. Canterlot is burning, rioters are taking over the streets and ponies are being killed.

“The royal barracks has already been lost to the rebellion. I’ve ordered the soldiers to retreat to the castle, but strangely, that hasn’t lured the fighting here. It’s like they’re not even targeting us.”

The princess turned back to the window, “Have you noticed soldier? Have you noticed that the sun has yet to rise above the horizon, yet it is well past ten o’clock in the morning now?”

“Princess, forgive me, but I don’t think that’s important right now. We need to do something about the city.”

“Princess Celestia is attacking the capital of Prance. It’s the only reason the sun has not yet risen.” Luna replied, ignoring the soldier’s alarm.

“Please, your highness. We need to do something! I beg of you!” Shock Wave pleaded, slowly approaching the princess and trying to bring her back to the more important issue.

“This isn’t about me or you or anyone else in the city. It’s about my sister. Only she is capable of repairing the damage to our city and our country.” Luna said calmly. “Only she can fix this. After all, she promised me she would.

"I've sent word to Celestia that she needs to return immediately, but it is to her discretion whether or not she decides to wait until after the war has concluded. However, I expect everything to be back under control as soon as she returns.

"Until then, I want you and the remainder of the guard to stand down. Do not attack the rebels and do not leave the castle."

"Stand down!?" the pegasus asked in shock. "Princess, we can't just wait for your sister to come back here and fix everything! The city is in peril and it is my sworn duty to protect the lives of the innocent and helpless."

"You're making the mistake of assuming that the war in Prance has only just started." Luna replied vaguely.

"You may not be Nightmare Moon anymore, but you're still a monster." Shock Wave lashed out. "I don't care if it's against your direct orders, I'm not just going to give up like you, just step aside and watch my city burn to ashes. I'm going to defend my city, my country and everyone inside it to my very last breath."

Shock Wave, fed up with the alicorn's obvious apathy, stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind her. The sound of her hooves echoed down the hallway, tears slowly rolling down the princess' cheeks as she heard them grow fainter and then finally disappear.

~

"Before I do anything, I want to know the truth. Why did you sabotage my country, Pierre?" Celestia asked sincerely. "What exactly did you hope to gain?"

"My country was suffering, princess." Pierre replied, rising from his seat and walking to the huge window behind him, watching the horrifying scene below. "I only wanted a better life for all the ponies that live here in Prance. I never intended to harm your country or cause a war. I only wanted to show your stubborn council that they were making a mistake. The trade agreement would have helped both our nations."

Celestia walked further into the elaborately decorated room. Its walls were lined with several expensive paintings, but the pair of extravagant statues and packed bookshelves that Twilight had described were absent, almost as if they had never existed at all. But the princess ignored the flaws in her student's depiction of the room and, nearing closer to the large desk Pierre was standing behind, her eyes narrowed and she glared inquisitively at the crimson pony across from her.

"That's a very different story from what I was told." Celestia stated.

"And what were you told?" the king asked, still focused on the sight below.

"That you were trying to conquer my country. You were trying to overthrow me and my sister in some kind of elaborate plan to take over the world. You promised to give the council power, so they willingly helped sabotage their own country."

The room was engulfed by an ominous silence and from the reflection in the window Celestia could see a faint smile form on Pierre's face.

"Did Sir Goldenroot tell you that?" he asked.

"No, Twilight Sparkle told me."

"Your student?" Pierre asked in disbelief, finally turning to face the alicorn. "I thought she had died."

"No, she never died, Pierre. You may have tried to kill her, but she never died."

"Kill her?" Pierre replied, again in disbelief. "I suppose I can understand why you would think that, but I never even saw your student, only her belongings, which I immediately sent back to you."

"How appropriate." Celestia said as she glared at him. "That's the exact same lie that your faithful subordinates tried to tell me, that she never even came here. Why are you lying to me, Pierre? Are you trying to make

me feel sorry for you? Is this how you think you can escape your punishment?"

The scarlet pony just turned back to the window. It was still dark outside, but it was well past the time the sun was normally supposed to rise. The moon hung high in the starry sky above, its light pouring through the massive window and washing over the king's body, forming a dark shadow on the floor underneath him.

"Don't you think there is some truth, however small, in what we said?" he asked. "Or do you wish to hang on every single word your student has told you?"

"She has no reason to lie to me." Celestia promptly responded.

"Whether you choose to accept it or not, what she has told you is not entirely the truth" Pierre explained. "She's lying to you, princess, but even I don't understand why."

"You're wrong, Pierre." Celestia stated. "She wouldn't lie to me."

"I admire your faith in those around you, princess." the king admitted. "I only wish it wasn't so misplaced."

The princess started to walk around the large desk and approach the king as he stared out the window.

"I'm not going to kill you, Pierre." she explained quietly. "I don't believe you deserve such a terrible punishment, even if you did fill the world with lies and cause such irreparable damage to the world."

The king continued to look outside the window, even as the princess neared closer to him.

"I'm going to lock you in the dungeon beneath my castle." The alicorn continued. "Perhaps when you are ready to tell me the truth, then I will let you return to your own country."

"There is no truth I haven't already told you, Princess Celestia." he said calmly.

The princess stopped in her tracks only a short distance away from the ruby red pony.

"But you are too kind." he continued, the reflection in the window showing him frown. "I could not save the weak, the young, the innocent... I have shamed myself beyond all forgiveness and I do not deserve to live among the ponies I swore, but failed to protect."

The king turned to the princess. Clouded in the darkness of his own shadow, his face held an unforgettable expression. His eyes were filled with sorrow, but they held no tears, and his mouth gently trembled as he tried to force a fake smile in the bright moonlight.

"I'm sorry, princess." he said.

Turning back to the window, the king bolted forward and hurled himself into the thick glass. The princess could only watch as the window shattered and the crimson pony was sent into the blackness of the night, the glittering fragments of the window dotting the sky like tiny raindrops.

Rushing towards the broken window and gazing down to the ground below, Celestia watched the pony and the fragments of the window grow smaller and smaller until they became invisible to her naked eye and the pony eventually stopped, slamming into the ground on the courtyard far below, his body lying in-between the two great statues and delicately arranged red and white flowerbeds on either side of the path.

For what seemed like an eternity, the princess just looked down at the sight below. The soldiers of Prance, the soldiers of Equestria and the innocent ponies that had been caught in the middle rushed from all over the city to the fallen pony's side. And while they all looked down upon the king as he lay in the center of the path, the moon fell across the sky and disappeared over the horizon, making way for the bright sun that appeared just beyond the landscape.

"Princess Celestia!" Swift Wing shouted, stopping at the doorway and looking around the room.

The sight left the recently appointed colonel speechless. The massive window was shattered and the alicorn was just standing beside it, staring down into the city below as the sun slowly rose into the air outside and began to cast long shadows across the room.

"Is it over?" Celestia asked, watching the sun climb over the horizon.

"It's... it's over." the pegasus replied, removing her helmet and tossing it onto the ground. "Right after we all saw the window explode and Pierre's body fall from the tower, they just gave up. They just sat down and started taking off their armour."

The princess said nothing and the room was once again bathed in silence as the sun rose higher and higher into the sky.

"What are we going to do now?" Swift Wing asked.

"We'll set up an interim government until things can return to normal." Celestia replied calmly. "Some of the soldiers will need to stay behind to watch over the country."

The pegasus continued to watch the princess as a great flash of light illuminated the room in front of her. When the light subsided, a letter unravelled itself in front of the alicorn, the princess quietly starting to read it.

"I have to go back to Canterlot." Celestia said abruptly, setting the letter on the large desk. "Find General Redhoof, he's in charge until I return. If you cannot find him, you're in charge."

"What's going on?" the pegasus asked.

"It's something that I alone have to deal with, colonel." the alicorn replied. "Just keep everything under control until I return."

"Of course, your highness."

“Goldenroot, we’re going to take the orb and wait at the palace.” Rarity said quietly. “We think that when Princess Celestia arrives she will go there first.”

While the others were busy preparing for the princess’ arrival, the stallion remained by the bedside in the small room, his eyes, although an intense red from his tears and prolonged sleep deprivation, still attentively watched the pegasus lying motionless in front of him.

“Fine.” he replied monotonously, his voice echoing around the small room.

While the tone of his voice could easily be interpreted as apathy, the truth was entirely the opposite. He still cared about the city burning outside the door, the bloody war in Prance, and the two ponies that stood, watching him in the doorway that were trying to bring it all to a sudden and abrupt halt. But what mattered to him the most wasn’t any of those things. He cared about her, the wonderful blue pegasus lying in front of him, and he refused to leave her side until he knew that she was okay. But as time wore on, he had begun to suspect the worst.

“Neither of us is sure why, but the royal palace appears to be completely deserted.” Thunderhorn added, answering the obvious question that Goldenroot had ignored.

Silence engulfed the room as the two unicorns moved their gaze from the pale green stallion to the dark blue pegasus and then back again. The entire scene seemed to be frozen, encased in a block of cold, solid ice as the world continued to move, shift and turn all around it. Goldenroot wasn’t taking this well, but then again, what kind of living, breathing pony could just ignore the pain of someone they cared about?

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Thunderhorn asked. “We may need your help.”

“I don’t care about that anymore.” Goldenroot lied.

The unicorns exchanged worried glances, before turning back to the stallion waiting by the bedside.

“Goodbye then, Goldenroot.” Rarity said quietly. “We’ll see you when we get back.”

The white unicorn smiled with a kind of hopeful determination, but soon turned around and quietly left out the doorway. Thunderhorn followed soon after, glancing once more at the stallion and then at the pegasus, before he backed out of the room and gently shut the door behind him, the handle slowly turning back into place as he gradually released his grasp.

When the room was completely silent, Goldenroot turned to look at the door, silently hopeful that everything would be alright.

*Why is it that when the world burns, I’m the one holding the match?*

“Are they gone?” a weak voice asked from the bed, interrupting his thoughts.

Goldenroot’s head snapped towards the bed, Vortex’s amber eyes glowing back at him softly.

“Vortex!” he yelled, wrapping his forelegs around her and starting to sob.

“Ow.” she muttered quietly.

Goldenroot jumped back, realizing that he was only aggravating her wounds and causing her more pain.

“I thought you died, Vortex.” he said, his voice shaking. “And... the doctor said that the blow to your head damaged your memory... She said that you might not even remember me.”

Standing near the bedside, Goldenroot watched the mare’s eyes intently. His tears streamed down his cheeks, the stallion unable to hold back the bizarre combination of anxiety and joy that flooded his emotions.

“I remember you, Goldenroot.” she smiled faintly, tears beginning to roll down her face and soaking her pillow. “You still owe me an expensive gift.”



"I know, Vortex." he said, tears pouring down his face.

The stallion leaned in and passionately kissed the mare on the lips, everything that led up to this moment flashing back into his memory like a strange dream. He remembered first setting his eyes upon her and thinking about how attractive she was and how hopeless he had always been.

*Focus on your job*, he had told himself. *She's not important.*

He remembered how she used to be and realized how much she'd changed and how wonderful and amazing she became to him when he finally discovered the real pony behind the stunning blue figure. And as the beautiful reveries finally drifted out of his thoughts, he realized how naïve he'd been that day. She was more important than anything and everything else in the world and he was never going to forget that.

"I'm sorry, Goldenroot." she said, as the stallion slowly pulled away.

"For what?" he asked.

"I'm sorry I was so arrogant. I'm sorry I made you worry about me."

"I didn't think I would ever hear you say that." Goldenroot smiled at her, "But I should be the one apologizing, Vortex. This... everything... it's all my fault. I was a fool and I put your life in danger. I dragged you into this mess and-"

"Now don't get too mushy on me, Goldenroot." Vortex interrupted, grinning back at him. "You wouldn't want me to gag, would you?"

For a moment, the two ponies simply smiled at each other in silence, but Vortex's expression slowly changed, the mare becoming absolutely serious and turning her gaze away from the stallion.

"I heard what you said." she commented. "I think you should go help Thunderhorn and Rarity."

"I don't want to leave you, Vortex." he said resolutely. "Not now."

“Don’t worry so much.” she said, turning back to him with a smile on her face. “It’s not like I’ll be going anywhere. And besides, you still have to slay the dragon and save the princess. We made it this far and if you forget to do that, we can’t have our happy fairytale ending, can we?”

Something about the mare had always made the stallion smile and, even though he knew that she was in an extraordinary amount of pain, he felt himself grinning stupidly back at her.

“I guess not.” he said.

~

The sun was gently rising into the sky as Goldenroot entered the palace, the bright orb only barely visible past the thick smoke in the air above the city. The interior of the palace was exactly the same as it had been before the riot, the great marble pillars extending to the high ceiling above his head and the identical marble floors polished to a perfect sheen.

“Sir Goldenroot!” Rarity shouted in surprise, rushing towards him. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

“A certain blue pegasus managed to convince me otherwise.” the stallion smiled happily.

“She woke up!?” Thunderhorn asked, smiling ever so slightly.

“And her memory doesn’t appear to be damaged at all.” Goldenroot replied. “Everything important is still there, at least.”

“Oh Sir Goldenroot, that’s wonderful news.” Rarity said, throwing her hooves around the stallion’s neck.

“It’s nice to have some good news for a change,” the general remarked, “but I think we’d better turn our attention back to our plan.”

Rarity released her hooves from around Goldenroot’s neck and smiled at him happily once more before turning back to face the general,

the green stallion also trying to focus his attention on the important final details of what had been a long, complicated, and exhausting plan.

"We're not going to use the orb immediately. We both think it's worth the time to see if we can convince the princess to give herself up quietly. If she does that, we can avoid a potentially dangerous situation. However, if she refuses to submit herself, we need to use the artefact immediately, before she has a chance to react. Since I'm the only one who actually read the instructions for this thing, I think I should be the one to use it on her. It takes less than a second to actually unleash the magic, but we can't afford to take any chances so you two need to make some kind of distraction."

"Like what?" Goldenroot asked.

"Yell, shout, throw something at her... I don't care what you do as long as it works."

Goldenroot nodded once, expressing his understanding.

"Now, if anything goes wrong-"

The general was cut off as a bright light filled the area, blinding the ponies and forcing them to turn away from the source at the center of the room.

"Goldenroot, Thunderhorn, and... Rarity?" a voice asked in an aggressive tone. "I have to admit, while I almost expected some of the council members to return, I did not expect the element of generosity to betray me like this."

The bright light faded away, revealing Princess Celestia who was gently flapping her wings against the air around her as she lowered herself to the ground. As she planted her hooves firmly on the floor, she folded her wings onto her side casually.

"Regardless, you ponies have set fire to my city, started a riot within its walls and caused the death of many of my subjects." she said, glaring at each of the ponies individually. "Why are you doing this to me? Was it not enough to try and dethrone me once, you had to attempt to do it again? Will you not stop until one of us is dead, dismembered and buried?"

"Princess Celestia, I'm sorry, but we needed your full attention." Goldenroot announced, stepping forward. "We were desperate to stop the war before it reached its climax."

"The war is already over, Goldenroot." the princess said, walking towards him.

"The war is over!?" the stallion shouted, stunned.

"Prance was defeated and their king is dead." Celestia explained. "However, I will allow you to say what you want to say before I completely lose my patience with you."

"There is no easy way to say this, your highness." he said, trying to focus even as his mind wandered to the horrible fact that they had been too late to stop the war before it ended. "Your student, Twilight Sparkle, is dead. The Twilight that you've spoken to is merely a hallucination. She's not real, Princess Celestia, and everything she's told you has all been just a lie."

Beginning at the drought, the three ponies wove an elaborate story about the past, trying to describe every single tiny detail of the seemingly inexplicable events that had taken place over only a few short months. But as they told this extravagant tale, Celestia's mind wandered somewhere else entirely, leaving only her blank expression behind as she was consumed by the powerful memories of her past.

*"It's about Twilight... She's not coming home."*

"They think she's dead?"

Ever since the very beginning, they believed she had died. But when Twilight came back, she proved them all wrong. She proved that she was too strong to be overwhelmed by simple bandits, too clever to be fooled by the falsities that Prance had twisted under her nose, and too ambitious to just give up when she was confronted with the horrifying events she knew would soon follow.

"She was one of the best friends I had and nothing will ever change that. I just wish I hadn't let her leave by herself..."

But why would Rarity lie about her own friend, whom she held so dear to her heart, being dead?

"I'll come back as soon as I can tomorrow. I know we'll have a lot to talk about."

Even if they were telling the truth, then who, or what, had she been talking to? What was it that she had seen, held, embraced, and even given up her own bed to on that stormy night so long ago?

*"So you don't know... what happened? Everyone thought she was dead, Celestia, yet she shows up in your bedroom in the middle of the night?"*

*"I know it's hard to believe, but this was very real, Luna. I can assure you, no part of me thought it was a dream."*

*"Well, we'll know when she comes back."*

Her sister had been so doubtful. She wasn't willing to believe that Twilight would just come back in the middle of the night without anyone else noticing her return.

"Please, Princess Celestia." Rarity pleaded, approaching the alicorn cautiously and dragging her back to the present. "It's the truth. I... I walked into your bedroom when you were talking to her."

Her legs trembling, her mouth dry, Celestia's gaze fixed itself on the exhausted, white unicorn in front of her. With the raging fires and the devastating riot quickly mutating her beautiful city into a hideous monster, she frantically tried to forget the uncertainty that plagued her memories and focus back on the issues of the present.

"Twilight wasn't actually there." the Rarity continued slowly. "You were all alone in that room."

*Alone?* Celestia wondered, drifting off once again.

*"I swear to you, princess! I'm not lying to you. I've never met your student. I was one of the ponies that accompanied King Pierre on his journey to your palace several months ago, the other being Daniel..."*

*Catherine was right, the princess thought. I remember seeing them before, both her and Daniel. They had been the king's escorts when he had arrived at the palace in Equestria several months ago. I remember talking to them. I remember being curious and asking them about their jobs, their families and their country. I even remember Catherine telling me why she had joined the army in the first place.*

*"Your student? I thought she had died."*

*"No, she never died Pierre. You may have tried to kill her, but she never died."*

*"Kill her? I suppose I can understand why you would think that, but I never even saw your student, only her belongings, which I immediately sent back to you."*

*Was Pierre telling the truth as well? Celestia thought, her eyes beginning to water.*

*"Whether you choose to accept it or not, what she has told you is not entirely the truth. She's lying to you, princess, but even I don't understand why."*

*Was Twilight lying to me? the alicorn wondered, closing her eyes to hide the forming tears.*

*"The Twilight that you've spoken to is merely a hallucination. She's not real, Princess Celestia, and everything she's told you has all been just a lie."*

*Is she even alive? she thought. But then, what happened to her?*

*"We spoke with your sister." Goldenroot said, pulling the princess back to reality. "We think she's afraid of you, princess."*

*Afraid?* Celestia thought, fading away from reality again. *My sister is afraid of me?*

*"You are and will always be more than just a student to me, Twilight. If I have to do this to protect you, my sister and everyone else in Equestria from harm, then I believe this is the right thing to do. I don't think I could ever live long enough to regret protecting the ones I care about."*

*"When will you be back?"*

*"As soon as I can be. I hope to be back in a few weeks, but I can't be sure. Nothing ever really seems to go according to plan, does it?"*

*"I don't really care how long it takes, princess. I just want you to come back."*

*"I will never leave you alone, Twilight. I won't make that mistake again."*

*No. It's not true.* Celestia thought, glaring down at the ponies in front of her. *It wasn't all just a lie. Twilight can't be dead. I spoke with her and held her between my hooves. No mere hallucination could ever be that real. No simple illusion could trick me, turn me into a horrible monster and force me to mercilessly slaughter innocent ponies.*

"No!" Celestia screamed, finally giving voice to her thoughts. "You're lying! She's not dead and you're all filthy liars! Every one of you! You burned and terrorized my city! You conspired against me and forced a war upon my country!"

Her eyes shone with a terrible rage as she spoke, her horrible glare moving quickly around to each of the ponies individually.

"I'm sick of your lies and I refuse to let you wreak havoc on my country." the alicorn continued.

Realizing that the situation was about to turn violent, Thunderhorn cried out, "Goldenroot! Rarity!"

The two rushed away from the princess simultaneously, trying to redirect her attention towards them as the general pulled the shimmering blue sphere out of his bag.

But the distraction failed as the princess just stared at the strange orb the old unicorn was holding in the air beside him, *I remember that...*

In one swift motion, Thunderhorn shot a beam of light from his horn into the small orb, the light amplifying and changing colour as it shot out the other side. A magnificent blue light filled the entire room as the beam flew through the air towards the princess, but she knew exactly what they were trying to do. She recognized the crystalline orb from so long ago. She remembered why it was created, how it was used, where it was stored, even the exact words detailing the surface of the sphere.

Her horn shone with a bright light that wrapped itself around the princess tightly, the piercing blue beam smashing into the barrier just as it managed to close in front of her. The magic exploded along its surface and pushed the princess, reducing the marble tiles on the floor beneath her to rubble and sending her crashing against the far wall. The resulting impact shook the entire palace, the blue light finally subsiding as its power dissipated into the barrier. With the last of the orb's magic gone, the light around Celestia disappeared and the exhausted princess stumbled and fell to the ground.

"You won't kill me here, not now." she wheezed, gasping for air as she climbed back to her hooves and inched slowly forwards.

Her horn shone again, her anger pulsating through the room as she moved towards the old unicorn.

"Goldenroot, Rarity, run!" Thunderhorn yelled. "Get out of here! I'll stall her for as long as I can."

The two ponies did as instructed and turned to the doorway, hoping to escape before the princess turned her fury on them.

"You will do no such thing!" Celestia roared, the magic around her horn swirling and darkening as she slowly neared closer to the grey



unicorn. "I won't let you continue to destroy my country with your selfish lies."

As she lowered her head and prepared to unleash her magic on the general, the elegant tiara placed neatly on the top of her head slid off and fell to the ground, landing with a hard clunk as it crashed into the floor. Ignoring the trinket, the princess let loose her magic, the powerful golden light cutting through the air as it approached the old stallion. The general hastily threw up a magical barrier, but after thoroughly exhausting himself from filling the crystalline orb, the barrier was futile, shredding like paper against Celestia's magic.

The general cried out in pain as the magic wracked his body and sent him flying across the room, smashing him into the stone wall and discarding him onto the floor. The crystalline orb, once again glowing with a faint orange light, rolled slowly away from his disfigured body and into the shadows of the room. The vivid orange letters projected themselves through the darkness and onto the wall, making the text written along the orb's surface perfectly readable on the cold, stone nearby.

*My beloved sister, my only family, I would toss aside my immortal life, my royal blood, and everything else I own for you, the one true constant in my world.*

Goldenroot and Rarity continued to run towards the door as the alicorn started to refocus her magic power. She reached out with her magic and grabbed hold of the two fleeing ponies as soon as they neared the exit and gradually began pulling them closer to her.

"Princess Celestia!" Rarity desperately cried out. "Please, I know this isn't who you really are! You're the most kind and generous pony in the world; you would never want to hurt us!"

But the princess just continued to pull them closer, tightening her grasp on the two ponies and squeezing their bodies, forcing their eyes closed and making them scream in pain as they were crushed in her magical grip.

"You're right, Rarity. I was kind. I was generous." she explained with an intense hatred in her eyes. "But how can I be so kind and generous

while you tread on my very existence? You destroyed the pony I once was and you created this monster that I am now!"

While the two cried out in pain, a strange cloud of magic was hiding in the shadows. It was reading the words on the wall and then watching the horrific display in the center of the room, watching as the one it knew as its sister turned into a terrible monster and killed the ponies she once cared for. She killed Thunderhorn, the pony that she had once trusted with her deepest, darkest secrets, and she was about to kill Rarity, the element of generosity that had helped save her sister, and Goldenroot, the pony that was willing to sacrifice himself just to save the forests of her land.

"Sister!" Luna screamed at the top of her lungs, tears streaming down her face as she slowly materialized out of the shadows.

Celestia loosened her grip on the two ponies, allowing them to breathe as she faced her younger sister.

"Luna! I... I didn't want you..." Celestia stuttered, slowly coming to realize the horror of what she was doing.

"Why are you doing this?" the moon princess asked, lowering her voice as her teardrops sprinkled onto the marble floor below. "What's happening to you?"

"They lied to me, Luna." Celestia stated, regaining her composure slightly. "They tried to destroy our country. I cannot let their crimes go unpunished."

Luna continued to sob, her tears soaking the ground as she just watched her sister. Her eyes forced shut by her sister's prying gaze, Celestia couldn't bear to look at her sibling and turned away.

"They're not lying to you, Celestia." Luna said, finally breaking the strange silence that had filled the room.

"What... what do you mean?" Celestia asked apprehensively, her body trembling as she turned back to face her sister.

The two alicorns just stared at one another. Luna merely looked upon her sister with tears in her eyes and sorrow in her heart, while Celestia gazed back towards her with a strange sense of misunderstanding, like she had no idea what was going on or why any of this was happening.

Slowly, Luna's horn started to glow with a brilliant blue light and she lowered her head, staring down to the floor at her hooves.

"I'm sorry, Celestia." Luna said regretfully, her voice shaking as she closed her eyes. "I didn't want it to end this way."

Celestia gently set the two ponies she was holding on the ground, the light encompassing them vanishing as they touched the ground. As soon as the light disappeared and the two ponies collapsed on the floor, a beam of light shot from Luna's horn and Celestia just watched as it slowly encircled her, tugging at her body and eventually causing her to disappear from the room completely.

~

Luna stood behind a podium on a large wooden platform pushed to the far edge of the town square. A massive crowd completely filled the area, small fillies and colts pointing at the stage and tugging on their parent's tails as they tried to figure out what was going on. Their parents, however, were not quite so lost. Very little had been explained about the gathering, but they seemed to believe that they knew what it was all about.

Everything that had led up to this point over the past few weeks had been some of the worst events in the history of their country. The drought, the war, the fires, the riots, they were terrible trials that all seemed to have ended at once. They thanked their princess for their salvation and now they were expecting a kind of celebration after all the hardships they had endured. However, they didn't seem to know why Princess Luna was on stage in place of her sister, so the ponies just stood and waited in silent anticipation.

"Citizens of Equestria!" Luna announced from behind the podium. "The drought is finally gone, every last trace of it washed from existence!"

The ponies in the crowd started to cheer loudly, happy to hear of their victory over the terrible plague that had seemed to start everything.

“The war is over, Prance was defeated and they now reside under our watchful eye.”

Again, the ponies cheered, stomping the ground and looking at each other in excitement.

“The fires were extinguished and the riot was ended, but though our city is damaged, reconstruction is in progress and the ones involved in the riot are being punished appropriately.”

Still, the ponies cheered loudly and stomped at the ground with their hooves.

“Yet everything you’ve been told was all part of a terrible, destructive lie.” Luna continued, her voice changing from the pleasant tone it once was as she began to explain what had actually happened.

The crowd went from a roaring applause to complete silence at this remark, every one of the ponies staring back at the alicorn in confusion.

“My sister has been swept away by grief, taken by lies and falsities.” Luna announced, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “I’m sorry to tell you that she spread these lies onto you. Prance was not trying to conquer us, the council was not responsible for the drought, though one individual in particular was indeed responsible for making it worse, and the fires and the riot that took place only a few days ago were not started out of hatred for my sister. Instead, they were started because it was the only way we could pull her back to reality and force her to realize the truth.”

The princess paused for a moment, turning her head and attempting to blink her tears away and stop herself from breaking down in front of her subjects.

“She has been locked away now, down in the deepest catacombs of the castle.” Luna continued. “And there she will remain for as long as it takes for her to regain her health. Perhaps someday, when you are able to

trust her again, she will resume her duty as the ruling monarch over our land, but until then, I will take her place.”

The ponies in the crowd below were visibly apprehensive about this new insight. Princess Celestia has been locked away and her sister was just supposed to take her place? Was she not the same sister that devolved into the villainous Nightmare Moon not so very long ago?

“I know that you are hesitant to trust me when I tell you this. I admit that I am not so sure that I am completely up to the task of ruling over this nation, or even worthy of it, so I am going to restore the council. Alas, the previous council members are either not capable of performing their roles any longer or have no desire to return to that life. Goldenroot will be banished for conspiracy against our country, Lord Thunderhorn perished in the riot, Lord Crescendo has gone missing, and Lady Wind Dancer, Lady Prairie Star, and Lady Vortex are all unwilling to continue with their positions in the government. Therefore, a new council must be created, one that will not be limited to just the nobility, but instead one that will include the entire populace of Equestria.”

The ponies started to talk amongst themselves and soon the town square was filled to the brim with an amalgamation of verbal dissent and panic at their situation. They didn’t seem to believe Princess Luna nor did they even want to believe her. Everything they did, everything they fought for, it couldn’t possibly all just be part of an elaborate lie, could it?

And amid all the confusion and even terror of the ponies around her, Luna just calmly turned back and walked off the stage.

~

She’d been cooped up in that tiny room for about a week now. Every day was the same, relatively dull experience. She would lie in her lumpy hospital bed and read, eat, sleep, or groan while various doctors and nurses badgered her with their concerns. She wouldn’t mind them so much, except they always managed to find some new complication as a result of her injury. First, she was diagnosed with ‘monocular temporal hemianopia’. The doctor had described it as ‘a visual field defect aligned along the

vertical meridian of the affected eye', but what it meant to her was that she had permanently lost all of the peripheral vision out of her right eye. Then she discovered that she had lost her unique ability to accurately tell the time using the position of certain objects in the sky as a frame of reference. Strangely, she was more upset about that than the loss of her peripheral vision. Everyone always found that trick to be so impressive.

Fortunately, however, both Goldenroot and Rarity would stop by to visit her and break up the day, the former always arriving more frequently and staying for much longer periods of time. She always wanted them to stay longer than they did, but they would both utter the exact same phrase like some kind of mindless machine.

"You need your rest." they would say.

And then they would leave her alone, off to do something much more important and interesting. It was all a practically unbearable experience and she didn't want to spend a minute longer in that tiny room. She just wanted to get outside and move around. She wanted to do something, anything at all.

*Ugh! What time is it?* she asked herself, staring out the small window near her bed and gazing out over the landscape. *Goldenroot said he would be here at noon.*

It looked very cold outside the window. The first snow of the season had finally begun to fall and it now blanketed the ruined streets and burned buildings of Canterlot in a soft, fluffy white. Turning her eyes from the snow covered buildings, she focused her attention on the ponies that wandered around the city. Wrapped with thick, winter scarves, they simply tried to avoid the bite of the frigid, winter air.

*And of course, it's going to be absolutely freezing when I finally get out of here.* Vortex sighed.

Suddenly, a light, but quick succession of taps against the door interrupted her train of thought and Vortex pulled herself upright, leaning her back against the headboard.

Looking at the entrance with a big grin on her face, she called out, "I already told you, you don't need to knock. Just come in."

The pony on the other side seemed to hesitate for a moment, but eventually the door slowly creaked open and revealed a familiar face. Indeed, she recognized the face of the pony standing in the doorway, but it wasn't exactly who she had been expecting. The brilliant golden armour the pony usually wore was absent and the cherry red pegasus, spotted with flecks of snow, was awkwardly cradling a long, skinny glass vase in her hoof. It was filled with seven, bright pink tulips that shot out of the delicate, semitransparent blue container like fireworks.

"Oh..." Vortex replied, her smile falling. "Hi."

"I... I got you these." Shock Wave replied, stuttering and trying to smile at the bedridden mare while she balanced the vase precariously in her hoof. "I know you don't really like flowers, but I... I still needed to apologize to you."

Vortex said nothing in response, just watching as the mare invited herself in, closed the door and walked further into the small room before carefully setting the vase down on the small bedside table. She was curious how the mare had managed to get such bright flowers at this time of the year, but her trivial curiosity was pushed to the back of her mind.

"I'm sorry, Vortex." Shock Wave said, unable to look at the other pegasus directly, her eyes staring at the flowers on the table. "I should have believed you. I should have known that you wouldn't lie to me about something like that."

Shock Wave slowly sat down on floor near the bed, glancing up at Vortex momentarily before diverting her eyes away again.

"I still find it hard to believe that the princess has really gone insane," she continued, "but I know you were telling the truth now and I... I'm so sorry I hurt you, Vortex. I..."

The pegasus drifted off and the two ponies sat in a strange, awkward silence for a long time. Vortex just quietly stared at the mare sitting beside her bed while Shock Wave periodically changed her gaze from the vase of

flowers, to the floor, to Vortex, never keeping her eye on anything for more than a few seconds at a time.

Just looking at Shock Wave pulled and tugged at Vortex's emotions. She wasn't sure what to think about her. She was a friend from her past, one she had been willing to trust with her life, yet this red pegasus had refused to do the same when it had really mattered. She tried to kill her and while Vortex had a strange feeling inside her, like she was supposed to accept her apology, it was a sin that she wasn't sure she was ready or even willing to forgive.

"I got kicked out of the royal guard." Shock Wave stated plainly. "Luna was doing nothing about the riot and after we... met at the barracks, I assumed command of the remaining soldiers stationed in the city."

She paused for a moment, grinning slightly as she looked at the pink flowers sitting on the table. Shock Wave seemed to be proud of her actions, even if they got her fired.

"Against her direct orders, I tried to stop the rioting and extinguish the fires." she continued. "But Luna is nothing like Princess Celestia. She didn't understand. She considered my actions to be desertion and I was issued a dishonourable discharge for misconduct and treason."

Shock Wave turned her head, finally facing the dark blue mare directly.

"You know, I'd feel a lot better about this whole thing if you were back in the council. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider that position? I know that every single pony in this country would welcome you back."

"I'm leaving Equestria." Vortex replied firmly.

"What!? Why?" the red pegasus asked in disbelief.

"Goldenroot was banished from the country, so I'm going to leave with him."

"You're joking, right?" Shock Wave asked doubtfully. "Please tell me you're joking... After all you've done, you're just going to run away with



some stallion and disappear forever? Do you even realize what's happened? This country is in pieces."

"I know that, but the last thing anyone in Equestria needs right now is some overzealous rebel in the council," Vortex explained. "I'm only going to make things worse if I stay here."

"Have you even seen the council candidates?" Shock Wave argued. "They're all extremists, radical commoners or conservative nobles. Not only that, but now we have to deal with Nightmare Moon as our monarch instead of the princess. Things were better the way they were before."

"You were living in a lie, Shock Wave!" Vortex argued back. "You can't possibly want to live in some fantasy world, just pretending that everything's perfect when it's really the complete opposite."

"At least I was happy!" Shock Wave yelled angrily, standing up. "I don't care if it was a fantasy or not, it's better than what we have now."

For a moment, Vortex was angry at Shock Wave. She sacrificed so much to make this country a better place, now she was trying to tell her that it was all just a mistake? But the feeling quickly fled from her emotions and she was left with only a sense of disappointment. It was heartbreaking to see that the pegasus standing in front of her was so very different from the friend she so fondly remembered.

"I... I think you should leave."

The cherry red pegasus just stared back at her, like she hadn't even heard what she said.

"Fine!" she said abruptly, walking to the door.

Vortex watched as she stormed to the exit and flung open the door, turning around and glaring at her once more before she left.

"You're a coward, Vortex," Shock Wave said, "and you're definitely not the same pegasus I remember."

With that, she turned and left out the door, slamming it closed and leaving Vortex alone in the silence of the small room.

Turning to look at the bright, pink flowers by her bedside, she was beginning to wonder if her former friend was right. She truly believed that they had done the right thing, but, while the flames were gone, was she really just leaving her country behind while the embers still burned on the ground? Would matters only get worse now that Celestia was gone?

*Why does everything have to be so hard?* She thought, slowly pulling herself back under the covers of her bed.

She didn't want to just leave them behind, but what could she even do? She was useless by herself, she didn't really know anything about politics, and she refused to abandon Goldenroot and all of her happiness for what was almost certainly simple paranoia.

Curled up inside her bed and staring intently at the tulips, another light tap sounded at the door before it swung open and revealed another familiar face. Except this time, it was someone she actually wanted to see.

"Hey, Vortex." Goldenroot smiled, slipping into the room and quietly closing the door after him. "I know how much you hate this hospital food so I brought you a sandwich."

The cheerful stallion smiled as he walked over to the table and reached out to the saddlebags slung over his back. Lifting the flap, he pulled out a large paper bag and set it down on the table next to the flowers.

"You certainly don't see many of those at this time of the year." he remarked, gesturing to the flowers.

"You're late." Vortex said astutely, pulling herself upright and leaning against the headboard again.

Goldenroot's smile fell, "Actually... I'm about ten minutes early."

Vortex frowned and glanced out the window once more. She really missed that trick, but more than anything, she hated being wrong.

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” Goldenroot grinned. “I think I’ve got something that will cheer you up.”

He reached into his bag again and pulled out a small, square box and set it gently on the bed, next to the mare. It was wrapped in shiny, white paper and had a pretty blue bow tied around it, the exact same colour as her coat.

“I was going to wait until after we ate, but...” Goldenroot said, drifting off.

“You know I was just joking about that ‘expensive gift’ thing, right?” Vortex asked, smiling back at him.

“You better not have been.” Goldenroot laughed. “This thing cost a fortune.”

And though it had been nothing short of a nightmare, something about the stallion’s joyful grin and reassuring disposition told her that everything was going to be alright. She didn’t have to stay here, give up her dreams and happiness to watch over Equestria like a suckling baby. It was much too naïve to think that the country would simply fall apart after what they did and that she was the glue holding it all together. Things would get better over time. Equestria could take care of itself.

Goldenroot grinned, “Well don’t just stare at it.”

~

It was snowing. The five ponies stood in a small semicircle around the two nearly identical stones protruding out of the ground, the entire scene enclosed under a bubble of magic that kept the small, white flakes from entering and disturbing the ponies inside.

Rarity was standing on the far left of the group and was solely responsible for projecting the bubble. As usual, her mane and tail were

perfectly stylized, her makeup flawlessly applied and her coat a brilliant, shining white.

To her right, was Wind Dancer, the pegasus' appearance almost identical to that of the unicorn beside her, if only slightly less immaculate. Her wings were carefully folded against her side and her gaze was focused intently on the stones in front of her.

And to her right, was Prairie Star, who had made the long journey to Equestria just for this one special, but depressing occasion. Her straight, golden mane partially obscured the earth pony's face, rolling down the light brown coat of hair on her neck.

Continuing on down the line was Goldenroot, the pale green stallion with the bizarre, leafless golden tree on his flank, and finally Vortex, the dark blue pegasus with the light blue hair and swirling torrent of water on her own flank. The two were standing close beside each other, the latter having just recently recovered from her injuries during the riot.

The rigid stone on right of their field of vision read, *Here lies Lady Violet, the mare that gave me a reason to love and a reason to live. You showed me the beauty of the world and everything inside it. And though our time was short, it will never be forgotten as the single happiest time of my life.*

The stone on the left read, *Here lies Lord Thunderhorn, a soldier, a general, a friend and a loving husband. He fought for what he believed in and he never gave up hope. His selfless courage and wisdom will forever be an inspiration to us all.*

"It doesn't really seem fair." Rarity said glumly. "He worked so hard for our future, but he was never given the chance to experience it."

"I think he would be happy to know that his sacrifice saved the both of us." Goldenroot replied. "And although Equestria does not seem to welcome Princess Luna or the new council with open arms, I think that over time things will improve and eventually return to normal."

"Where will you go?" Rarity asked, turning to face the stallion. "You have to leave today, don't you?"

“Yes. Luna withheld my banishment only just long enough so that Vortex and I could leave together.”

“Yep, besides my peripheral vision, everything’s healed up nicely now.” Vortex stated plainly, unfolding her wings and stretching them out in front of the group. “And after getting kicked in the head, I only seem to have managed to forget one thing.”

“Well I certainly hope it wasn’t anything important.” Rarity said with concern.

“Well it was important,” the blue mare replied factually, returning her wings to her side, “but then Goldenroot bought me this watch.”

The pegasus lifted her right foreleg into the air, flaunting the elegant, golden watch sitting only a few inches from the very end of her hoof. Secured by a thick, gold and silver strap, the face of the timepiece held twelve little diamonds that were placed evenly around the circumference, one for each hour, and three shining silver hands so the pegasus could tell the time down to the exact second of the day.

Each of the ponies around her, with the exclusion of Goldenroot, who only sighed heavily and started to rub the bridge of his nose with a hoof, slowly walked closer, trying to examine the watch’s more intricate details. It was probably the most expensive watch they’d ever seen and until now, none of them knew such a thing even existed.

“It’s twenty-four karat gold, twenty-four karat platinum, the diamonds are perfectly flawless and it’s both protected and powered by a magically imbued artefact, so it won’t break and I don’t have to rewind it every other hour.” Vortex bragged, still holding the watch in front of her. “You’re totally jealous, aren’t you Rarity?”

She was jealous.

“That is absolutely gorgeous, Vortex.” Rarity said, still a little baffled by the expensive watch.

"Vortex, you don't need to brag about it..." Goldenroot said quietly, trying to pull everyone's attention away from the watch.

"Goldenroot, forgive me for asking, but how exactly could you afford something like that?" Wind Dancer asked suspiciously. "You're not exactly the wealthiest noble on the block."

"Well it's not like I need my house anymore." he replied with a smirk.

Vortex lowered her hoof quickly, the stallion's remark instantly reminding her of what she had wanted to say before she had gotten so carried away showing off her watch.

"That's right!" the blue pegasus announced. "Since we can't stay here, we both decided we're going to go on some kind of elaborate adventure. Maybe we'll even find Crescendo and tell him what happened."

She paused for a moment, just smiling at each of the ponies around the group before stopping in Goldenroot's direction, her smile growing brighter.

"Or maybe we'll just go behind a bush somewhere and make out." she continued.

Goldenroot just shook his head slowly, giving the pegasus a strange look while she just grinned back at him.

"Are you going to be okay, Miss Rarity?" Goldenroot asked, turning back to the unicorn. "I mean, have you found out anything about what happened to Twilight Sparkle?"

"You don't need to concern yourself with that anymore, Goldenroot." she said, finally tearing her gaze away from the expensive watch and smiling quaintly at the stallion. "You've already done more than I could have possibly asked from you. You don't, and never will, owe me anything."

The pale green stallion smiled back at her.

"And I did manage to find her belongings, so hopefully something in there will help me understand what happened to Twilight." Rarity continued.

“Well, I’m going to stay here in Equestria.” Wind Dancer intervened, jumping into the conversation awkwardly. “Even if my house was burned to the ground, one doesn’t keep absurd amounts of gold hidden in their cellar for no reason. My house has already been rebuilt to look exactly as it did before.”

Each of the ponies grinned and chuckled at her statement. Wind Dancer hadn’t changed a bit.

“And you.” she continued, turning to Goldenroot.

She just stared at him for a moment, the group enveloped in complete silence as the tiny flakes of snow drifted around the magical bubble that encased them.

“Thank you.” the white pegasus finally said. “I believe we are on equal terms once again.”

“That’s good enough for me, Wind Dancer.” the stallion replied.

“That’s Lady Wind Dancer, Goldenroot.” she corrected with a smile. “Unlike you, I had my noble status restored.”

“Until you find out where you’re going to go, you’re more than welcome to stay with me for as long as you wish.” Prairie Star intervened. “I found a job as a baker and I have a very nice house in that village now.”

“I don’t know, Star, we might keep you up all night.” Vortex smirked.

Goldenroot turned and gave her another harsh glare at her vulgar comment, the pegasus just smiling more brightly at his reaction.

“We’ll keep it down.” Goldenroot said quietly, turning back to the brown earth pony.

The group faded back into silence for a minute longer, turning their attention back to the tombstones and just staring at them as the snow gently landed, melted and rolled down the surface of the bubble surrounding them.

"Miss Rarity?" Goldenroot asked, breaking the momentary silence and turning to the unicorn. "When you do find out what happened to Twilight, I think you need to tell Princess Celestia. I worry about the princess. I've gone to visit her in the prison below the castle a few times now, but every time I see her it's the exact same thing. She's completely traumatized from the incident. She doesn't eat, she doesn't speak, she hardly even moves. Even when you address her directly, she simply stares through the barrier, right past you like you're not even there."

"I don't think she's actually come to terms with Twilight's death and the fact that Princess Luna, her own sister, has been so busy with the political state of affairs that she hasn't had the time to see her even once, only makes her situation more depressing."

The stallion paused, returning his gaze back towards the tombstones.

"I just think she might feel better if she knew what happened to Twilight, even if it's not exactly something she wants to hear." he finally continued.

"As soon as I find out what happened, I will tell her." Rarity replied, trying to force a reassuring smile.

Pausing, the unicorn's fake smile vanished and she gently closed her eyes.

"But I can only hope that she will believe me when I tell her. If she doesn't, then I fear she will remain this way forever..." Rarity continued, "...or at least until she is no longer willing to endure the horrible pain and tragedy of her life."