

The Eversleep And Endless Sky

By EvenMotion



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The Eversleep

Chapter 1

The pale moon hung high over Equestria. Nestled in the sea of stars, it cast a cool glow upon the sleeping city below. Stores and homes were dark, and the streets were empty save for the few who called the night their own. Royal guards roamed the city ensuring the city of Canterlot was safe and secure. But the torches they carried were not the only lights within the city that night. Light spilled forth from one of the rooms within the castle, built into the mountains above the city.

The room belonged to Princess Celestia, the regal and undisputed ruler of Equestria. She looked out over the city through her window, her mane flowing behind her in a river of colors. Her body felt sluggish, and her breath came slowly. Her form was that of an alicorn: a regal pony with the wings of a pegasus - albeit larger - and the horn of a unicorn - though far longer and more deadly. Her white coat shone in the light, but it looked unkempt and ragged. On her flank, the sun still shone its full color.

At least Celestia knew what was happening. She had known since winter came to the kingdom she shared with her sister, Princess Luna. The sun was becoming harder to raise over the land; to fill the land with its light. She knew Luna had an idea of her condition, but her worry was still bottled within her. That would change tonight.

The royal princess lit her horn with magic, sliding her bed to the corner of the room. In its place was a previously hidden door which she pulled open. Inside was a full set of battle armor placed around a model of her figure. She slid the model into the center of the room, breathing heavily from the exertion. Celestia attempted to place on the armor, shoulder pads first, pulling with her teeth to secure the straps. The exhaustion crept up on her, and the grip she had slipped. Struggling with it for a moment did no good, and she was forced to let go of the ties she had in her mouth. The armor sagged for a moment before sliding off and clattering to the floor.

The other parts jingled as she bumped into the armor on the model to lift the fallen piece from the door.

A soft knock on the door resounded in the room. It was followed with the voice of a trained stallion, "Is everything all right Princess Celestia?"

She sniffled, trying to stifle tears from forcing their way out. Her composure returned slowly.

"Princess?" The voice came once more, with more urgency than before.

"Yes." Her voice wavered for a moment, before it came clear as day, "I'm quite alright; however I require your assistance this evening."

The pegasus guard that once protected the chamber entered to see his ruler standing in the center of the room. Her armor glinted in the torch light and she moved her head towards its direction. "I have not been accustomed to wearing armor. Perhaps you would be able to show me how it is supposed to be secured?"

"Of course, your majesty," he replied. His coat was grey and tough, but his eyes were a soft brown. He grabbed a piece of the armor in his teeth, and began to strap on the body first. His hooves were gentle, but firm. The guard pulled slowly, testing the tightness of the strap, before retrieving a new piece of armor.

"What is your name?" She asked curiously.

He pulled the cord on another piece taut, and let it drop from his teeth, "My name is Sky Shroud, your majesty."

She nodded. Another piece was firmly tightened into its place. Her mind drifted away from the loyal guard attending to her, gravitating to the Throne Room where she held court during the day. Her thoughts flowed towards the one mind in the room, one which did not hesitate to accept them in kind upon feeling them.

Celly? Luna's thoughts were rampant with surprise and concern. The voice she projected was that of a worried and curious sister. *Its still very early for you to be awake, are you-*

Luna's thoughts ground to a halt when she paid attention to Celestia's emotions. Sadness, courage, and... fear seeped through Celestia's heart and mind into their mental bond. *Luna, I need to speak with you.*

No. No, no, no, no, no... Luna's fear was bleeding into her thoughts. With each mental "no" Celestia could almost feel tears upon her sister's face, and she fought to keep them from her own.

Luna. It is inevitable. It's... Celestia took a moment to reign in her emotions, *it's the way it has to be.*

Don't leave me here...

I will be down in a moment.

"Your armor is secure your majesty."

She opened her eyes and made her way to the mirror. Plates of gold armored her neck and chest. It wrapped around her legs and strung along her body. Her flank plates glowed brightly with crystals that bathed the cutie mark below in purple light. Crystals orbited her horn and adorned her shoulder plates.

"Thank you Sky Shroud. You may accompany me this evening."

"As you wish, your highness."

Celestia made her way from the tower, her iron hooves clopping hard against the stone. Sky Shroud followed at first behind her, and then accompanied her by her side. They walked in silence down the stairs and hallways towards the Throne Room. The torch light dimmed as she past, as if to mimic her own fading light. If Sky Shroud had noticed, he said nothing.

She was feeling her body drain more of her magic away as she walked into the throne room, where Luna sat, quietly crying in the dimly lit room. Celestia moved over to Luna's side with great pain feeling it pulse in her side every time she took another step. She wrapped one armored wing over her sister's shoulder, and Luna turned inwards to sob into Celestia's body.

"No, no, no, no, no..." Luna spoke briefly, but it slowly devolved back into incomprehensible sorrow. Celestia smiled and held her close for hours, comforting and coddling the younger alicorn. As dawn began to approach the moon settled down towards the far horizon.

"It is time, Luna." She said softly.

Luna looked up at her older sister, who had conjured several scrolls, as well as one in which she began to write in. Sweat soaked Celestia's head as she strained to conserve her magical reserves.

Luna nodded sheepishly. Her horn began to glow softly and she levitated the quill from her sister. She signed the scrolls one by one and floated them down to the guard, who still stood at attention.

"Sky Shroud. As my last decree," she paused. Sky Shroud turned to look at her, shock filling his face, "you shall complete the following tasks. Ensure that the first part of my will is followed. You are also hereby promoted to be Luna's protector. Guard her with your life if necessary. Know that what is happening is not anypony else's fault, and that I want the best for everypony, both here now, and still to come. You are the sole witness to my last hours, other than Luna." She stopped to catch her breath. It came in laboured gulps now, "Lastly, ensure that this letter is

delivered personally to my student Twilight Sparkle, and that she doesn't do anything foolish. She will protect you both if it comes to it."

"Y..yes, your majesty." He managed the words at barely a whisper.

"Luna. My only sister. I hope that you will continue to cherish what you have." She kissed the top of her sister's head, hugging her tightly with one wing.

Luna began to cry softly once more, as Celestia broke the embrace to march towards the horizon. The moon disappeared below its resting place and Celestia began to well the power in her once more, calling on the sun, the body of warmth to rise and fill the world with happiness, and joy. A single tear streamed down her cheek as her iron hooves cracked the ground. Magic rippled from the ground and the air, joining into the light surrounding light.

"CELLY DON'T LEAVE ME! PLEASE!" Luna screamed, barely keeping herself understandable. Sky Shroud held onto the Princess of the Night, unable to truly comprehend the words she was saying.

Celestia cried as she gathered the memories of all of the people she had met; the young, the old, and those who were gone as well as the ones she loved and held dear to her heart. Twilight: her faithful student who was becoming a wonderful young mare in her own right. She called upon her studies to help her power one last spell.

She felt the warm light of her sun upon her face, even though it hadn't risen quite yet. With a pained sigh, she released all of the magic at once. The sun rose over the horizon, and she turned to face Luna.

"I love you Luna, please don't forget me." She whispered.

Her eyes closed, and she fell to the floor.

"NOOO!!!" Sky Shroud could no longer contain the young alicorn, as she fled to her sister's side. She wept over her body, shaking with each heave and heavy choked breath. Sky Shroud walked slowly over to the Princess's body, his own tears splashing on the floor. He knelt down to Luna's side and coaxed her off. With a tender grip he used every muscle to lift the Princess of the Sun into his hooves, beating furiously with his wings to keep steady. He flew slowly to the center of the room, and lay her upon her seat. He walked to the doors and slipped through them.

"FETCH THE CAPTAIN!" He called, flying from the doors.

Inside Luna crawled her way over to her sister's body, still heaving from the tears that still came freely. She nuzzled her sister lovingly, feeling the cold plates around her sister's body. "Please... don't leave me alone..."

The bells in the tower rang, slowly bringing its toll upon the city. Clouds gathered in the sky as the weather patrol shirked their duties for the procession, and the news that accompanied it. Everypony seemed to be out on the street waiting for the gates to open, so they could see that smiling face one last time. The news spread like a plague among the city and out into the far reaches of Equestria.

The great monarch, the bringer of the sun, their dear Princess Celestia was dead.

Somewhere within the crowd, a group of musicians played a slow requiem as the procession opened the gates from the palace into the city. The lead figures marched to guard those others behind them, carrying the coffin of their leader. The clear crystal coffin allowed the crowd to see their beloved leader. It was wrapped in a golden frame encrusted with amethysts. It was built so that the light could reflect the color onto their beloved leader and be rebounded off of her armor.

Ponies around them cried or stared in shock and disbelief. Some young fillies tossed roses from baskets they carried, mixing red with the beginnings of a snow shower falling from the clouds above. Unicorns around them took the same lead and used their magic to change some of the falling snow to rose petals. All of the guards fell to one knee, and as the procession past they rose and followed closely behind Princess Celestia's favorite chariot.

Luna was inconsolable. Sky Shroud sat beside her, as she still tried to weep, even after all of her tears had left her. She felt as if another hole had been torn within her, right where her heart should be. Though she knew it would be a long time until things were set right, Celestia had to bear it as well. She sobbed silently with the knowledge that she had to watch it happen twice.

The procession continued down the street until it was on the main road to the countryside. While the procession continued towards Ponyville, Sky Shroud left Luna to her grief to accomplish the tasks Celestia had given. At any cost.

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Within a few hours, a group had been summoned to the grand throne room in the castle. The wind still howled against the windows and walls, battering it as a reminder of the tone of Celestia's peace. It was barely such within the room. A large table was set up in the center of the room, with

eleven distinguished ponies around it. Only one was a pegasus, the rest were unicorns.

Unicorns of the highest magical potential from around the kingdom of Equestria had been summoned by the final Will of Princess Celestia.

Sky Shroud sat at the head of the table, reading from the scroll, "... for the betterment of Equestria. You who have been chosen are to form a council of advisers and supporters to the kingdom. Under the rule of my sister, Princess Luna, you shall assist her in both governance and in her magical duties of raising both sun and moon. Henceforth, you shall be named the Council of Sun and Moon. These duties shall end upon the disbandment of council during the future time of Rebirth. Humbly, and graciously, Princess Celestia."

A long pause followed, as Sky Shroud wrapped up the scroll, passing it over to the Captain of the Guard. Some of the unicorns shifted nervously in their seats, and others looked deep in thought.

A light blue coated unicorn cleared his throat, "I for one, shall accept the new responsibilities that have been requested of me. I am not particularly fond of... how this has come upon us all, but it would be disastrous without the necessary talent."

"I agree," concurred another, with a thick accent, most noticeably from Stalliongrad. He was a deep grey unicorn, with a rough white mane. He was built like a workhorse with thirty years of hard labor deeply rooted into his form. He had red-orange eyes that seemed to burn when he spoke, "Professor Yorsets is right to accept a most gracious offer. Princess Luna is most certainly capable, but is in need of good, strong hooves."

"While I concur in the fact that the dear 'Princess' needs assistance, I am not confident that she can perform these duties at all. She grieves as we all do, but there may not be a chance for her to fully recover." This unicorn was wearing a fine business suit over his beige coat, stifling his green mane from being let out. It was slicked back with an unnecessary amount of hair gel.

One other spoke up, his deep voice smoothly seeping over the table, "It brings her dangerously close to becoming a beast once more. If she isn't already *her*." The unicorn had a violet body with streaks of silver and gold in his blue mane. His eyes were a deep red, and they slid across the table towards Sky Shroud.

Sky Shroud was losing composure, "Dying of natural causes seems out of order with what you imply, Starfall. I would be careful with your foalish misconceptions."

Several of the unicorns shifted uneasily in their seats once more.

“What proof do you have that it wasn’t an *act* to make foals of us? As I recall, you have no training in Magical Arts, while I have a better idea of such possibilities. I am the headmaster of Princess Celestia’s foremost school in magic.” He began to raise his voice, “If Luna has allowed herself to become Nightmare Moon once more, and hide her appearance, she would go unnoticed. She is an alicorn, and one who has proven to be unstable and unsuited for sole ruler-ship!”

Sky Shroud slammed his hoof into the table, “Nonsense! No pony who was as vengeful or spiteful as Nightmare Moon would stand to act in the same manner. If you do not wish to believe this true, then you can decline the will of the leader you served so loyally!”

The room was silent. It was minutes before Starfall began once more, “I will consider this when I form my answer.” The words dropped the room by a couple of degrees. Sky Shroud backed away from the table, “You have until tomorrow morning to accept or decline. Luna will return by then, and will be coronated as the leader of Equestria, so that she can at least preside over her sister’s funeral.” Sky Shroud stormed out of the doors of the Throne Room, and set off for Ponyville to deliver a particular letter.

When the doors closed, the other guards exited the room.

“Fillies and Gentlecolts,” Starfall began. “It appears that we have much to discuss, and more to fear than before...”

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Twilight Sparkle sat dumbstruck in the Ponyville library which she called home. Her hooves shook as though she had nearly died, moments ago. What she had seen...

No pony else was in the library. Even Spike was absent, and Twilight hadn’t the faintest idea of where he was. She had spent hours pulling books off of the library searching for anything that would disprove what she had seen - something that would burn away her memory as if it had only been a nightmare. Her teacher, the Princess of the Day couldn’t possibly be... But she had seen her. It haunted her thoughts, and kept her awake and numb.

A soft knock at the door did nothing to change how she felt. There was no movement from her. The knock came once more, but she still stayed seated.

“Twilight Sparkle. I have something important for you. A final letter from-”

She snapped back into her own world. Of course! A letter from Princess Celestia, proof she was still alive. Everything was just a horrible dream. She trotted over to the door and opened it. In the doorway, a fully armored pegasus stallion held a scroll in his teeth. He was being bombarded with snow flakes, whipped around by the wind outside.

She levitated the letter to herself, uttering a, "Thank you," before closing the door.

She ripped off the seal and opened the letter. As she read her reality crumbled around her. She was dragged back to the urgency of the letter's contents, and the sliver of hope it promised. It was all she needed to start digging through the shelves of the library.

Chapter 2

The group of unicorns summoned by Celestia's will was still gathered in the throne room. It was sometime after dusk, and although the orange and pink colors of the setting sun still provided light, the majority came from the torches in the room.

Starfall watched several of the unicorns were shuffling out, but a few remained. Bastion, a fellow teacher of his was one of them. A red pony with a mane like the embers of a fire- Dynasty- also remained. As for the others? He had forgotten their names by now, and didn't quite care to recall them. They were here, so it seemed as though he had their attention. As expected.

The hours before hand had been filled with debate on how to run Equestria in Celestia's stead. While their first words were heated, they managed to simmer to a less excited debate. They had been told that they were powerful enough as a group to raise the sun and the moon, provided enough time to recover between such magic. In Luna's obvious state of mourning, they were to assist her by raising both sun and moon. In time, they would relinquish the moon to her, and later still, the sun. Starfall disagreed with that.

They further talked about the affairs of the Kingdom. To ensure Luna would be able to fulfill her duties as sole ruler, she would be advised by their same council. They would start by taking care of the normal decisions of governance and teach Luna these tasks so she would eventually take over. Despite this wish, Starfall was vehemently opposed to letting somepony take over without many years of experience, and as far as he was concerned, Luna had none.

Protection of the kingdom had also fallen to them. Many strange and dangerous creatures still roamed unchecked in the wild parts of the world. While these areas were regularly patrolled, one thousand years of harmony seemed a thing of the past, and that it would not continue in Celestia's absence without new guards and a more prepared force of ponies. Starfall agreed, but was concerned that while this was the council's job, it could be taken back by the princess.

Which made him think, what was this council even for? There were almost no duties that they would retain after a year's worth of training the foalish Princess, and then years more of blunder and disaster from her

under their watchful eyes. Not to mention, the failure in leadership after they were dismissed would destroy everything they would have to fix. Plus, her past spoke poorly of her acceptance by the world at large. Who could trust a Princess who once wished to be their tyrant? Not even a thousand years on the moon would change his mind. No, something needed to be done, and these were the foals who were smart enough to join him.

"Starfall, perhaps it would be a good time to become acquainted with each other?"

"Indeed," he replied, "I do believe I was quite open about my opinions and goals during the meeting, but I have not learned nearly as much from any of you. Except Bastion, of course." Bastion lowered his head at the praise, "and your name was...?"

"Guiding Light." The mare bowed before Starfall, "I am from Germaney. Although I do not have much input, I do agree with your concerns. As do the rest of us gathered here." There were some nods.

Starfall smiled casually. Not only had he won over a group of Unicorns, he had inspired them to begin forming on their own. He looked around the room. The rest of the guard was gone, as well as the other ponies that were present. "Oh?" He tried.

Bastion stepped forward, adjusting his coat, "We are willing to assist you in taking action. Princess Luna is not entitled to the throne. It would be as if Nightmare Moon had won long ago, if the Princess turned back into her now."

"There is no way to take action quite yet. We may be displeased with our current situation, but it is the only one on short notice," Starfall argued.

"Perhaps not," Guiding Light countered.

Starfall raised his eyebrow in apprehension - and worry. He had wanted action, but he would have preferred to have it happen subtly. Not so openly and so soon. Though on the other hand, the longer they waited, the more likely Nightmare Moon would come and destroy their plans.

Conflicted, he watched as the red mare, Dynasty, opened the doors to the chamber. In walked in one of the guards, bowing his head to her before entering. She closed the door and followed close behind the guard until he stopped in front of Guiding Light.

"May I present to you the second in command of the Royal Guard. Lieutenant Storm Chaser."

The guard bowed, "Lieutenant is sufficient." Starfall acknowledged him with a nod.

"The Lieutenant's brother was in Ponyville during Nightmare Moon's return. He was with those that tried to apprehend her."

"He died a week later because of her." Lieutenant snorted, "That haughty princess must not be allowed to have the throne. My brother died to protect us from her alter-ego. Allowing Princess Luna to have that throne would betray all that he died for."

Starfall looked on with confusion, "You are but one of the guard. The others will-"

"Only a few respect Princess Celestia's decision. I can convince most of them to join us. I have done so with the captains already."

Starfall bit his tongue. This was too well orchestrated, nopony could have pulled this off in a few hours. "See what you can do," he started cautiously. Control was key, "We will meet before dawn, to assist Luna with the sun. I will decide on how and when to strike."

The other ponies nodded and each took a bow before him. As they left the chamber through their respective exits, a wicked smile played on his face. The alicorn would suffer for her sins... and he had an idea on how.

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The moon could barely be seen behind the clouds that plagued the sky. A gloom hung over Canterlot following behind a lone figure in the clouds. Princess Luna sat above the haze, staring into the stars above. Her light colored hair flowed behind her, underlining the crescent moon in the center of the sky. The wind that carried it ruffled her coat, trying to stab at her with the cold winter air.

She stretched her body out onto the cloud and buried her head in her hooves. While she was still wrought with grief, she had no tears left to shed for her sister.

Why? She thought, *Why did you have to leave now, of all times? Couldn't you have pushed it back for a few hundred years?* Luna shook her head. She knew that the Eversleep was never predictable. You knew when the time came, that it was upon you. She would know.

"Princess?" came a voice from behind her. Luna felt a soft landing on the cloud behind her, accompanied by the jingling of pieces of armor.

"Yes, Sky Shroud?" She asked. Her hooves dug into the cloud as she lifted herself to look at him.

"I wanted to let you know that the time for the Coronation has been set. After dawn you will be required to sit in the throne to accept the crown."

A long pause passed between the two of them. Luna's gaze passed to the moon above her, which was slowly inching its way towards the horizon. Sky Shroud shifted in place, a bit nervous, and paranoid from the

conversation after Celestia's will. He had been preoccupied with it all day, fulfilling requests and duties within the will. He had to go all around Canterlot for supplies and services, and even out to other towns just to complete specific requests. The more free time he had between mindless tasks, the worse his anxiousness became.

"Is there something else, Sky Shroud?" Luna spoke again, moving her eyes to lock with his. Pain was reflected in her eyes. She couldn't handle another betrayal, not even from somepony she barely knew.

Sky Shroud trotted to her side, "I am... uncomfortable with the council. I fear that they will simply use their new powers to enhance their personal goals and desires."

Luna rested her head against his side. "It will be fine." She didn't quite believe that herself, but she was willing to trust her sister. Celestia only wanted the best for her, even if her banishment was a blemish on that record. "I trust my sister's decision."

Sky Shroud nodded. "Yes, Princess."

Luna giggled a little. Sky Shroud was still too formal for her tastes but she found it amusing. She spread her wings and walked to the edge of the cloud she was on. "Please accompany me to the castle Sky Shroud." She lifted off of the cloud, "And thank you."

"As you wish, your highness." He trotted to the edge and took to the sky, side by side with Princess Luna.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. There was a nervous air among the denizens of the castle as dawn began to show its beautiful colors on the horizon. The castle's many cooks walked from their homes to the kitchen in the castle, filling the air with the scents of fresh fruit. The newly appointed advisors began to move through their guest chambers to the throne room. All throughout, Sky Shroud guarded the Princess as she roamed the halls for her coronation and burial rites for her sister.

He was nervous - clearly so. Not once did he pay attention to anything but Princess Luna and her safety. A few pots fell in the kitchens and he rushed to her side like a foal. Anypony else would have looked first. The princess just giggled at his actions, but he thought very little of it.

Eventually they made their way to the throne room, standing outside the doors until the appropriate time that they would enter in procession.

"Princess? Where is your crown?" Sky Shroud whispered.

"Oh. It was needed for the coronation ceremony, so I had to relinquish it. Only for a little while." She smiled sheepishly. Sky Shroud could tell she was barely holding it together.

He nodded in understanding. But that made him paranoid. Who had her crown? Would it be enchanted with evil magic?

The doors opened and he was jarred from his thoughts by the procession of trumpets that ushered them into the room. Guards stood on either end of the red carpet that they walked upon, each with a crossbow in hoof. Before Sky Shroud was able to react, the guards moved their crossbows into a firing position aimed above Princess Luna's head. They fired, and as the bolts got closer burst in to showers of rose petals that fell all around them. Surrounding the throne was the Council of Sun and Moon, all dressed in their finest clothes. Sky Shroud eased a little as the guards reloaded once more. When Luna reached the front, she sat in the chair. The council shuffled around to stand before her, Starfall in the front. The guards behind Luna aimed high in the air and fired.

There was a loud bang as the bolts turned into fireworks, spreading light into the chamber. Sky Shroud watched them reload and then turn to attention. He didn't like that, though he assumed it was for afterwards.

Starfall stepped to the front of the hall. "Fillies and gentlecolts. We are gathered here on a somber day, for a wonderful and joy filled celebration. As the last alicorn in all the land, Princess Luna, you are the only heir to the Kingdom of Equestria. As such, you will be required to take on all of the duties that the title entails. Are you willing to take Celestia's place, which she has left for you?"
Luna smiled, "I am."

He looked to the left of Luna. Standing there was a guard in silver and black armor adorned with trinkets of gold, bearing the royal seal of Equestria. His mane and tail were a brilliant golden yellow, and his coat a light silver-gray.

"And do you, Captain Ironhoof, Commander of those sworn to protect the leaders of Equestria, and the country they serve, pledge to continue serving until blade, bane, or old age take you."

"I do." The captain's voice was rough and rolled over the room like passing thunder.

"Then by the power vested in the council by Princess Celestia, reaffirm your crown, unless any pony wishes a challenge." He lowered the crown onto Luna's head with his magic, adjusting it slowly. He readied his magic to be cut loose, "as representative of the peoples will, I hold peace... No longer."

Luna was immediately assailed by pain emanating from the crowd closing her eyes and falling to the floor. She quickly filled the crown with

her magic, causing it to explode. Before her eyes opened, she was able to hear several soft thuds from in front of her.

Sky Shroud stood valiantly with more than ten different crossbow bolts lodged in his body. Dizziness began to take hold, blood leaking from each wound. A few guards rushed in front of him to protect Luna, blocking or taking another volley of bolts. Captain Ironhoof moved towards Starfall, drawing a knife from beneath the armor hanging above his neck. It left him exposed and the Lieutenant filled the gap with a bladed wing, cutting across the Captain's neck.

"Nightmare Moon will never rise again to threaten Equestria! Destroy Luna! Destroy the betrayer!" Starfall shouted.

Sky Shroud felt the adrenaline kick in and grant him strength despite the loss of blood. He nudged Luna towards the windows, the other guards fighting for the retreat, or clearing a path for the escape.

"No!" The husky unicorn shouted. He popped in front of Luna and Sky Shroud gathering magic around the remaining protectors. Another unicorn popped into the group binding her magic to the group and hurling spells at the attackers. She was overwhelmed by the forces she controlled and a perfect shot dropped her to the ground.

The room exploded with arcane energy shattering support beams and sending floor tiles into the attackers. Dust billowed into the room covering the sunshine and commotion from any kind of observation.

"Clear the hall!" Starfall shouted. Angry fervor consumed him from those who did not support his mission.

Wings beat furiously to push the smoke out into the clouded sky. The other council members used their magic to increase the speed the guards were beating their wings.

Eventually the dust billowed from the room leaving behind the bodies of fallen combatants and the stains of blood from the melee. Only one of those bodies belonged to a unicorn.

Starfall screamed in frustration using his magic to hurl some of the tiles at the corpses.

"Perhaps we should clean this now so we can induct the true ruling council?" Lieutenant offered.

Starfall eased slightly. "By noon," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The storm over Ponyville picked up it's fervor dropping snow and ice onto the town. With the weather patrol just doing their best just to keep the storm from getting worse, there was no one able to keep up to with the snow on the ground and the houses.

Most ponies were simply trying to enjoy a day at home with their families. Mothers and fathers played with board games with their fillies or colts, trying to forget the events of yesterday. But in the library, Twilight had fallen asleep face first in a book sprawled out on the floor. Ink was spilled out all over the floor, partially dried on the wood and on some of the table nearby.

A muffled snap startled her from her unintentional sleep, and she looked around mumbling incoherently. She noticed the ink on the floor and groaned. Magic covered her horn and cleaning supplies flew into the room from the kitchen.

Outside, the source of the noise was surrounded by a newly scorched hole in the snow. The hot dirt sizzled, bellowing steam into the air. In the center stood Luna, Sky Shroud, the assisting unicorn, and two guards, each with a bloodied weapon in their teeth.

"We must hurry Princess," the unicorn stallion panted. It was clear that a spell like that was not one he could repeat without rest. Sweat beaded on his coat started to freeze in the temperatures. With the guards on either end he lifted Sky Shroud and began a careful trot to the nearest building.

Luna flew ahead pounding her hooves on the door, "Please help! We need help!" Her voice wavered between bursting into tears.

Twilight shot up into the air at the unexpected noise and bolted across the room to the door. She yanked it open, "What's happ- Princess Luna?"

Without a second thought she entered, "No time. Get whatever medical material you can get your hooves on."

"Why, wha- oh Celestia." Luna's other companions entered the room with Sky Shroud, blood dripping all over the floor.

Twilight flung what ever books were around to the farthest corner of the room and trotted into the bathroom. In the meantime, Luna used her magic to remove the armor around Sky Shroud's body, placing it to one side. Sky Shroud began coughing.

"Stay with us, comrade." The grey unicorn said softly. He had retrieved a wet washcloth from the kitchen. It dabbed at the area around the crossbow bolts wiping the dried blood from his coat.

“Stormbreaker... Luna... It’s too late for me now,” he managed speech in soft tones. His body was losing feeling fast. Darkness began to shade his eyes.

“Sky Shroud...” Luna began. Even in his last moments he could see the pain of betrayal in her eyes; the doubt, the second guessing... it was all leading to tragedy.

“Do not lose heart, your majesty.” Sky Shroud used whatever energy he had left to keep clear words, “If you do, you will prove Starfall right. That wouldn’t be who... I died... to save...” His eyes closed fully now, and his last breaths came slower. He opened them slightly, raising one hoof to Luna’s own. He could see Twilight working whatever magic she had into the wounds. Luna was crying now, but he smiled and looked her in the eye. “You wouldn’t be... the one... I fell in love... with...”

Luna continued supporting Twilight with her own magic, but it wasn’t helping. She screamed in her head knowing that she had let down a friend... a friend who had loved her. She grabbed his hand. “Sky Shroud... don’t leave me. Please...”

His eyes closed once more, and he slipped from the world into eternal sleep.

Everypony watched her sob in silence, each lowering their gaze to their fallen friend. Twilight was the first to move, sitting besides the princess. Unsure, she tried to comfort her, placing her neck underneath Luna’s. For a moment nothing happened, and Twilight was scared she had done something wrong. But Luna lowered her head onto her shoulder, burying her face in Twilight’s mane.

The tension eased slightly, and the guards went about cleaning the mess of blood and fur on the floor. It was a slow process as much of the damage had soaked into the wooden floor. A clean white sheet slowly materialized above the body from the magic Stormbreaker weaved. With Stormbreaker exhausted and Princess Luna barely active, they took frequent breaks so that he could recover.

By the time they had finished preparing his body it was already dusk. The storm outside had finally been cleared. Through the clear skies, the bells of far off Canterlot rang, signaling the new leadership had taken their place. Outside the weather patrol was already cleaning snow off of the roofs having them fall in heavy loads below.

Rainbow Dash was on her last stop before going home to sleep: Twilight’s House. She had gone first to Fluttershy’s cabin, knowing that she was too far out of the way for normal snow control. It didn’t take too long to clear the snow off which allowed her a chance to try to find Applejack.

There was no need to worry as she and Big Mac were plowing the road into town.

When her feet touched down outside of the library, she immediately regretted not going there first. The ground behind the library was absolutely destroyed. A solid trail of red stained the snow leading to the front door. Her mind went into overdrive: Was somepony hurt? Did Twilight get hurt doing magic? Did somepony else try to hurt Twilight?

She sped around the library and plowed down the front door.
"Twilight are you- ok...?"

Just entering the room was Twilight, a towel being shuffled around her mane. She stared at the pegasus for a moment, then turned her gaze at the door beneath her feet. "Uh, Rainbow Dash?"

Her words spurred the rainbow pegasus into action, lifting the door back onto its hinges, closing it quietly. "You're not hurt? But what about the trail of blood outside, and the crazy magical duel you had?"

"Rainbow, you're starting to sound like Pinkie. There was no fight, at least not here anyway." Her ears flattened to her head.

"So... what about the crater outside?"

"Look, I'll explain later. Now's really not a good time. Especially after what happened."

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow at that. Twilight was practically bawling louder than Luna was yesterday when... "I dunno Twilight. You were practically gone after the procession yesterday."

Twilight had no reasonable way out of that explanation. The letter was very specific about her silence. "I can't really explain why. I'm sorry."

There was a brief silence between them. The emptiness of the room was a huge contrast to half an hour ago. A light knock at the door broke the silence. The door swung open, and Rainbow turned to leave.

"Princess Luna?" she said in bewilderment.

She looked at her for a moment in confusion. "You're the Element of Loyalty. Your name was.."

"Rainbow Dash," the violet mare butted in. "Listen Rainbow, the Princess and I need to discuss something in private. Celestia wrote a letter to me before she died and judging by what's going on, it's imperative that I get information from her."

Luna looked at the two of them, wincing at the mention of her sister.

"Oh, and you don't think any of *us* are important enough to know what you're up to? Or that we aren't nearly as hurt as you are by what happened?!"

Luna bit her lip and backed into the wall by the door, "Celly's not... she's still..."

The words bit deep into Twilight. Her rage began to boil over, "You have no idea what I'm going through! You weren't practically raised by her, or even taught like her! I LOVED HER LIKE MY OWN MOTHER!"

Twilight lunged at Rainbow, slamming her into the door. Rainbow beat her wings and kicked off of the door sending Twilight flying into the bookcase. She zoomed across the room, but Twilight was expecting it. The only thing Rainbow saw was a blur of violet before two hooves connected with her chest. While the pegasus was trying to recover, Twilight leaped on top of her, pinning her to the floor.

"Stop." Luna said with very little conviction. Her mind was racing. Using magic to break the fight might hurt one of them. But she had to do something. The two ponies rolled into the writing desk, knocking the contents all over the floor beside them.

"STOP THIS!" Luna shouted.

The two of them stopped. They panted heavily, and Twilight was close to crying again. Twilight looked horrified at what she had done and backed up into the wall. "Oh no. I didn't... no, but..." she babbled on.

Rainbow stood shakily a similar expression of shock on her face. "Its... its ok, Twilight. I'm sorry."

"No, no. It's not okay... I just hit you. I wanted to h.... No, no, no, Celestia no."

Luna walked across the room to Twilight as she stood paralyzed. A sound crack resided in the room, and Twilight slumped to the floor. "Snap out of it, Twilight Sparkle. At least twenty other ponies lost their lives today over Celestia's foalish thought that anyone would trust me like she did. If I could wake her up, I would do it now, but she'll be sleeping for the next thousand years."

The hoof mark glowed a bright red under Twilight's coat. She teared up and shied away from Luna, fearing another blow was coming. Instead, the alicorn simply knelt in front of her and nuzzled her in apology. Twilight accepted it in kind, crying into her shoulder softly.

Rainbow Dash looked at Luna for a moment.

"She's not really dead Rainbow Dash," the Princess said once more, "She's fallen into the Eversleep."

Chapter 3

"Like I told you Twilight, there's no written information here in Ponyville. I doubt that there's any information in the castle on The Eversleep." Luna walked carefully, avoiding the books piled to the ceiling. Once or twice she came close to knocking one over, but she managed to keep it intact with her magic.

Twilight sighed. She had spent days looking through the library for any information. If she hadn't read every book in the library before, she certainly had now.

Twilight walked over to the barren bookshelves and placed the book in its place. "You're right. There's nothing here. Celestia said there was a book for it at home in her letter, but *you* said the castle doesn't have one. And you don't really know how the whole process works. Not how or when it happens to an alicorn, nor how to predict when it happens."

Luna frowned at that. She had combed through the archives when she tried to figure out what happened after she was sent to the moon. There was nothing there. In fact there was a whole three year gap in between what she remembered and the written history.

It dawned on her. Home. "Oh! Oh..."

"What? Do you know what Celestia meant?" Twilight looked at her eagerly.

Luna nodded, "Where we were born. But only ruins still exist."

"Well, then we'll have to pack for it. I'll let Rainbow Dash know so she can join us."

Luna winced. Anxiety filled her mind and her body reacted by shaking a little. "I don't know Twilight... it's not a place I... I really don't think it's a good idea."

Twilight sighed, "But it's the only place that could help! Don't you want your sister back?"

Luna hesitated. She was visibly torn. Go back to... *that* place and save her sister, or allow a full blown war to rage. A war where a few unicorns had enough magic to kill her outright.

"How do we get there Luna?" She repeated.

Sweat dripped down Luna's head. Her will wavered, still indecisive.

Twilight looked desperate. "Please?"

Luna's will shattered. She lowered her head and spoke very quietly, "through the castle ruins where you saved me..."

"We'll leave tomorrow then. I'll bring something to eat on my way back. Hopefully Spike will be ok with whatever he and Rarity are working on today."

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"Lastly, the city of Fillydelphia pledges it's loyalty to the Council." Bastion Yorets rolled up the scroll he was reading from. Magic guided it to one of the guards who bowed, took it into his teeth and walked out of the hall.

Starfall sat in the throne with a light blue set of armor accenting his features. He held one front hoof to his chin, while the other tapped lightly on the ground. A round table sat in front of him with a pile of scrolls scattered about in front of him. A map of Equestria with several figurines placed on certain cities sat in the center of the table.

Bastion summoned another figurine of an shining sun and moon, and placed it on the city of Fillydelphia. "Several cities prefer neutrality at the moment, as do a few select towns." He summoned several new figurines, each depicting a grey banner with black stripes. "But..." Bastion looked to Starfall who nodded to continue. Several figurines featuring a crescent moon eclipsing the sun appeared. He used his magic to place them on several cities and towns, joining those already present.

"There are cities who are in open rebellion. Their leaders call themselves the Kingdoms of Equestria. They recognize Princess Luna as the ruler of Equestria. They are also referring to themselves as the 'Keepers of Celestia's Will'."

Several of the unicorns snickered at the phrase, "Keepers of Nightmare Moon is more like it."

There were some laughs around the table. Starfall raised a hoof to quiet them.

"The main leadership is in Manehatten, which is as I understand it gearing up for major defenses. Stalliongrad is also ready for a major fight, and is the new Capitol." Bastion levitated a glass of water from the table in front of him, taking a sip. "Of course it is possible that they are moving the leadership out there to keep them safer."

"And that is all, fillies and gentlecolts. I propose that we begin to rally every stallion and mare to our cause. It has been hundreds of years since Equestria had needed an army. But in order to unite pony kind we must call

upon it's citizens to realize the dangers of the chaos those foals are creating!"

"Perhaps we should start with Cloudsdale or Manehattan." Bastion said. The room got suddenly quiet. A scroll was now open in front of the stallion's face. "Cloudsdale had rejected our sovereignty, and the city is moving away from here towards the edges of the Everfree Forest."

Starfall stood up. He walked around the table to the captain of the guard, Lieutenant. "Prepare the training fields for a large class. Bastion, take a scroll."

Bastion nodded, levitating a scroll and an ink pen in front of him.

"By the decree of the Council of Sun and Moon, every able stallion and mare must join the armed forces for a period of two years, or until peacetime befalls this country..."

The Council members quickly added phrases and changes to the manifesto that Starfall laid before them. As it quickly evolved into a declaration of power and hope, he smiled. They would love this council, no, this nation. The foolish public would be willing to die for it.

Or they would die for disobeying.

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"By a unanimous vote by the ruling council, each able mare and stallion are to be recruited for a Republic army. Please comply by coming to the town square for examination." The guards were going all around Ponyville shouting this same phrase in different variations.

The mayor stood in the center of the city, trying to shrug off her restrainers: two large pegasi. They each wore a redesign of the royal guard's armour to include the council's new insignia.

"We're a free village! You can't come in here and take people for some ridiculous cause!"

One of them hit her in the back of the head, knocking her unconscious. The two holding her let go, and her body slumped to the ground.

"Put her in chains and lock her in her home," came a voice from the side. A young pegasus in red robes walked out from the crowds of people. A hat adorned his head, with a tightly woven gold mane hanging to one side. The guards nodded and complied with his order. He smiled and looked down the streets.

Parents from each household said goodbye to each other as they left their homes. Young ponies cried or wished them luck in the days they

would be gone. Some of them were given a memento of home, but most went with a hope and a promise.

Bit by bit, they gathered in the main square in Ponyville. Many were nervous, and some were outright scared of what was happening. Each of them had saddlebags packed for several days journey, mainly food and water. The pony dressed in red approached the podium, clearing his throat.

“Residents of Ponyville, I would like to humbly welcome you here today. My name is Oath, and I am the newly elected Mayor of Ponyville.” The gathered crowd spoke in whispers, but Oath raised a hoof to silence them.

“For those of you that are confused about this change, it was made because the previous mayor endangered the lives of your entire town. You see, a large group of Equestrians have broken away from the council that Celestia appointed to begin a transition to an age of self-rulership. In her last hours, our beloved Princess commanded that a Republic be created!

“These... rebels believe that rulership under one pony is the way to continue forward. The way of tyranny! For nopony can replace the love and care that Celestia had for all ponies. Without her unbiased leadership, there will always be corruption and leadership under one, single pony. They would defy the last act of love that Celestia brought to Equestria!

“It is for this reason that you have been inducted into the armed forces. To reunite everypony under the guidance of the Equestrian Republic. You will be the greatest force the world has ever seen assembled.

“We will win. And when we do, your foals will remember the great sacrifices we all made to bring pony kind together, united under one banner!”

The crowd stamped their hooves in agreement, slowly growing into cheers and shouts of unity.

War was coming, and they were blind enough to embrace it.

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“How deep into the Everfree Forest is this place?” Twilight asked. They had already trekked a good way into the forest. They had passed the castle ruins an hour ago, before they began traveling along the edge of the cliffs. Every once in a while, Twilight gave a peek over the edge but couldn’t see past the mist.

“Not much farther. But the road there is a long one. We may not make it there until after nightfall, which means we’ll have to camp for the

night.” Luna replied. Her horn was aglow in magic pulling them gently along the edge of the woods, “At least Rainbow Dash didn’t take any of the tent stakes she was carrying.”

Twilight nodded, but sighed. At the edge of the forest they had run into several pegasi ponies. They were apparently scouting out a new location for Cloudsdale to set down since they had essentially declared war on the council. They offered for Luna to stay and rule from the city, but she declined in lieu of the mission they were on. Rainbow Dash volunteered to take her place instead, and Luna allowed it for a little while. It was mainly to humor her, but she did need someone to find out what was happening in the coming conflict. She had also given Twilight and Rainbow each a necklace so that they could communicate over the long distances by thought.

Rainbow? How is it out there? Twilight tested. Hopefully it was like one of the spells she had tried before.

Huh? Oh! Right, Twilight. It’s exciting! The weather factory is designing tornadoes, and the whole city is building a huge storm below it. From what it sounds like, we’re moving further away from Ponyville towards the mountains. Apparently its better hidden back there.

Why are you making tornadoes and giant storm clouds?

I don’t know. But they’re so cool!

Twilight wasn’t sure that was the kind of news she wanted to hear from Rainbow. It wasn’t so much that she thought dangerous weather was cool, especially since she expected Rainbow to enjoy stuff like that. The problem in her mind was that making weather into a weapon was possible, and - more specifically - that it was being done. She didn’t feel comfortable with those dangerous things being in the same place as her friend, let alone the population of Cloudsdale.

“Hey, Princess Luna?” Twilight sped up to catch up with her companion.

“You can just call me Luna,” she smiled, “I’m not a princess anymore.”

“Yes pr-, er, Luna. I was just wondering why Cloudsdale is moving towards the Everfree Forest. It doesn’t make sense. Even more confusing is that Rainbow says they’re making huge storms for fighting.”

Luna’s smile faded back into a frown, “Yes, well... There will probably be a lot of fighting from now on. Starfall seems to want to preserve a united world, but with denying me the right to the throne, some places didn’t agree with him. They’ll be fighting to either put me in power, or keep me from it.”

“Well, I hope you can go back to being a princess.”

"I don't."

Twilight stopped. "Why? Didn't Celestia want you to rule while she was... gone?"

She nodded, "Yes, but nopony wants me to be what Celestia was. They only want Celestia."

"I wouldn't mind if you were in charge."

Luna flushed red in her cheeks, and turned her head to the side, "Thanks."

They walked in silence after that. Unlike the previous parts of the Everfree Forest, this one was blooming with all kinds of wild flowers. The trees here looked like they used to be regularly maintained, not wild like the rest of the forest. The color was more vibrant here in shades of green, blue, red, yellow, pink, and so many others Twilight had to slow down to take it all in. But it was strange that these colors were only close to the edges of the cliffs.

"Luna, this place is beautiful. Is this still the Everfree Forest?"

She nodded once more, "This is the southern edge of the forest. Here comes the tricky part." Luna adjusted herself into a more grounded posture, magic emanating from her horn, "I call upon the founding makers of Equestria: Earth, Sky, Water, and Fire. Ones who have transcended the cycle of the great sleep, you have pledged your loyalty to the Kingdom of Equestria and its citizens. One of royal blood calls on you now to reveal the pain you are so burdened with. A pain so horrible that even through survival, I was used as a tool in it's destruction." Magic flared around her pushing her deeper into the ground. Four colored magic shimmered over the cliff.

"Princess Luna. The youngest of the Royal Line. Your inconsolable sadness allowed the jealousy of your sister to grow, and be taken by foul Nightmare. We have not forgotten the cries you shouted in moments of control to bring the Great Sleep early upon you."

Twilight was confused. Nightmare? Didn't they mean Nightmare Moon? Wasn't Nightmare Moon simply a creation by Luna to plunge the world into eternal night?

"We will allow you to share in our burden, Princess Luna. We will also open the eyes of the world that has forgotten, starting with young Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight flinched. Who was in that magical light? Why did they know her name?

The ground beneath began to shake. Earth heaved at the edges of the cliff expanding it beyond its normal size. Old fenced paths rose from

beneath the mist, melding softly back into the cliff. The temperature increased making the mist disappear into the sky above. Wind came and cooled the land as it shifted. Twilight lost her footing, and fell into Luna's side. She wrapped her hooves around one of Luna's clinging on for dear life. As suddenly as it began, it stopped.

It was eerily quiet, but Luna could hear the echoes of swords and screams in her head. Her panting filled the air mixing with the sounds of soldiers. She looked from side to side watching for a sword or javelin to come flying at her. The wind rustled the trees and she jumped forward carrying a huge weight with her on her back leg.

"Luna!" Twilight cried as she was lifted into the air, before falling promptly on her flanks, "What's the matter?"

Luna shook her head to the sides. The sounds were gone, leaving her in silence. She floated back down to the ground, and helped Twilight to her hooves. "Nothing. Old memories that are best left forgotten."

Twilight walked onto the path and looked over the railing. Her eyes went wide and she held her breath, "What... what is this place?"

Luna spread her wings and hopped in the air, landing softly beside Twilight. She felt as though her heart was going to break once more, "The city where Celly and I were born."

Twilight's eyes stared at the city below. Ocean waves could be seen lapping at the shore in the distance. Many of the buildings were smashed or shattered by something large, or burned black if not to its foundations. Above the city she could see across from her the castle of the royal pony sisters. From this angle she could see that there was far more of it built into the cliff. Once intact, tower skeletons climbed up the cliff walls. A central castle jutted out from the cliff into the city below, with smaller ones spreading out from it. The setting sun cast a foreboding glow on the land.

The two ponies walked down the path towards the city below. Luna stopped once to raise the moon, but was promptly stopped when another force took hold of it and dragged it into the sky.

Twilight asked a few questions here and there but they weren't substantial. She didn't want to upset Luna further. From the way the princess walked, it was apparent that she was very upset by just being here. They stopped at the bottom of the trails, now within the confines of the city. Twilight used her magic to pull out her tent from her bag, setting it up quickly.

"Do you mind if I make a fire? It is still winter after all."

Luna shook her head, "I'll get some dry wood from the forest."

It took a short while for Twilight to get the campfire ring right, thumbing through a copy of *Camping is for Everypony* that she had borrowed from the library. She smiled in triumph and placed her saddlebags on the ground. After a moment of digging she found the logs she had taken from the library's supply and hovered them into the center of the ring.

Luna touched down on the other side, placing the twigs she found onto the fire. With a tap of Luna's magic, the kindling was wreathed in flames. The fire slowly grew until it encompassed all of the logs. They sat outside for a few minutes before Twilight pulled a small pot from her bag. It hovered over to settle on the fire. A few packs of nearby snow hovered over the pot and fell right into it.

"Want some soup when it's ready?" Twilight asked.

"Sure!" Luna said. She was hungry from all the walking and the magic she performed.

The pot slowly bubbled over the fire. Twilight went about her work, adding small packets of powder into the pot. It smelled delicious.

"What are those?" Luna pointed her hoof at the empty packets by Twilight's side.

"Oh these? Instant soup mix. Just add hot water and it makes a delicious onion soup broth." She chirped. Her magic grabbed hold of something in her saddlebags. The fresh vegetables were coaxed out and dropped into the pot. "I like adding a little something to it though. Spike taught me how to make this when we went camping on the roof of the castle in Canterlot."

Luna licked her lips in anticipation. Instant soup sounded funny, but it smelled good, especially with the vegetables thrown in. The pot hovered off of the fire and poured itself into two bowls that had slid out of her other saddle bag. Luna hovered the soup over to her and took a sip.

"Delicious!" Luna said joyfully. She quickly drank down the contents of the bowl letting the tangy liquid dance on her taste buds. The warmth settled down in her stomach, and she patted it with one hoof.

Twilight giggled at Luna's antics and drank more of her soup. When she finally did, she put the bowls in the pot and boiled more melted snow to clean them. Eventually they were done, and she poured the water into the dirt and repacked the pot and bowls into one saddlebag.

"I'm going to get some sleep for tomorrow." Twilight said, "I brought an extra sleeping bag so you could use it."

Luna nodded and followed Twilight into the tent, letting the fire burn out on its own. She tucked herself away in the extra sleeping bag, settled behind Twilight.

“Good night, Luna,” Twilight whispered.

“Good night, Twilight,” Luna responded in kind.

As Twilight fell asleep, Luna was overcome by the feelings she had been holding back. A single tear left Luna’s eyes, and she sniffled. *I’m home Celly. I’m...* Luna cried softly into her sleeping bag. The fire outside turned to smoldering ash, and the moon took its place above the city, covering it in a fresh layer of sorrow.

Chapter 4

The sun was peeking over the horizon when Luna rose from her sleeping bag. It was rare that she slept through her own creations passing, but she was overwhelmed by the situation she was in. The sound of breathing filled the tent, coming from her right. She looked down at the violet pony sleeping in relative peace. Twilight had no idea on what this place held, nor what it meant to her and Celestia. She needed time to clear her thoughts, so she walked out of the tent and into the cold morning air.

One of the first things she noticed was the sound of the ocean, which seemed to fill the whole city with tranquil sound, soft enough that it didn't wake her. The back and forth of the tide hid the rising sun, which spread beautiful oranges and pinks across the sky. She watched the giant ball rise up over the waves, basking the city in light. It was too bright, however, and she raised her hooves to shield her eyes.

"Mmm... Luna?" came a voice from behind her.

Twilight was half out of the tent, with her mane sticking out in all directions. Luna snorted, and stuffed her hoof into her mouth.

"What?" Twilight said groggily.

Luna pointed at Twilight's head. Twilight reacted by summoning a brush from inside and going over her hair several times, until it straightened out.

"Better?" Twilight kept her facial features flat.

Luna giggled a bit, but nodded.

Twilight grabbed what was left of the vegetables for breakfast, and split them between her and Luna. She didn't bother with the mind link with Rainbow Dash. Knowing that silly filly, she was still sleeping in whatever place she found.

"OK. Princess Celestia said that whatever answer we needed is in the city. But where do we start?" Twilight asked.

Luna floated up into the air to get a better look around. She didn't know where exactly to start, but she had an idea. "If there's anything left of the library we can start there. But it might take a couple of days to search the whole city." Twilight raised an eyebrow at her. Luna continued regardless, "We'll probably have an answer before we get to that point."

"Where's the library?"

“By the castle. It should be one of the marble buildings in front of the main gates.” Luna replied.

Twilight floated her saddlebags to her back, tightening them in one fluid motion. “Let’s go.”

It took an hour of walking for Twilight to get a feel for how massive the city actually was. By ancient standards she had read, this city was comparable to the size of Manehattan. Without running everywhere, it could take hours to go from one end of the city to the other. She was starting to realize that the path they took was really the long way around.

The buildings for the most part weren’t very tall, mainly keeping a one to two story height. Most of them were made from stone or brick, and many were a simple combination of the two. Some holes abounded in the ruined structures, likely for wood support beams. Unfortunately time had gotten the better of the average structure. Without support many of the buildings had fallen in on themselves or were plain ruins.

The more disturbing structures were the ones with damage done to them. Some of the ruined buildings had huge holes through them with single marks or discolorations from strain. Other structures were just completely absent. It was almost like someone laid the foundation for a new house and simply forgot to build it. There was one they passed where Twilight stopped to shuffle through the rubble and found part of a doll, made from some tattered cloth. Half of its face was missing or intentionally sewn that way. Its single eye seemed to look at an odd angle as it bulged from the cloth.

Twilight was starting to feel sick, but her curiosity got the better of her. She cleared a little more of the rubble away until she hit something metal. Her hooves dug around it slowly removing the rubble before her stomach pulled her to the side. There, under the rubble was a rusted crib and the... the...

Twilight lost whatever she had eaten for breakfast to the floor outside. Her sickness turned to grief, and confusion.

“Twilight! Are you alright?” Luna flew over to her. She glanced inside the building and looked at the doll on the floor.

“Look father, a present!”

A young filly carried a doll with half a unicorn as its body. Her eyes were big and red, with only slits for irises.

“No... She’s taken her too...”

Luna gripped her head as it swam with visions. Her head felt as though it was going to burst from sudden pain. She fell to her haunches and grabbed her head with both hooves.

The door was ripped from its hinges as more dragon-eyed ponies brandished weapons or even kitchen pots and wooden spoons.

“The young one wishes another doll?” One of the ponies asked, turning to face the filly with his neck at an awkward angle.

“Mama Nightmare says I can have Daddy be just like this one.” She held up the doll in her hands.

The sound of distant screams and fire filled the air, joined shortly by those of her loving father being hacked apart.

Twilight was crying as Luna’s vision returned to the present. Her whole body shook as she rose clumsily to her feet. She put a wing around Twilight and nudged her back onto the road.

“Why? Why would a foal be here like that? I don’t understand!” She managed through her cries.

Luna calmed herself as best she could, “Its not something you want to know. Just try to calm down.”

They walked on towards the library. Luna eventually soothed Twilight to the point that she could walk on her own again. But after the discovery of the doll, it was a bit different. Twilight never looked inside a single building as they passed.

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“As requested, we have brought winter to a close today. The first official day of spring will occur tomorrow as scheduled. The fields are ready for training, however.”

Starfall poured tea for himself and Bastion. They were seated in one of the private halls in the castle. The room was plush with comfortable furniture ranging from the one pony seats they were in, to a beautiful red sofa with an engraving of the sun on each arm. There was a small table between the two of them made of hard wood that was clearly old and refurbished. The carvings running along the base were hand crafted and followed all the way down to the feet of the table. Several windows flooded the room with afternoon light.

Starfall yawned softly. Raising the sun for the council was difficult and downright exhausting when only half of the council was present. His only saving grace was his protege, Bastion Yorsets. When he headed Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, Bastion was his right hand stallion, and his partner in many of his research studies. It was good that the relationship traveled into politics.

"How would you like the forces to be set up?" Bastion asked, raising his teacup to his mouth.

Starfall lifted his own cup and drank some of its contents. The cup settled back in place, and he cleared his throat, "I would like to see the division along the lines of each type of pony. A ground unit of earth ponies, an air unit of pegasi, and a separate unit for unicorns. I would like the ground and air units to be trained in hand to hand and ranged combat. The unicorns however will be a division focused through a few select individuals. I'm thinking of applying our research on weaving spells to this division."

Bastion raised an eyebrow, "The ritual for weaving is fairly simple, but with as much magic as you're thinking of using it could become completely unstable."

"That's why I want you to head this division. You are the most experienced unicorn in the Republic besides myself on the ritual. I trust you above all else in this matter as well. Without fully understanding the others, I simply cannot trust them with possibly some of the most powerful magic in the world."

Bastion's eyes lit up with pride. His former teacher and respected leader was entrusting him with leading their army. "I accept. I am honored that you think of me so highly. I will make them the greatest force ever seen." He stood, bowed, and trotted happily to the fields below.

Starfall stayed in the room for a while longer. The warm tea was good in the lingering cold weather. He walked to one of the windows and peered down below. The new army he had fashioned for his empire was starting their training. Soon they would be able to bring down the rebellion looking to keep Luna's leadership.

But, still he worried. After the death of Remedy Rose, her followers in Paris were itching to get revenge. Stormbreaker witnessed it first hand and had swayed them to his cause. With his fellow ponies in Stalliongrad, he had thousands of hardened ponies ready to fight for his cause.

He drank what was left of his tea and called for one of the maids to tidy up the chamber, before returning to the throne room, to plan his strategies.

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The life of a politician was boring. There was no flying, no pranks, no excitement. Rainbow Dash wanted nothing but out of the politician's seat. Plus, her parents had already moved out of Cloudsdale after she took the job on the weather patrol in Ponyville, so there was nothing really to do. Except get into trouble.

Trouble she seemed to narrowly avoid as the rest of the city was not focused on her antics, nor on other minor trouble making from some of the fillies in town. A huge storm was brewing beneath them, tended to day and night by almost anyone the city could spare. The weather factory had stopped delivering any new storms to Canterlot, or the surrounding cities and towns. They had allowed a bit of sympathy to her town by rangling wild storms over the Everfree Forest in Ponyville's direction. With winter wrap-up underway, it was well needed rain that would be coming its way.

She was concerned that there were classes on fighting taking place. Pegasi carrying truckloads of armor and weapons had started to come in big time from Manehattan. Though she was curious why they only came in from along the tree-line.

Today, her only mischief was to find out exactly what was going on. To do that, she'd have to sneak into the important meeting with Stalliongrad's diplomats, and more importantly, not get caught. The pegasi that came as diplomats were bulkier than Big Macintosh, and she did not want to be on their bad side.

Fortunately, one of Cloudsdale's diplomats found her poking outside the hall and dragged her inside the room for the meeting. She was a short pony, but boy was she witty. Not a single prank slipped by her, and Rainbow was becoming bored with trying. The mare was a lavender pegasus with a paper and ink quill on her flank. Her hair was a deep blue, but cropped short to her head.

Unfortunately she was stuck between Cloudsdale's worry-wart of a mayor, and the burly pegasi she didn't want to be near.

"Who is this?" one of the pegasi diplomats said. His accent was thick, and Rainbow fought the urge to giggle.

"Princess Luna's representative. She has direct contact with the princess," replied the mare who dragged her in. The two pegasi looked at Rainbow with awe.

That's what I thought, Rainbow mused.

"I am Peace Bloom, official representative of Cloudsdale. I'm pleased our invitation reached you so quickly," the mare continued. "As you can see we are building defences as best as we can. Though the storm is a big deterrent. We were wondering if you might be able to spare some forces to train our militia. We also have almost no weapons, save for what we can make."

One of the representatives from Stalliongrad stepped forward, "I can try to get weapons for you, but we believe that Starfall is looking towards Manehattan as his first target."

Peace Bloom shook her head. "We're going to be starving his fields of the rain they need. Do you think someone who overthrew Princess Luna and took over Canterlot in a mere day would ignore such a threat to his nation? He'll take this place without support!"

The representative who spoke looked at his companion who simply nodded once. He turned away from his comrade and sighed, "We will do our best to get something for you Miss Bloom. Troops or weapons or both - though the chances of the last occurring is very slim."

Peace Bloom smiled. "We appreciate your support. If he turns to Manehattan, we will send troops to support you in kind, as well as some other... fun things."

The burly ponies grinned. "Until next time, Peace Bloom. Miss Dash." They bowed in respect to both Peace Bloom and Rainbow Dash before exiting the room.

Rainbow wasn't quite sure what to make of the meeting. It was a shorter conversation than she had expected to happen. She looked to Peace Bloom for any explanation.

"Well?" Peace Bloom said.

Rainbow looked at her quizzically, "What?"

"What does Princess Luna think of the discussion. You were filling her in, right?"

Rainbow Dash laughed nervously, "Of course I was! I wouldn't forget something like that. She's just a little busy where she is." Her mind went to the necklace and she started to think... hard. *TWILIGHT. DOES LUNA THINK THAT STARFALL WILL GO AFTER CLOUDS-*

Rainbow! Don't think that you're screaming! Think that you're talking normally! The response from the other end sounded pained and irritated.

Oops. My bad. Let me explain what happened in the meeting I'm at.

Luna and Twilight returned to the tent sometime after the moon rose over the horizon. This time, Twilight built the fire without Luna's help, and threw the pot on to make more soup. Their supply of snow was dwindling, so she made a point to fill a water bottle with some melted snow after she cleaned the pot.

Twilight didn't focus on the pot as much as she did on the tome they had found. Luna was reading the contents as quickly as possible, flipping the pages in almost a steady rhythm. She hadn't forgotten how they found it, nor the magic that hid it.

Luna had sensed the magic as soon as they left the library. A warm breeze blew the strong scent of sunflowers across her path. They were her sister's favorite. It was also the scent of her sister's magic. She took off after the smell, barreling down the streets towards the castle.

"Luna! Wait for me!" Twilight tried her best to keep up with the princess, barely managing to keep her pace.

They passed through what was left of the front gardens first. The plants here were overgrown, and had dug into the stone path, overgrowing much of the rubble it created. Vines stretched over many of the garden walls and paths, leading to the growth covering the main hall ahead of her. Luna slowed to a walk as she entered the hall before her. Twilight caught up to her and walked over to her side.

The central hall was filled with paintings all over the ceiling and the walls. What was left of the roof depicted what the city may have looked like in its glory days. Sprawling streets filled with carts of food and merchandise was very different from the buildings in Canterlot. Homes held lines hanging over the streets filled with clothes out to dry. Above the city, the trees produced all kinds of fruits, being carried by alicorn and pegasus alike. High in the center was the sun shining down on the city. Below it was a moon mosaic, followed by the floor designed as a nightly reflection of the ceiling mural. The walls were of fights she had never heard of, and of coronations she had never seen.

Luna made a beeline for the moon in the center. She could feel the magic coming from the floor below her. Carefully she tapped the floor with her hoof, listening for the hollow response. It was there. Her horn lit up with magic and the magic below her responded immediately.

Use this well, Luna. Her face lost some of its color. It was Celestia's voice, but it sounded... young, pained, and inexperienced. How long had this been here?

Twilight backed up from the center. Luna rose into the air as the tiles spun around in a spiral pattern lifting gradually from its place. The moon was torn up by the magic and the tiles hovered around the Princess of the Moon. They began to snap back into place, forming a crescent moon, instead of a full moon like before. In the empty space, a small book lay in wait, filled with paper sticking out at odd angles. It was as if the book was used yesterday.

Luna floated back down to the ground and hovered the book into her waiting jaws. They left the castle shortly after that.

The two of them ate the soup before any part of the book was discussed. Even so, they stayed silent around the campfire for a while after eating. The sound of the ocean echoed off of the cliff walls keeping the silence from truly intruding.

Luna began first, "This book contains research that was conducted by my sister, shortly after a plague hit our city. The research focusses solely on the plague for a while and is discontinued after a certain point. Around the same time, my sister began to study the Eversleep.

"According to her notes, the Eversleep is a phenomenon only affecting alicorns," Luna began. "It is a part of the life cycle of their immortality, just like a Phoenix. When the Phoenix bursts into flames, it rises immediately from the ashes to be reborn. When an alicorn enters the Eversleep, they "die" and rise again a thousand years later. It may happen many times during their lifetime, but each time their body is vulnerable. If their body is destroyed during the Eversleep, they cannot return after their sleep. But they can become something else."

"Like what?" Twilight asked, trying to take in all the information at once.

"They can become the embodiment of their special talent and use it to serve the lands of Equestria. Remember the voices at the top of the cliff?"

Twilight nodded.

"Those were the combined voices of Earth, Wind, Fire, and Sky. They are the oldest known alicorns to have grown beyond their Eversleep. They embody the elements they are named after."

Twilight nodded slowly. She understood that... sort of. "Why doesn't anypony else know about them?"

"No pony else can summon them. Only those of royal blood can. With Celestia asleep, I'm the only one left in all Equestria who can."

Twilight was silent for a while. She was intrigued by all this information, but it didn't make sense why Celestia had studied all of this. Maybe a school project? She stood up and sat down next to Luna.

"So, was there anything in there about bringing someone back early from this... sleep?"

"Yes. Its simple, but difficult. It requires a lot of magic to perform and it will take some time to complete. More importantly, I'm the one who has to cast it."

"Why is that a problem?"

"If Starfall catches up to me and stops the spell, we'd have to start all over again. Every day for a month, I must tie together the hours that everypony and every creature sleeps. Once I have enough sleep gathered, I can tie it to Celestia's time asleep. It would be as if she had slept those hours herself. It could take a little longer or shorter to gather all the time needed to make that spell occur, but I can force the number of hours to multiply."

"Well, great! I was about to say that one month was not nearly enough to make up for one thousand years of sleeping."

"There is the possibility that I might die from the amount of magic required to power the spell."

"Oh."

Luna nodded, "Which is why there was one more thing that I wanted to ask you."

"Anything you need, I'll try to help."

Chapter 5

Starfall was visibly upset. That usually meant that someone had delivered bad news, or had blundered something important. This time, he didn't even need to hear the bad news, he already knew what was coming.

He held up a hoof to silence the earth pony who was requesting more water. A small sigh escaped him, "I am well aware of the crisis, but as I'm sure you know, the city of Cloudsdale has rebelled against the republic. We do not have the capacity to assist you further, but be assured you will have rain within the next few days."

The earth pony motioned to protest, but revised that course of action. Instead he bowed, "Thank you for your time. I pray they will reconsider their actions and join Celestia's council in building this great republic." With that he walked out of the doors.

"Starfall, it has been a week since Celestia's death, and the melted snows are all that have been feeding the crops. We need to do something!" Guiding Light yelled.

The room was relatively cool, but without the rain, the heat was becoming excessive. Lakes and rivers they depended on were drying up, leaving very little water. The council unicorns were starting to get cranky.

Starfall held a level head through it all. The army was disciplined enough for the time being. The special unicorn division was also coming along nicely, assisting the drought with magically summoned water. Still, he was unsure of whether or not to take military action on Cloudsdale. Why? With Stormbreaker reinforcing Manehattan and pushing his forces to the contested border between Republic lands and those of the rebels any forces he would send would be unprepared. But his internal debate had left him with a reasonable solution. What was left was to test the faith of his 'loyal' council members. He bit down on his tongue hard and took in a deep breath.

"I have thought very hard these past few days on the matters at hoof. I have come to a kind of conclusion on the matter. Allow me to explain."

He summoned the map of Equestria to the table once more, using his magic to drag the pieces into their places. Several of the military figures sat around Cloudsdale's flag.

"You're intending to fight Cloudsdale? That seems like a waste of resources, considering that Stormbreaker is breathing down our manes."

Another of the unicorns responded. Starfall glared at him. The unicorn sat down immediately and stayed quiet.

"We have a very large military force, in comparison to Stormbreaker's. Therefore, we can deceive him into thinking we are responding with force to his move in Manehattan." Several flags slid across the map, passing through Fillydelphia. A blue glow of magic highlighted the trail the forces would take. Four smaller flags remained.

"However," he continued, "this would make it seem as if we are ignoring the threat of famine with a short term look at winning the war as quickly as possible. Many history books deep in the archives prove that ample food keeps morale high in long fights.

"This allows us to sneak several units through the Everfree Forest to attack and overwhelm Cloudsdale," Starfall slid three of the flags on a path through the Everfree Forest to the mountains near the city. "They will be more likely to send troops and arms to their allies in Manehattan, leaving them vulnerable and catching them off guard." He tipped the flag on Cloudsdale's position onto its side. "It will allow us to cut off any additional air forces or weather fronts."

Many of the unicorns nodded in agreement with this plan. Starfall smiled widely. They were won over easily enough, and it further enforced his leadership in the military aspect as well.

Good, Starfall thought.

"Do you have a plan for rainclouds after the city falls to us? Surely the weather factory will not be in working condition." Guiding Light chimed in.

"If we have to rebuild or repair the factory, we can wrangle the remnants of whatever clouds they've been building. We can also take advantage of the storms they've let run wild in the Everfree Forest. It should not be a problem."

Guiding Light seemed satisfied with that and nodded her consent.

"I would like to bring it to a vote. All those in favor of this military plan?"

All of the unicorns in the room raised their hooves. *Excellent*, Starfall mused.

"The plan will take effect immediately. Bastion, you will head the forces in the attack on Cloudsdale. Dynasty will accompany you as the leader for our ground forces. The attack will occur as soon as you arrive. Since it is still early, you should have enough time to reach your staging area by nightfall. If you're ready, you can attack them. They're guaranteeing blue skies."

Bastion and Dynasty nodded and bowed. They then left the room to their posts.

"The remainder of our forces will fall to Guiding Light and Lieutenant. Follow the path through Fillydelphia. You will be greeted hospitably, and it may force Stormbreaker's forces to retreat to Manehattan. If that occurs, don't push too much farther. I will join you in a few day's time in Bastion's place. The rest of you will assume the duties of court and council. You will also be responsible for raising and setting both Sun and Moon. Conserve yourselves."

All of the unicorns stood and bowed to Starfall, who in return bowed to them.

"Make them regret their misplaced trust," he said.

Permanently, his mind whispered to him.

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Rainbow Dash woke up to another warm evening in Cloudsdale. The bed she lay in floated in the center of the guest room. Three of the walls in the rounded room held open windows, allowing a cool breeze to float gently through her feathers. It also allowed the sounds of an unusually busy city to drag her from a nap. She hovered over to the window to see what all the fuss was about.

Many of the guards that had been sent to train and equip the militia were scrambling to pass out equipment and packs to the waiting hooves of the troops. These troops fanned out into the city, kissing their wives and children farewell before lifting off. From what she could see, they were headed out of the city, in the path that those diplomats had come.

"That's weird," she said aloud.

Her curiosity took over her laziness. Diving from the window, she flew down to the main part of the city hall. It was a large open building built into the clouds to separate two whole tiers of the city. Above it was the school she had attended in her youth, as well as the arena where she had performed her Sonic Rainboom at the Young Fliers Competition. The entrance was on the housing tier, where much of the clouds had been broken down into many different buildings, each housing many families, and a few small businesses.

The hall itself was simple, with few furnishings, save for a lavish carpet in the center, and tables spread across the room. In the back, at the end of the carpet no less, were several desks and a door into the room holding the mayor. On each side was an entrance to a large meeting room,

one of which she was frequently in to listen to diplomatic talks. That was her first stop.

She entered the room and found Peace Bloom busy writing on a scroll, while looking at a board with many different pieces on it. The burly diplomats from earlier in the week had returned and were adjusting different pieces on the same board.

Peace Bloom glanced up and beckoned Rainbow over to her.

"Rainbow, this is important. You need to get in contact with Twilight and the Princess immediately. Starfall has made his move towards Manehattan."

Twilight! I need to talk with Luna, like, right now, Rainbow said, the anxiety bleeding through the connection.

OK. Hold on, came the response. There was silence for a moment.

Finally, Luna's voice chimed in her head, *Yes Miss Dash?*

Peace Bloom, that's the diplomat from Cloudsdale, wants you to know that Starfall - I think that's his name - is sending armed ponies towards Manehattan. From the looks of it, Cloudsdale is sending almost everyone there to defend it.

Luna's response faltered. Rainbow could feel the fear in her voice. *They're leaving... to go to war?*

Yeah. I mean it'll be like that time in Appaloosa when the settler ponies used pies to subdue the Buffalo there.

Luna's voice was confused, *Pies? Rainbow Dash, be serious please. When ponies go to war, they kill each other. Its no joking matter.*

Luna said something else, but Rainbow Dash wasn't paying attention. Her whole body shook slightly just like she was during Celestia's funeral march. War was never really explained to her very well in school, nor did she pay attention much even if it was taught. The only war that she had ever heard of was the Reunification War of Equestria almost 900 years ago, and it was because Twilight found it in some old book she wanted to study.

Where are you two? She managed to think.

In a city below the castle where you freed me from Nightmare Moon. For now, stay there. If anything happens, come find us here. Don't put yourself in danger. I would never forgive myself if you got hurt. Neither would Twilight...

Ok. Rainbow lost her concentration on the connection.

"Is there anyone staying behind?" One of the Stalliongrad diplomats looked concerned. Rainbow was unaware of what conversation she missed, but her mind was just barely able to catch the conversation now.

“Yes. A small defensive force is here. Any who can will fight if it comes to it. We have already set up an evacuation plan.” Peace Bloom was sweating from anxiety. She wiped it off with her hoof.

“Good. Ensure that the tornadoes are ready to be sent tomorrow. If we can keep luring his forces forward to Manehattan, any tornado from behind will send his troops into a panic. It will be quick, and then we can take back Canterlot.”

She saluted them, and they returned in kind. “Just make sure the stallions and mares come home.”

“Stay vigilant Peace Bloom. May Celestia’s spirit protect you.”

“And you. All of you.”

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The morning sun glinted over the corner of the mountains on the edge of the Everfree Forest. An army of pegasi and unicorns marched through the mountain paths, hiding behind its relative safety from the city of Cloudsdale. Their armor lightly jingled on the stone from the many soldiers lying in wait. Unicorns began to channel their magic, slowly weaving their spell together. Bastion trotted to the peak of the mountain, in plain sight of the city and sat down. His own magic began to surround him flowing behind his eyes to see far into the city.

Pegasi sat behind their clouds with crossbows and swords as best as they could make. Some of the leaders looked concerned at the lone unicorn, scrambling to get pegasi into positions all along the storm clouds that the city was brewing. The weather factory was barely containing the tornadoes they had put together, reigning it in with any tools they could use to adjust its ferocity. Bastion outright laughed.

Their weaponized weather would be the death of them.

His magic reached out into the weave behind them and drew himself as its guiding needles. The magic flowed around his own giving him full control over the weave. He tested their strength, tugging slightly on the sources of the magic. The unicorns made no noise, or movement, so he finished preparing the weave’s ruthlessness to unleash upon the poor foals in Cloudsdale.

Starfall looked towards the sky, feeling the wind on his face through the throne room in Canterlot. He could see the far mountains and the storm that brewed beyond it.

The weave is ready Starfall, came Bastion’s voice.

A smile played on Starfall's lips, slowly pushing him into a wicked grin. *Wipe Cloudsdale from the map.*
Of course.

The screams from the Republic's army rattled the front lines of Cloudsdale, and woke Rainbow from her sleep. She rushed to the window only to witness pegasi pouring over the mountains. They flooded the sky with their feathers, pushing the air out of the way as they charged the city. A strange magical force followed slowly behind them. Like a tsunami, the ocean-blue magic poured over the mountains reaching into the sky. The clear skies gave way to the darkness, the wave consuming whatever lies she was trying to tell herself.

It was real.

"FIRE!" Yelled one of the Cloudsdale defenders below.

A volley of crossbow bolts flung themselves skywards at the charging pegasi. The magic wave reacted first, pouring in around the attackers and burning the crossbow bolts as they touched it. Not all were spared from the meager defenses, as ponies fell from the sky into the storm clouds below. Screams of pain and fear mingled as the wave closed in on the city. Clouds evaporated at it's touch, taking apart any defenses that Rainbow had watched the city build night and day.

"Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh," she began yelling, frantically trying to fly into the tier with all of Cloudsdale's homes. "WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! HELP!"

Ponies scrambled from their homes to look at the commotion outside. Panic gripped families who tried to leave with anything they could put their hooves on. Young foals and fillies could be heard crying among the confusion as scared parents tried to flee with them in their hooves.

The militia also left their homes and took to the sky, flying to the battle, drawing their weapons as they flew. The wave advanced upon the city. Just as it was about to crash right into it, the Republic's pegasi broke from behind it.

Pegasus fought pegasus as they collided with one another in mid-flight. Loosely gripped swords clanged against expertly trained Republic wingblades. Mare and stallion fell through the clouds to their doom below or dying as they fell. Hatred fumed through the ranks of hundreds of soldiers. The rough militia of Cloudsdale gave as many inches as possible to preserve whatever lives they had to protect. Any families still in the city did their best to escape the encroaching melee.

That's when Bastion began to truly weave the magic at his command. An expert at large magical spells, he began to coax the threads from each pony he had under his command. He worked out each individual string from the weave, letting the strands hang loose over the city. Then with a grunt, he dove each strand into the clouds, spider-webbing the different layers throughout. He could feel the clouds giving way slowly to the heat, allowing the storm clouds to rise through the gaps.

The storms burst through the clouds in random locations, spraying the soft platforms with fresh rain and ice. Lightning struck through homes and buildings, tearing up the battlefield. With the magic guiding the path of chaos and destruction, it worked its way into the weather factory. The walls cracked and heaved under the pressure of the storms within, without, and the magic piercing it from below. The ponies inside tried to stop the storms they had so carefully created, but they broke free of their constraints, smashing the walls into nothingness.

Rainbow couldn't believe what was happening to the city. Before she knew it, she was caught within the melee. Blades danced around her, flinging sparks or blood into the air. Her body was knocked around as she tried desperately to weave in and out of danger's way. One of the enemy soldiers swung wildly at her, and she reacted on instinct, rolling left and bucking him right in the head. The crunch was sickening and the stallion dropped through the clouds below.

Screams could be heard from all over the city as the magic worked their way into the sky. Anypony it touched started to lose their ability to fly, and fell into the storms below. Her instincts hit her full force now, and she bolted from the city, plowing through anything in the way except for the weapons she avoided. One slashed into her side and clipped her wing, but she spun to keep her momentum steady. The tendrils of magic rose around her like columns of water, which she launched herself around.

Just at the outskirts, she was grazed by one. Her wings locked in place and she started plummeting towards the forest beyond. Instead of fighting to stay up, she pushed herself to move faster diving full on. The air began to tighten around her body, and her breathing became weaker.

Bastion signaled to his counterpart at the base of the mountains by releasing her magic from the weave. The red mare licked her lips. The earth ponies behind her stood ready, but nervous. But that was alright, not that it mattered.

She would break them.

Do it, Dynasty. Bastion's voice was strained, but clear in her head. She wanted blood.

"CHAAAAAAAARGEE!" She cried, leading forward into the valley below. Fire burst from her horn surrounding her body as she ran into the rampant storms. The ponies behind her echoed her cry, raising the banner of the Republic of Sun and Moon and charging in after her. Swords sung from their sheaths as they entered the storm.

The air pulled into a tight cone, ripping through the air like an arrow. The ground came ever closer as Rainbow tried to push harder. She only had one shot at this.

The first thing that surprised her was the army of ponies waiting for her. Unicorns in the formerly hidden group lifted their veil revealing a small force of soaked earth ponies waiting to meet them. Dynasty burst into hysterical laughter, pulling her magic to her and forcing it into the ground below. She stopped in place allowing the earth ponies to charge past her. Her body strained to rip the molten core from deep below the battlefield, pulling hard on her magic to force it towards the surface.

Your weave begins now Dynasty. Don't overdo it.

She could feel Bastion's magic intertwine with hers, weaving more of their loyal unicorns' magic into hers. Her eyes went wide, and her smile deepened into insanity. Swords met somplace beyond her, where the armies fought.

Stormbreaker's unicorns were desperate to destroy the red pony. They sent up flares of magic, weaving their might together before unleashing it into the sky. Lightning struck at the pony, but her magic was already around her. The rain fled from her as the heat increased around her. Bodies of dead or dying pegasi rained down from the city below fueling her excitement and glee. It was all so perfect. She couldn't contain herself any longer.

Dynasty's laughter pierced the air as the earth ruptured beneath the enemy. Columns of lava burst from the broken earth, consuming the dirt that once held it. Her magic teased them into column sized whips, lashing out at the lines below. Ponies were flung skyward, as the clouds above lifted higher.

But her magic ended abruptly when a huge boom thundered from up above, sending a huge rainbow blast across the skies. Bastion also felt the magic ripped from him.

Fortunately, the magic had done its work. Whatever was being held by the weave fell into nothing. blast wiped whatever was left of the cloud city into a growing crescent shape on its edge. The storm cloud was ripped to pieces, clearing whatever advantage those forces had. Those remaining numbered less than a few hundred, and they knew there was no hope for a counter attack. Their weapons dropped to the ground, and they surrendered.

Rainbow felt her body flying low to the ground, and she pulled up, loosing her supersonic speed immediately, and flinging her skywards. The trail dissipated behind her leaving her sore and helpless. Eventually she slowed down to a stop, and fell back down to the river below. Her eyes shut from the pressure, and she flared her wings out. The air whipped around her slowing her descent into a slower dive, breaking her already injured wing. The pain was more than she could take, and as she fell into the water, her consciousness slipped away.

Whatever ponies remained from Cloudsdale's defenders, Bastion and Dynasty rounded them up and brought them into the muddy fields below. They stood side by side, surrounded by the Republic's forces. He looked them up and down.

They were worn, and afraid. Some were crying softly to themselves, while others were simply too shocked to react. They each stared down at the ground as Bastion walked by, accompanied by a whimper or too.

Bastion reached out with his mind to the council chambers. The mind he seeked readily grabbed hold. *Starfall, we are victorious*, he thought, pride filling his mind.

What of the city?

Wiped from the map.

Starfall laughed out loud, filling the chamber with dark laughter.

Excellent.

What shall we do with the prisoners?

Starfall went to answer, but instead cut the connection for a moment. He hadn't planned for prisoners, nor did he have space for them. The best thing would be to use them to rebuild the factory, but if they could be freed, it would be a problem.

A though slowly whispered its way to the front of his mind. *Kill them*, it said. His smile grew wider. That would solve most of the possible problems from keeping them. He could always have other pegasi rebuild Cloudsdale.

He re-established the connection to Bastion.

Starfall? Bastion's voice sounded almost immediately.

There weren't any prisoners.

Sir?

When the future hears of this battle, there will be no prisoners from the first battle of the war. There were no soldiers that survived. It is a complete and utter victory.

Bastion hesitated and swallowed hard. *Yes sir.*

He looked at the ragged soldiers who were only protecting their home, and steeled himself.

"All forces begin the march northward! We go to Fillydelphia."

Cheers went up in the crowd, and they happily complied, setting off at a brisk pace beside him. He nodded to two unicorns to stay.

Dynasty.

Yes, Bastion?

Let them believe they will be prisoners, but wait until we leave.

Then what?

Bastion could feel the excitement and anticipation bubbling through her thoughts. He steeled himself not to look back as his group passed over a hill. His gut screamed at him not to do what he was ordered. He bit down on his tongue and grated it along his teeth before gathering the will to give the command:

Kill them.

--*--

Rainbow coughed as hard as she could, expelling the water and mud from her mouth. Pain wracked her body all over. At least one of her wings was broken, but amazingly, she wasn't more hurt than she should have been. Especially after her sonic rainboom right near the ground. Incredible luck must have been with her for the water she landed on rather than the solid ground.

She mustered enough strength to lift herself to her hooves. Her body wobbled as she tested one hoof, then the other. Once she found that she could walk again, she set off through the woods, doing her best to find her way out of the forest.

Twilight... Twi...? She tried desperately to reach out for a connection somewhere.

Rainbow Dash? Is everything alright?

No. Nothing is ok, except for hearing your voice. Cloudsdale... She hesitated. The images flooded her mind, going by over and over.

Rainbow? What about Cloudsdale?

I... I don't know... I'm lost in the forest somewhere, and I'm bleeding I think. I can't fly and there was so much blood.

Rainbow?! Oh Celestia, I'll try to find you, just keep going south if you can manage it.

It hurts so bad, Twilight. I can't feel the ground or my wing. How long have I been unconscious?

I don't know Rainbow, just keep going.

At the campsite, Twilight was frantic. She had no idea what was going on with her friend, but it was clear that she was traumatized to no end. Luna was resting in the tent, and she had just started the fire for that evening. All of those duties left her mind as she opened the tent flaps.

"Luna! Something's happened to Rainbow Dash!" she yelled.

Luna shot straight up from her sleeping bag, "Wha- what?"

"Rainbow Dash is in the forest somewhere! She's hurt and trying to say something about Cloudsdale, but I can't understand her."

Luna took the necklace from Twilight's neck and poured her magic into it. She felt a tug from it, trying to return to its other half. "I'll go find her." Her wings beat the air beneath her, and she took to the skies.

Rainbow Dash? This is Luna. I'm coming to find you.

Luna? Oh Celestia, please. I'm so scared. They killed everypony... Why? The pain... it hurts so bad.

Luna darted through the forest, speeding past the trees, following the tug of the necklace guide her. She felt the pull increase and she slowed down, walking quickly forward. Before long, she found the light blue pony, who collapsed into tears.

"Luna, they killed..." she bawled into her hooves.

Rainbow Dash looked horrible. Her entire body had bruises and cuts all over it. Her mane and coat were disheveled, stained with mud and blood from her wounds. The pony simply leaned into Luna's coat as she lifted her onto her back, crying the whole way back to the campsite.

Twilight had paced for almost an hour until Luna returned, landing and taking off towards the sea.

"Rainbow Dash!" she cried, and chased after her.

They spent a good amount of time at the beach cleaning the blood and dirt out of her coat and mane. All the while, Luna worked magic on her to help ease the pain, and reset her broken bone. Rainbow's thoughts began to settle, slowly at first, but then quicker as sleep started to take her. When they brought her into the warmth of the fire, Rainbow Dash lay her head on Twilight's leg, and fell soundly asleep.

The three ponies stayed by the fire for a long time. Twilight and Luna watched the fire dance into the night. Its flames slowly grew tired, and the wood shrank to coals. Finally, when the moon was high overhead, the flames dropped to become a mere embers. The wind blew the heat into the air, warming them as they sat.

"I saw what happened." Luna whispered, "I looked into her thoughts and watched them destroy everything."

Twilight looked up at her, tearing.

"No one was spared. It was... haunting."

"Is Rainbow... going to be ok?"

Luna hesitated, then sighed. "She won't be the same again, but she will be alright. Maybe not right now, but soon."

Twilight was silent. It was a few moments before she piped up, "This will continue the longer we take."

"Yes." Luna's eyes cast to the ground.

"Then I would like to do what you asked of me."

Luna blushed, and stammered over her words, "B-but I thought... you said..."

Twilight looked more determined now. She slid Rainbow's head off of her lap, gently lowering it to the ground. She walked over and sat in front of Luna, staring right at her. "I don't know if I'm ready, nor if this is the right thing to do when the world is falling apart around us. But... I trust you. If it will save everything we know, then its worth it. Not just for us, but for every foal and filly now and in the future."

Luna smiled sheepishly. Twilight returned the smile, blushing in the process. She nuzzled into Luna's neck, before pulling away.

"You know that I won't force you into such danger." Luna finally mustered the guts to look her in the eyes.

"I'm volunteering. Whatever happens, everything will be ok."

The two ponies closed their eyes. Magic burst from their horns, sheathing them in their own magic. They focused more magic into their horns, Luna's glowing ever brighter beneath the moon. Twilight opened her eyes first, waiting for Luna to do the same. When she did, they locked their gazes in place and their horns touched.

The magic blended together, creating a beautiful array of dark colors like blue, purple, and every hue or shade in-between. It coalesced together causing a single bubble of magic to encompass the two ponies shimmering a deep blue into the night.

Chapter 6

Fillydelphia was aglow with festivities taking place throughout the city. Just two days after Cloudsdale's defeat, every pony in the republic was spending their time partying the night away in celebration. Hungry soldiers crowded bars and restaurants bringing in huge amounts of bits for their businesses.

Of course, Starfall knew that would eventually lead to more money to fund the war. The light taxes on the cities that Celestia had placed were raised before he left the city. Although it wasn't much higher, the small increase over many purchases would make a huge difference. He had a feeling that wherever a soldier would go, they would spend more money. His thoughts were spot on.

The evening of the battle, he had taken over command of the victorious forces. They marched on well deserved rest before reaching Fillydelphia this afternoon, with spirits high and booming stories. Between the soldiers' tales and the propaganda coming from the new, republic-loyal mayors the cities were ripe with tales of heroic battles won by the troops at large. No pony else thought it any different from other stories they were used to.

But there was an air of apprehension behind all of the partying. The road ahead would put them into enemy territory. The road all the way into Manehattan was well defended, and Starfall knew full well that Stormbreaker would not give him the chance to charge right in. His opponent was smarter than that. The journey alone would foster many casualties, with only more waiting for the Republic forces within the city itself.

Starfall walked around the city towards the park area, where the soldiers would be sleeping that evening. Only a small group of them remained in the park commons, each on their own or with a small group. Those in the groups were talking with one another, bonding regardless of the circumstances they had been thrust into.

Before long he arrived at the largest of the tents in the park. This was the central command of the whole military. Within the tent several Captains

mulled about, as well as Dynasty and the Lieutenant. They were seated at a table sharing a pot of tea.

To the other side of the pot was a map of the roads north of the city. Several figurines were positioned all over the map, with colored lines floating behind them.

"Good evening," Starfall began, "How are the plans coming along?" Lieutenant looked up at him, "Poorly. Our scout reports say that the enemy's positions are going to be difficult to deal with." He pointed to the map in front of him, "Stormbreaker has spread his forces out all over the country side. To make matters worse, his troops are being moved erratically. Most of these reports will be garbage in the morning."

Starfall felt his frustration starting to creep in on him. "Their constant movement means they will be tired on the battlefield when we arrive."

"Some will. Others will sleep and then move. It's impossible to know which ones."

Starfall chewed gingerly on his tongue. His options were limited if he wanted to preserve his forces. But, the opportunity to strike hard and fast was waning. He was counting on that advantage.

"Wrangle the troops back here. The most sober divisions will have four hours to sleep, and then prep to ship out. The others will wake up in six. In order to keep as much of Stormbreaker's forces unaware, we have to be quick. It's the best advantage we have. They'll be thinking we've just hit Cloudsdale."

Lieutenant nodded to the captains, who dropped what they were working on and left the tent.

"When the first group is ready, wake me." Starfall walked out of the tent and set off towards his own.

Not even an hour after they had left, Starfall's group found enemy soldiers. The road they were traveling was well built and wide enough to march in ranks. There was no activity on the road, and it looked as if it hadn't been traveled since the Republic had risen from the ashes of the Kingdom of Equestria. The only other tell were the border guards that Stormbreaker had set up in the road. A small fortification rose around that

part of the road, but it was incapable of withstanding an attack. Everywhere else was flatlands as far as the eye could see. No army to oppose them.

Starfall led the army forward, signalling to the captains to stand ready.

The guards in the checkpoint scrambled to their posts, cowering behind their meager defenses. Starfall gathered his magic and flung the barricades to the sides leaving the ponies removed from their protection. He looked the two over. One was an earth pony, shaking in his armor, while the other was a unicorn, standing firmly in place with magic brimming from his horn.

Kill them, he whispered. "Fire."

Two of the crossbows sounded, each bolt hitting home, interrupting the magic that the unicorn was casting. The earth pony fell immediately to the ground, dead. As the unicorn slumped to the ground, magic accumulated around his horn. Starfall moved up to the dying unicorn and crushed his horn under his hoof, kicking his neck with the other. The resounding snap was all he needed to hear.

"Check the skies, Lieutenant."

The pegasus signalled two of his fliers into the sky. They wore no armor, and glided in the night sky, silent as the wind. In a few moments, they returned shaking their heads.

"Clear, sir," one spoke softly.

Starfall signaled them forward. His advance went unhindered for at least another hour before he began to worry. No fighters were even in sight other than those two they killed. There wasn't even a sign that they had been moving as their reports had said. Campfires they came across had been out for at least a day, and there was no trace of the direction they went to.

He bit down hard on his tongue. They were out here. Somewhere. It wasn't until dawn that Starfall found Stormbreaker and his army. In fact, they were waiting for him.

Stormbreaker stood above the walls set out along the hills surrounding Manehattan. From where Starfall could see, it was a downward slope all the way to the city below. All the rebels had in Starfall's way was the defences they had built.

His troops were tired by now. They had spent all night with no fighting, and Starfall's paranoia had kept him pushing forward, just like Stormbreaker had planned. Now, he would pay for his mistakes.

A hail of crossbow bolts streaked down from the skies above. Starfall screamed for defenses, and scrambled under the protection of his magic. The unicorns behind him did their best to begin the weave, but the darts caught them first.

Ponies in all of his divisions were hit hard, with the unluckiest of them dying instantly from a well placed shot. Others scraped by with a hit to a non-vital part of their body. Luckier still were those with just a scratch.

Starfall seethed with anger. He drove his magic into the unicorns behind him, pulling their individual strands of magic from them. The sudden expenditure of magic shocked some of them, knocking a few unconscious, but the others stayed standing. The weave twisted and turned in his hooves, molding into a single nexus above him. He reared back, and sent forth lightning into the sky, picking out the clouds above. Several screams filled the air above, as Stormbreaker's hidden forces were slammed by the lightning. A shout went up among the pegasi behind him and they charged skyward into the rain of dead soldiers from above.

Stormbreaker didn't seem phased by this. In front of him were legions of ponies all standing in their ranks. They stood silent to the charge above them. Waiting for a signal. Stormbreaker raised his hoof. All of them stood ready to charge. He brought it across his chest and the ready ponies gave a battle cry.

Stormbreaker smiled.

Stormbreaker. Must. Die. Starfall's mind spoke firmly, and his actions followed its intent.

Earth ponies charged up the hill from Stormbreaker's lines, and Lieutenant signalled their troops to do the same, charging down the hill. Starfall pushed his will into the magic, forcing it to change shape. The clouds above the wall darkened at his whim and he pushed more of the weave into it. He brought down his hooves and released his spell.

Behind the walls, burning stones poured down from the sky, raining down upon Stormbreaker's defences. Magic flared up from behind the wall

covering it from the burning stones. The burly unicorn lifted himself onto his back hooves, and swept his hooves across his body.

The ground below the Republic's earth ponies exploded outwards. With so much momentum behind them, the ranks behind them didn't have enough time to slow down before the gash left in the earth. The front ranks barreled over the dirt and fell prone. The ranks behind them trampled them underfoot in their attempt to slow down, unprepared for the ponies charging up the hill. Confusion and chaos reigned as Stormbreaker's forces fell upon them, hacking the Republic's legions to pieces.

The air forces were the only ones who were prevailing. With Starfall's initial blast, most of the hidden enemies had no chance to move out of the way, and were falling to the ground below. The remainder of their forces could not match the training passed down by the former royal guards. More of them fell into the chaos below as spells ricocheted from one side to the other.

Stormbreaker's pegasi retreated. Lieutenant swept the slowest to the ground as he lead a counter-charge into the earth ponies below. Without warning, many of them were shot from the charge, their corpses falling like rain into the melee on the hill. The walls had hidden a huge reserve of Stormbreaker's forces, who were now shooting over the top into the skies.

Starfall lost his temper. This battle should have been won! He had calculated every move, just as he had in his victory in Cloudsdale. He called within the deepest part of him for his own magic, drawing on it to take revenge. Unicorns fell out of the weave as he ripped the magic from them into his reserves. But it wouldn't be enough. Not for this.

Use me, came the whisper, the day is lost, but I can win you the war!

Blinded by his anger and frustration, he didn't even give it a second thought.

The magic that built up above him began to turn an inky black color, permeating its glow like paint hitting water. Screams filled his mind from the pain it must be causing the unicorns still involved. But the power, the sheer raw magic... it was exhilarating. It was...

Perfect.

The black energy funneled through his hooves and arced across the sky. The black lightning tore the wall apart, ripping through the measly

magical barrier Stormbreaker threw in front of it. Anypony it touched cried in agony before drying up and turning to ash in seconds. The grass died where it passed, and it burned away the air, choking those around it. Some went mad at the sight... others screamed in terror and abandoned the battlefield.

Although the power was monumental in scope, it was short lived. Starfall was completely spent, leaning into the side of one of his body guards.

“Order... a retreat...” he panted. All of his muscles were sore, and he limped as he walked back towards Fillydelphia, “Send a runner... tell Dynasty to... prepare a defense. They’ll come for us.” One of the guards took to the sky and bolted towards Fillydelphia.

Starfall bit down on his tongue again, chewing harder than usual, *When they do... I will kill them all.*

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At least they haven’t put me in chains, mused the former Mayor of Ponyville. *It would be impossible to do anything!*

Her home was modestly sized, furnished with older wooden tables. Unlike her desk at work, she kept everything in the room neat and tidy. Keeping her house neat was the only thing keeping her company now. With the new ‘Mayor’ in charge, she had no one to say hello to, except for those designated to bring her food.

But after the Battle of Manehattan resulted in horrific failure, she had another visitor. That visitor was not confined by a simple door. A small popping noise accented that fact. The source of the noise was a tired looking violet pony, Celestia’s former student, Twilight sparkle. She had a basket of food within her teeth, as well as a few odd items in the bunch.

One was a newspaper - something the Mayor was grateful for receiving from her every time she came in. But she also carried a necklace in the bag. A necklace that matched the one she had seen her wearing the first time she came into her house.

Twilight walked over to one of the tables and set down the basket, “Good morning, Mayor.”

The Mayor was pulling the curtains closed on the large windows in the room, "Hello, Twilight. How is everything?"

"Good. I had to refill our food supply, we were running low. I also picked up a couple of other things. Luna hasn't been feeling very well."

"Well from what she's told me, it doesn't surprise me," she said. The Mayor had only been visited once by Luna, but they had spent a great deal of the night talking. Plus, she was all part of the plan to pull the rug out beneath those ponies that took the town from her. "I'm no unicorn, but magic like what she's doing every couple of hours is downright dangerous. If she wasn't a Princess..."

Twilight cringed slightly. The Mayor had no idea of how close Luna was from entering that danger zone. It felt more like they were playing with fire than with sleep. They were doing everything they could just to keep Luna healthy and happy - though the latter was easier.

"How is Rainbow Dash, by the way? It's been almost two weeks now since Cloudsdale."

Twilight smiled, "A lot better. Her wing will heal in about another week or so. She's also been able to put some of her memories to bed. But... she has some pretty bad nightmares."

"I see." The mayor sat down on one of the chairs in the room, and invited Twilight to sit as well, "Now I read the note you brought from Luna last time you were here. I have spoken with the guards that I wish to 'repent'. Oath was pleased. It seems that he needs somepony that every pony knows to reassure the town."

Twilight nodded.

"He will be re-instating me later this afternoon. After that I will be waiting for your signal."

Twilight pulled the necklace out and fastened it around the mayor's neck. She tapped it with her horn, placing magic all over the device. The mayor was confused for a moment.

"What did you do?" She asked quizzically.

"No pony but you can see it, as long as you don't take it off of your neck. Luna taught me how to use the spell. It should last for a while."

Twilight stood, "I'll try to talk to you when I can, but I'll keep it short. I have to get back. I'm cooking again tonight."

“Aren’t you always?”

“All but one time. Rainbow Dash isn’t allowed to cook anymore.”

The Mayor raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t want to know.” Twilight bent down and picked up the basket. A small popping noise was all that was left of Twilight’s presence, and it faded into the carpeted floors.

The Mayor didn’t have time to mourn the loss of her friend’s presence, as a knock on the door jarred her from her thoughts. She walked to the door and opened it. There in all of his pride and glory was Oath, dressed in a white shirt and a loosely fitting suit jacket.

“Good evening Mayor. I’m so glad to hear that you have come to your senses. I would like to offer you a job as... an assistant mayor for now. Of course when the council deems it time, I will be transferred and you will have Ponyvill all to yourself again.”

“That sounds wonderful. I regret having doubted the leadership of the council, and I will do anything to earn back their trust.” Her words were fluid as always. But she was still wary of his ‘good mood’.

“Excellent. Now that we can release you from house arrest, perhaps I can discuss a few things with you? Over dinner perhaps.”

“Uh, yes. Of course.” She tried her best to keep cool.

“Now, now, I know it’s sudden but it’s only business. Regardless of the news you may have heard from those you’ve seen, there is quite a lot you need catching up on. I’ll return at 7:00?”

She hesitated.

“Good. I look forward to seeing you this evening.”

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The flat-lands north of Fillydelphia were nothing but a memory. If you asked anypony in the city they would tell you the fields had been gone since the day the Republic started losing. Weeks of small battles forced Starfall’s army to dig in, forming trenches all along the outskirts of the city. While Starfall’s pegasi dominated the sky, his ground forces were forced to take cover from the hails of crossbow bolts and magic spells. Occasionally, Stormbreaker would charge his forces over land, forcing the Republic back.

Then the Pegasi would respond with their crossbows, and they would be forced to slide back or to the side to try and surround them.

Overall? The Republic was losing. So many of his forces had died trying to push forward or pull back that Starfall lost count. His temper became as wild as his magical whims. His skills as a leader were strong as ever, but fell prey to strange bouts of madness. His frustrations were numerous, but as of late, he was becoming less stable in his decisions. This correlated well with the advance on Fillydelphia coming ever closer.

"We can't hold them out of the city for much longer! There's nothing left, and fresh troops won't be ready to go for days!" The voice belonged to Lieutenant who was screaming over the magic exploding in the vicinity. He, Guiding Light and Starfall were running along one of the supply lines back into the city's makeshift headquarters.

"Then we must leave the city to their hooves. Risking the civilian population further is unreasonable!" Guiding Light yelled.

They reached the building they were looking for and went inside. The room was filled with doctors and messengers sprinting from room to room. Some were in a hurry, but some were generally in a panic. Starfall lead them to the back room nodding to the soldiers who saluted them as they passed by. The door swung shut and the silence that hung in the air was eerie, rather than relieving.

"Lieutenant, Dynasty, Guiding Light. Are you willing to do what is necessary to win this war?"

"Of course sir." Lieutenant replied. Dynasty nodded in agreement.

Guiding Light hesitated, "Yes, Starfall."

"Then we are leaving this city. Dynasty and Lieutenant you will be leading the pull back. Retreat until you pass the wheat fields. Guiding Light, you will be given a group to evacuate the town immediately." Starfall summoned a scroll and pen, scratching down a few lines. It hovered over to Guiding Light. "Those are the smallest divisions left. They will be your legion."

She saluted to him, "Thank you, Starfall." The mare sprinted out of the room to her assignment.

She won't do what is necessary to win.

“I have to be frank with you both. I’m afraid that Guiding Light will be removed from active service. She lacks a certain willingness to do what you have done for me. I don’t believe she would agree with my plan of action.

“After she clears out the civilians, her division will cover our retreat. She will draw them into the center of the city. Since many of Stormbreaker’s forces are bound to the earth, we will use this to trap them in the city. Then, we will burn it all. Every building, every single home, business, hospital. Every single piece of wood and stone will be burned to ash, and with it will be Stormbreaker and his remaining forces. Do you understand?”

Lieutenant nodded. Dynasty seemed beyond pleased.

“Oh yes, Dynasty. You will have first pick on the job of lighting it.”

The red mare licked her lips in anticipation, a wild bloodlust growing in her eyes, “My pleasure, Starfall.”

She will do nicely. Starfall thought.

Keep her close. His mind responded.

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“Get out of the city! Go west or south for safety! Bring only what you can carry!” Guiding Light screamed.

Ponies sprinted as fast as their legs could carry them from the city. It had been hours since the order was given to clear out the city, and it was only because so many had left before the fighting had arrived. Buildings shattered around her from the force of magical strikes. Guiding Light did her best to avoid the stone falling from the collapsing buildings as she sprinted to the north entrance to the city. It was almost entirely empty, save for the other forces zooming past her to the south.

She was close.

The skies screamed once more as the unicorns behind her launched their own magic across the sky towards some unlucky soldiers trying to get in. Fire filled the sky, w hailing down upon the northern gates where she could see her new division fighting valliantly.

“WITH ME!” She yelled, beckoning them back into the city, firing her own bursts of light into the sky. Her group ran around her, taking cover

behind buildings and bits of rubble to ambush and control the flow of the battle. It was only stalling for time, however.

They passed over the center of the city, hiding in the brush of the city's park. She was having doubts about Starfall's leadership. While she believed that Luna would be a poor fit for the leadership, she had only wanted her to be banished. She let the attack slide, as a necessary evil. But the war was a whole other thing. Her services were mainly medical and she had not once taken the life of another soldier if forced to fight. Every attack was non-vital, or just something to stun the poor pony who got in the way. She looked back towards the city entrance, focusing her magic to see far enough that the smile on Starfall's face was... twisted.

"Surrender now, and you will be spared your lives!"

Stormbreaker stood in the center of the park, surrounded by unicorns and earth ponies. A glowing magical shield swirled around his entourage. Guiding light turned to look at the troops she had. They were tired of this fighting. Their eyes held questions she had no answers to herself. One struck home among all of them: What were they fighting for?

She looked back and stared in horror at Starfall. He and Dynasty stood at the edge, pouring fire into the city, burning down anything they could catch aflame. More importantly, sealing them in. Guiding Light knew what was happening. He knew she didn't want to continue. So he was ending the war, and taking her with it.

"I... I surrender."

Like wildfire the magic egged the flames all around them, whipping them across the city as fast as they possibly could. Stormbreaker looked around unphased. He dropped the magic shield and walked over to the fallen unicorn.

Stormbreaker held out a hoof, "Be glad he didn't corrupt you like he did so many others." His quiet voice brought tears to her eyes. She took it in kind, and lifted herself to her hooves. "All of you, prepare for a teleportation spell. We're not on the beach, eh?"

"NO!" Starfall roared, pouring the magic into the flames. He knew it was too late, but he didn't care. He would not suffer traitors.

“Dynasty. Burn it all! Every field, every home, every bucking village until they can see nothing but ashes for miles!” Starfall was raving mad, black streaks of color bleeding into his mane like molasses.

I will not suffer traitors. I will not lose this war, no... he paused. We will not lose this war.

I have faith in you, Starfall. We will not lose this war. It has only begun.

Chapter 7

The road was a quiet one for Starfall. He had left the Lieutenant in charge of the fight, telling their forces to push forward while Stormbreaker was vulnerable. The only remnants of the battle at hand were the clouds that hung over the road and nearby Canterlot. Small drops of rain fell from the clouds onto his coat. Beside him, Dynasty was silent, looking over the rolling hills they walked through.

He missed his former student. From what he'd heard, Bastion was handling the Republic's affairs quite nicely. The entire process of reviving the crops was well underway, and with minor magical assistance, it was promising to be a bountiful year. Negotiations with neutral cities was bringing new territories into the Republic. That meant new soldiers and fresh supplies for their ailing war effort.

While he was proud of all his successes, it was curious that he hadn't already sent the fresh troops being trained in Canterlot meant for the push back to Manehattan. By all reports, they should have been finished training, equipped, and sent today. He didn't see a single soldier on the road.

Within an hour they reached the castle. The guards bowed in respect as they passed through the hallways towards the throne room - long since, their council chamber. The doors were already open when they reached the entrance. Two of the other council members were walking towards them from within.

"Good afternoon, Starfall, Dynasty. We've heard about your exploits in the war, and are pleased with your tactics. Has Guiding Light stayed at the front? There are some matters that she needs to attend to."

Starfall felt anger start to simmer beneath his thoughts. But he controlled it, and shook his head, "No. She has been captured, and is probably dead." The two unicorns stared open mouthed. Starfall eyed them sternly. Were these foals really going to waste his time? "Whatever you need, Dynasty can fulfill that role." Starfall nodded to Dynasty.

She smiled at the two unicorns.

“Yes, Starfall. Thank you.” Dynasty accompanied the two unicorns back down the hallway they entered from, with their quiet conversation fading quickly from his hearing. Starfall entered the room signaling to the guards to close the doors behind him. They slid back into their places, closing with a quiet click.

He’s going to kill you, came the whisper. Starfall shook his head, casting the thoughts aside.

Taking a quick glance around the room, he noticed that there were a few changes made to it. Their symbol hung from tapestries along the far wall and were also newly worked into the stone of the chamber. The table was replaced by a row of thrones, set in the shape of a horseshoe at the end of the carpeted path from the door. Each of them were raised above the floor at the end, allowing any who came to speak the ability to see all of them at once. More importantly, all of the council could see their guest. Hanging from each raised tier was a tapestry with a replica of their cutie mark directly in the center. Below it was their name.

Bastion was the only one present in the chambers, as well as the only pony in the room. He sat in the chair beside Starfall’s watching him as he approached.

“Bastion. My former student.” Starfall spoke, coming to a stop in the center of the horseshoe, “It has been quite a while. I very much enjoy the changes that you have made.”

Bastion rose from his seat and stood at the edge of his raised platform, “I’m pleased that it suits you. I enjoy what you’ve done to Stormbreaker’s lands. He won’t be using them for a while.”

His words have bite.

He wouldn’t dare, Starfall told the voice.

“We have much to discuss, especially on battle plans for the invasion of Manehattan while Stormbreaker is still stunned,” Starfall continued.

Bastion hopped down to the floor below, “Much to discuss indeed.”

Without a word, Bastion’s magic covered his horn, and it lashed out into Starfall’s body, sending him skidding off the rug and onto the marble floors. The light blue unicorn walked after his former teacher. He pulled on his magic once more, throwing lightning down on him. Starfall was

prepared this time, however, and they reflected into the ceiling above. Stone and debris poured down onto the floor.

Starfall lifted himself from the ground. Pain throbbed all along his side where he was hit. He moved a hoof to check on it, and came up with blood.

"You have made a grave mistake, foal." Starfall growled.

"I have? I have made a mistake?! You *massacred* an entire city, and then forced us to murder those who had willingly surrendered!" Bastion's yellow eyes widened with rage. He lashed out again with his magic, sending flames across the room. Starfall twisted the flames around his body and into the air behind him. "You set miles of homes, fields and cities ablaze just to make a point to Stormbreaker about how far you would go to control Equestria!"

"I did what was necessary to win!" Starfall shouted.

"We trusted you to be better than what *Luna* would have become! Instead you've committed unspeakable acts of murder on the grandest of scales!" He lowered his voice to normal levels, "You're not the teacher I once knew. What madness has taken hold of you?"

Starfall raised his horn, and the magic flowed around it. "Equestria needs a ruler who is willing to do anything for her people. By any means necessary. Luna was weak, and Nightmare Moon was dangerous. With our power we keep her at bay. With my power I keep the council under control. I rule this land because I am smart enough to control it without deviating from Celestia's wishes.

"Don't you see? Every decision I make leads all ponies to the perfect future. A future where I will rule it!" Starfall laughed. "You're just too weak to understand. Guiding Light was the same way. Perhaps I should burn you down with a city like I did to her."

Bastion charged forward, screaming and firing magic at his teacher. Starfall did his best to move around the shots, while delivering his own magic back at his student. It was no use.

Bastion slammed into Starfall's shoulder with his horn, impaling him. His magic reinforced his neck muscles and he flung the helpless unicorn through the chairs in the horseshoe.

Did I not warn you? Are you so apprehensive to trust me? The voice was becoming more concerned, and saddened.

I only want what is mine. Starfall tried to rise, from the ground but the pain was unbearable. He was losing a lot of blood.

Then let me deliver it to you.

I... I... His will wavered.

Perhaps a demonstration? I will humor you.

“What’s wrong, *Master*? Have you lost the will to fight for an insane cause?” Bastion jumped onto the tier above Starfall. A wave of confusion began to wash over him.

Starfall stood up. His normally violet coat darkened considerably to a deep purple color. His mane became less tangible, turning a deep black that seemed to suck the light away from the room. When his eyes opened, they were a lighter red, glowing faintly regardless of the lighting. More importantly, they were the eyes of a dragon.

“My cause is far from insane, my dear little colt.” Starfall’s mane lashed out and gripped Bastion’s head. His screaming was immediate and unbearable for anypony to listen too. Except for his teacher, who’s voice was low, and most peculiarly, that of a mare. **“Insanity to you ponies is a relative term. If you ever wake from your situation, then you will know what I mean.”**

Starfall walked around Bastion’s writhing body. He seemed to be taking in the room as if it was his first time in the chamber. **“I’m so happy that you mastered a spell to negate sound in a room this size at such a young age. No wonder the guards outside never heard a thing. Wait... no, they still can’t hear you. How...”** he licked his lips, savoring the screams, **“...delicious.”**

Dark magic emanated from his horn, creating a glass coffin, not unlike Celestia’s. It swept underneath the writhing pony and dumped him into the box. It sealed shut, locking out the screams.

Starfall pouted, **“I was enjoying our time together. But don’t worry. The agony will stop when your body dies of old age. Then you’ll be free of your punishment.”** The casket disappeared.

Magic once again reached out and repaired the room, sealing the roof, clearing debris, and even wiping away the blood from existence. Starfall levitated up to his seat and sat down in it. The magic subsided, finishing the repairs on the raised chairs that had been destroyed.

“I can’t wait to discuss the proposition I mentioned with you. But that will come later. You have guests coming.” Starfall laughed quietly to himself as his mane settled to normal, and his new dark coat dulled in color.

The doors opened once more, and Dynasty entered the chamber. She walked into the hall standing in the center of the horseshoe. “Where’s Bastion?”

Starfall looked down at her, “He stepped out. I believe he mentioned that he needed to rest and gather his thoughts on some of the issues in the Republic.” He pointed at the chair on his side, “Please, come sit. This chair was designed for you. Besides, we will be having an open chamber soon.”

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A whole month. It had been a whole month since Celestia had disappeared, and Twilight and Luna were finally finished with the spell. What a spell it had been, with more than its fair share of complications. They found that they couldn’t tie any time sleeping from any animal but a pony, and on top of that, they couldn’t take more than a few seconds from each pony every day to tie to the spell.

While it wasn’t noticeable, it was straining Luna to the point of serious harm. Twilight was forced to help contribute magic almost every night as time progressed. After she started keeping up with the news on the war, they had to leave the soldiers alone, just in case. Luna wouldn’t have it any other way, regardless of how insignificant a few seconds seemed. That being the case, it was relieving for Twilight to see Luna excited, albeit exhausted when they finished that afternoon.

The pot bubbled merrily over the fire they’d been using over the last few weeks, using the city as a refuge from possible discovery. Rainbow Dash had stayed with them since she had arrived. Her wing was almost back to normal, but Twilight had convinced her that she would have trouble explaining the injuries she recieved from the fight over Cloudsdale. It was a one way ticket to being arrested.

Rainbow never complained about having to stay behind. During the day, whil Luna slept, she and Twilight fixed up one of the buildings near the

entrance. There was nothing inside, so they simply build a roof onto it and brought the sleeping bag and tent inside. Other than the sleeping materials, there was an enormous amount of books and old tomes that Twilight took from the library. Stories and history even some lost tales from the times when the city was vibrant with life. She was more lucky, as Luna had explained to her, that the building still had it's old magical wards that refreshed the books as they sat on the shelf. Magic that Celestia had shown her how to maintain in the castle library.

"Looks like it's ready!" Twilight chimed as she poured the thick soup into three bowls. Her saddlebags opened, and a loaf of bread hovered out, "I managed to get a hold of some bread too. Zecora was nice enough to pick one up for me yesterday."

"Yes! I've been dying for some bread," Rainbow cheered. While Twilight's cooking skills were excellent, weeks of rotating between soup and salads was getting boring.

"I also managed to get some apples too. But those are for desert." Twilight looked on with pride as Rainbow and Luna went through the soup, sighing in happiness as they munched on the bread. She managed to start eating her own, when Luna refilled her own bowl with seconds. Using magic does exhaust most ponies.

"Geez, Twilight. Pretty soon both of us are gonna gain too much weight to fly around. You need to stop making it taste so good," Rainbow teased.

"I'll let you cook then, if that's how you feel."

Luna swallowed what she was eating and stared at Twilight, "But that was beyond inedible! Rainbow even caught the stuff in the pot on fire," she pointed a hoof at Rainbow Dash.

"Hey, it was my first time cooking. Give me a break."

Silence passed over them. Most of it was exhaustion, but the pressure of implementing the spell was starting to creep in. Luna finished her second bowl and set it on the ground. She stood up, and used her magic to snuff out the fire.

"Before you need to leave, we should go over the plan one more time," Luna said. Her voice was a mix of concern and apprehension.

Twilight and Rainbow Dash nodded. They could see that Luna did not want to do what they had spent so much time planning. Twilight knew that it was more than that. Neither wanted Twilight to be the bait.

“Twilight. You will go into Ponyville. Once you arrive, you will knock out the Mayor, as planned, and kill Oath. He won’t give you a second chance if you hesitate. That pony had training from the Royal Guard before he lost his wings.

“Once you do that, you will have to cast the illusion that you learned to get the guards to go after it. That will lighten up the guard, but then the hard part begins. I will begin to cast through you so it appears that you are casting the spell. Since we’ve shared magic in creating it, you can use whatever you have to keep the guards from hitting you. It will attract a lot of attention.

“My main concern is when Starfall shows himself. He won’t sit around and let a huge spell he doesn’t know about just happen. When that happens, I will stop casting through you. You need to leave as quickly as possible, so be ready to teleport away.

“Rainbow Dash. You need to be ready and waiting at the other end of her teleportation spell. Pick a spot to meet beforehand. If she’s used up her magic, run. Drag her along with you if you must. If you’re followed split up to try and throw them off. We’ll meet back here. The spell will start when the moon is at the top of the sky.”

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The offices of the mayors were occupied that night. While the rest of the citizens of Ponyville slept, the former mayor and the appointed mayor, Oath, were deep within stacks of paperwork. While both of them had been toiling away since the afternoon, it appeared as though they would be there well into the night.

“I still don’t understand how these silly things are all so urgently needed.” Oath had been complaining sporadically on some of the items that crossed his desk. “I guess it can’t be helped. The post office in this town has been such a mess this past week. I’ve received mail that comes

early, mail that comes late, even sometimes not at all. But almost nothing on time.”

Because I made it that way, the mayor sang in her mind. As part of the plan, she had deliberately ‘not received’ mail, received mail late, or downright hidden it away in plain sight. Luna had told her when they had met that it needed to be evening when the two mayors were together. What better way than a last minute pile of paperwork. She had the misfortune of being bogged down in a similar amount of work once or twice before, so she knew how to make it look natural.

“Maybe it's the new wave of recruits?” She offered, “We are asking those who work the mail to help on the front lines.”

“I suppose that is possible.”

Oath was silent once more, scribbling away with his quill.

Get ready. Twilight’s voice chimed in her head.

“Do you want more coffee?” She asked.

Oath gave her his cup, “Please. Leave it black if you can. The bitter taste keeps me awake longer.”

The mayor nodded and walked to the other side of the room. She grabbed hold of the pot, and poured it into Oath’s cup.

Ready, the mayor thought.

There was a soft popping noise in the room, followed by a muffled scream. The mayor turned around to see Twilight with her horn through his shoulders. Oath was unconscious and losing a lot of blood. She removed her hoof from his mouth and threw him to the floor.

“Go,” the Mayor said.

Twilight popped out of the room, leaving behind an illusion of herself. It shifted its coat to a deep red, followed by a yellow and gold mane. Its eyes were a light purple. The illusion pushed her into the door, knocking it over and barreling into the street.

“That pony just tried to murder Oath! Stop him!”

The guards outside of the door were already on their hooves, taking to the skies and chasing after it. Others in the town rallied and poured out from the town. Those that were left surrounded the Mayor, and accompanied her back inside the room.

“Secure the room, get the other guards and tell them to patrol this area. Somepony obviously wants both of us dead.”

One of the guards nodded and left the room.

Twilight moved as fast as her hooves would take her, barrelling down the road to the center of town. She flipped herself into the fountain, and ducked down inside of it. The sound of wings flew past her, as well as several voices.

“Half of you to the Mayor’s! There’s an assassin on the loose. The rest of you, patrol the outer city for signs of more assailants. Be thorough.” A soft fluttering of wings filled the air, and slowly faded away into silence.

She stayed crouched for a minute, before popping her head up. The streets were barren and quiet. Above her, the skies were clear, not a single cloud obscuring the full moon which was almost at the top of the sky. She hopped out of the fountain and walked a few paces from it.

Magic began to glow at the tip of her horn, and she felt Luna’s magic reach out to her. The magic connected, and huge amounts of energy began to engulf her, flowing through every part of her being. Moonlight surrounded her and shot straight up towards the moon. It stopped its motion in the sky above, tied to the pillar of light that glowed in the sky.

“Starfall! Look outside!” Dynasty barged into his private chambers. In his groggy state, the clear state of panic on Dynasty’s face worked like cold water. Dynasty was never afraid of anything.

The pillar of light cast a huge light over the entire valley and the mountains that surrounded it. That included Canterlot. Starfall immediately got out of his bed sprinting to the open door. Dynasty let him pass, only to run behind him.

“What happened?” He yelled.

“We lost control over the moon, and then the pillar of light appeared! The moon doesn’t seem to be moving anywhere, but it has only been a few minutes,” she replied. “We can be on top of Ponyville shortly if we go by chariot.”

“Prepare two, one for each of us. I believe that Luna has revealed herself, and I will not let another chance to destroy her pass me by.”

The first wave of guards were stunned by the display of magic, that Twilight was able to perform. None of them moved to engage her, and in fact, a few tried to scurry away. But Twilight wasn't taking any chances. A shield formed around her, held steady by her own magic. The pony in charge drew his crossbow, firing one shot right at her. Her magic grabbed hold of the crossbow bolt, flinging it back the way it came. It landed in the guards shoulder, and he yelled in pain.

The others around him drew their wings out, revealing the blades along the edges. They screamed and charged forward. Twilight twisted the shield to harden, blocking the blades as they tried to get closer. One of those spots she forced to explode, launching the pegasi back. More magic poured into the shield, replacing the gaping hole in the shield. Her mind molded it into new shapes, creating walls of swords and hand shields.

Just in time, too. A second wave of guards joined the first, charging forward to stop her magic. The weapons responded in kind, battling each pegasus as they crashed upon her defences. Stray crossbow shots were deflected by her idle weapons. Blows reigned down on the guards, none of them particularly lethal in their own right, but enough to disable them. Their forms limped away, trying to recover, while their compatriots tried desperately to stop her.

She pushed the magic further, drawing on a little bit of Luna's extra magic, using it to fire magic arrows from the shields. Ponies were knocked back from the attack allowing her time to recover some of the unused energy. Lightning arced across the sky landing all around her, ripping up the ground and battering off of her weapons. One grazed her, sending shocks through her body. She managed to hold on to the spells, and the connection. She couldn't let this be the end of her fight.

Two unicorns dropped down at the end of the plaza in front of her. The mare, started accumulating magic, while the stallion, still fully coated in magic, launched another series of lightning bolts at her. Twilight molded her magic into the bubble once more, absorbing the lightning as it rammed into it. The other unicorn followed with a pillar of flames. The bubble absorbed the fire, letting it coat the area around it, but Twilight was forced to put more of her magic into it.

“Good evening, Twilight Sparkle. I see that Celestia chose her student well,” the stallion said.

“Who are you?” She yelled back.

“My, my. Don’t you read? I’m Councilor Starfall, of course.”

The pillar of light cast an odd glow on him. A huge swath of space in front of him seemed to be killing the light where it touched, as was the shadow it should have cast. Something was seriously wrong with this pony, and Twilight didn’t want to find out what it was.

I’m almost finished. Get ready to run. Luna whispered in Twilight’s mind.

“I apologize. I don’t usually talk to ponies who try to kill their intended leaders.”

Starfall sighed, “Have you spoken to Luna? That’s a shame. Nightmare Moon always loves to twist the words that come from her counterpart’s mouth.”

“You murdered her bodyguard.”

“A pittance for saving Equestria, I feel.”

The pillar of light began to fade. Twilight twisted her magic into a new spell, finding the new location in her mind.

“Destroying Equestria is what you mean. I intend to save it.”

Her magic went off, the teleportation pulling her to her new destination. But she never left the square, instead feeling pain shoot through her body, as black lightning tied her to the ground.

“I am really tired of you ponies trying to leave while I’m in the middle of talking.” Starfall’s eye twitched. Twilight screamed from the pain. “That noise is also irritating.”

The lightning flared, coursing through her body. Twilight passed out from the pain. Starfall nodded to two of the guards, who hefted her body onto one of the chariots. The unicorn stallion smiled, delighting in his perfect catch.

“Luna will watch you die tomorrow, Miss Sparkle, as will all of Canterlot. They will learn that I do not suffer traitors, once and for all.” His face contorted into one of frustration. He turned to those guards carrying the chariot, “Place her in the dungeons.”

The chariot took off towards Canterlot. Starfall stared into the direction of the Everfree Forest, smelling the subtle scent of rain in the night air.

“What will you do now, little Luna?” The mare’s deep voice whispered into the wind through Starfall’s lips, **“I think its time for a reunion.”**

Dynasty put a hoof on Starfall’s shoulder, “Starfall?”

He looked at her and smiled, “Dynasty, would you be a dear and bring the Elements of Harmony to me? Take them by force when you have to. The show tomorrow is starring their best friend after all.”

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_____It was only an hour before the morning sun would rise into the sky. Only an hour until Starfall made an example of that foalish mare. But he had something more important to discuss. He walked to the mirror and began to brush his hair.

“I am indeed pleased by your sheer magical power.”

“It is much stronger with you, than when I was forced into Luna’s body.” The mirror reflected back the image of an alicorn. A deep purple coat which seemed to glow in the darkened room covered her body. Her eyes were the colors of the rainbow, but were darkened substantially, while giving off an otherworldly glow. Her mane was a fluid black, sucking the rest of the light out of the room save from her coat and eyes.

Starfall chuckled to himself, “Her selfish intentions made her dangerous. My desires to rule will make your power used for the good of Equestria.”

The alicorn smiled and nodded, **“Of course they will. I can bring you the throne, you know.”**

“Of course you can. I have spent a lot of time thinking about your offer, and I know it to be true.”

She raised an eyebrow, **“You have made a decision then?”**

He put the brush down on the table. “It has always been important that rulers have a counterpart to their actions. Celestia spent a millennium taking on different students, each to balance her decisions and actions.

When Luna returned, her current student was sent away, so the two princesses ruled together.”

“In the time before, their parents ruled together as King and Queen,” the alicorn added. She was pleased to know where his logic was taking him.

“As you say. While the council is an excellent counterpart, it is merely a pawn in my hand. I intend to rule over it and all of Equestria. But doing so alone will let everything crumble. So...” He looked her in the eye, “It appears that I am in need of a Queen.”

“If it pleases you, I would be more than happy to fulfill that role.”

“It does.”

“Pledge your faithfulness to me, and I will give you the world.”

“And pledge I will. Just not now. It would be best to do so during the pleasantries so all can see.”

The alicorn looked giddy with delight, **“Until later then?”**

“Until the dawn rises, my queen.”

In his joy, he never heard the whisper fading into the back of his mind, ***When darkness will rise, and cover this land. Forever.***

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Deep within the castle, light began to cascade upon the stones within the burial chamber belonging to Princess Celestia. The sun filled the solemn place with warmth, glinting off of the coffin’s crystal casing. Unaffected by the warmth, the body of Princess Celestia lay in wait, glowing like the moon had the night before.

The sunlight inched over her body, causing the glow to fade from her form, showing the white coat new life in the light. Her mane shone in the new sunlight, letting all of the colors refresh Celestia’s millennial prison with color. But as the light shone on, the crystal melted away, revealing her to the fresh breeze of spring. The wind ruffled her feathers in her wings, and tossed her mane and tail to the side.

Celestia’s eyelids slowly slid open.

Chapter 8

“Get up.”

Twilight could feel the blunt end of something being jabbed hard into her side. She forced her eyelids to move apart and look at her surroundings.

The first thing she saw was the cold stone floor of the dungeon that she was thrown into. The only light came from the guards torch, which cast deep shadows within her cell. There was no seat in the room, and the walls appeared to be nothing more than a natural cave with bars hammered into the stone. An easy place to escape with magic.

But that was the problem: she didn't have any. Starfall had made sure that her magic was locked away from her. The magical clamp around her horn stifled even the smallest use of magic on it. The only way to get it off was with a key. Unfortunately for Twilight, the guard didn't have that key. That would be too easy.

As she rose, she was able to take in more of the dungeons. The stone was almost all natural, save for the worked floors and the staircase leading up into the chambers above. Her guard carried a spear in his teeth, and was accompanied by another who held a sword at his side.

“Move.” He said more forcefully, jabbing her again in the side.

Twilight winced but moved out of the cage. The other guard posted outside the door, moved in front of her. He produced a muzzle and placed it around her snout, pulling tight on the straps to secure it. The guard moved to her other side and they prodded her to walk up the stairs.

When they neared the top, she could vaguely hear the sounds of a large crowd outside, and one voice booming above it. The guard to her right pushed open the door, while the other shoved her through it.

“... a traitor who once learned under our beloved Celestia, has turned to destroying all that she had created!” somepony was saying. She recognized it immediately as Starfall's voice. The crowd went wild, jeering and shouting at his statement.

She was brought to a set of double doors. Her guards stood behind her waiting for something.

"Perhaps, we should show her what it means to be a traitor!" Starfall shouted.

The doors swung open, the sunlight blinding her momentarily. She tried to lift her hoof to block the light, but it was chained to the others. Her sense of balance went awry and she fell face forward into the light. The guards pulled her up by her stomach and pushed her forward.

Crowds for as far as she could see were all focused on her, screaming at her. Some of the ponies threw things at her as she passed, or spit in her direction.

"TRAITOR!" They screamed sporadically, jeering at her.

Twilight hung her head low, as she was lead onto the main part of the stage, where she was chained up to a wall. Her eyes welled with tears when she saw who else was in the same predicament. Beside her were all of her friends. Everyone that she had tried to protect. Even Rainbow Dash had been taken, still fighting in her restraints. That foal must have gone after her in the middle of the night.

Pinkie Pie was crying, and her mane no longer had a poof in it. Rarity was horrified, trying to get loose. Fluttershy, was silent, staring down at the floor. Applejack - who was beside her - looked confused and worried. She had good reason to.

In front of the stage were at least thirty different guards, all faced away from them. In their hooves were crossbows, fully loaded, waiting for a command to fire.

"May I present to you the Elements of Harmony. Those who locked Nightmare Moon deep into Luna's heart. Waiting for the perfect time to let her come back. But, we won't give them that chance."

The crowd went wild, calling for their blood, itching to see them pay for Starfall's clever lies. A tear fell from Twilight's eyes.

She had failed. Starfall had won.

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"Celly, you need to wake up now!"

Celestia moved slowly, taking in the place she had been sleeping. The stone walls were only lit by the sunlight that poured into the room. But it felt cold, and full of despair. Something terrible had happened.

Luna stood above her, desperately trying to lift Celestia from her coffin to her hooves. She wobbled a bit.

“Oh Luna, I’ve missed you so much. I’m so sorry that I left you for so long.”

“Celly, your spell worked! It’s only been a month, but something terrible has happened.”

Celestia looked at her quizzically. “A month?”

“Yes! Twilight and I found your notes, and woke you up but, now she’s been taken by Starfall!”

Celestia steadied her footing, feeling all of her muscles responding to her, slowly recovering from her sleep, “Luna, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Starfall shouldn’t be bringing her onto the council yet. She’s too-”

“Celestia!” Luna grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her, “He’s going to execute her and all of the elements of harmony if you don’t come right now and stop them!”

The words hit her like a slap in the face. Her adrenaline kicked in, shooting her mind into overdrive. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Starfall? Her former student, and Twilight’s former headmaster, was going to execute six ponies?

“What? That doesn’t make any sense-”

“He even tried to kill me! Come on, we’re running out of time!” Luna was frantic at this point. Tears were flowing freely from her face. *I can’t lose her*, Luna thought, *I can’t*. Celestia had her doubts, but she followed her sister out through the upper windows and into the air above.

The first thing she heard was the crowd, long before she ever saw it. Ponies were screaming as one pony addressed the crowds below. Luna flew up to the roof of the castle and landed on top of it. It was empty save for one guard who turned on her with his weapon. Celestia came up behind her landing softly on the stones. The guard dropped his weapon in fear, his wings locking tightly to his sides. Luna swiftly reared back and kicked him in the head. His body slumped to the ground, but Celestia said nothing. No

pony had ever raised a weapon to her sister except when she was Nightmare Moon.

Her worst fears were confirmed when she looked over the opposite ledge at the proceedings below her.

“As my last act, I would like to pronounce that I have found a wonderful addition to the council. She is a strong hearted mare, one who is both well versed in the ways of magic, and is very dear to my heart. Before you all, I want to pledge, as was tradition in the times before, an oath to express my solidarity with her in friendship, and in love. To she who captivates my heart, I beseech thee my pledge of bonding. In heart I will not waver.”

The crowd cheered, but Celestia knew exactly what was happening. She nodded to Luna and bolted down to the crowd below, trying to stop Starfall before he finished.

“In soul, I will forever hold your name...”

The crowd started to cheer, but gasped when their beloved Princess soared above.

“STOP!” She screamed.

Starfall looked up, his eye twitching and mouth hanging open.

“You...” His voice echoed across the crowd.

Celestia stared at the stage. All six of the elements were chained to the stage.

“Luna, take them down from there.” Luna nodded and flew onto the stage. Celestia stared at Starfall, “How dare you violate the trust I placed in the council? You have gone and done something unthinkable in my presence, merely because I disappeared for a short time. Citizens of Canterlot,” she addressed the crowd, “Do you actually approve of this act? What have these six done, but liberate my sister from a terrible entity?”

“How dare you demand to know what you yourself orchestrated! You used these six to hide Nightmare Moon for a time of your choosing, yet you lie about it to your loyal subjects?” Murmurs filled the crowd, slowly turning into hesitant agreement. “By trying to place her in your stead, you allowed her the chance to rule over Equestria unrestricted! You left us divided so that your appointed council had to ask many ponies to sacrifice their lives just to reunite without you. Only to find that you weren’t even dead!?”

Angry shouts consumed the crowd, egged on by his words. His eyes gleamed in satisfaction, turning slightly so he could check on Luna. She was preoccupied with undoing some of the binds on Twilight's legs.

He ripped a crossbow out of a nearby guard's hooves and hefted it skyward. The guard responded in kind lifting them in the air. Celestia's horn glowed with magic, as a shield formed around her body.

"Celestia, princess of all ponies, daughter of Sol, and eldest of the royal line. I hereby accuse you of betraying your duties to the ponies of Equestria and being the cause of many innocent deaths."

Celestia was taken aback. No pony besides her sister had any knowledge of the old kingdom. There wasn't even a written record of their family line available to anypony in the world.

"I judge that the proper punishment," he turned and aimed the crossbow at Luna's back, who was slowly turning around to stare directly at the crossbow's deadly load, "is death."

The guard fired at Luna, who had no time to respond, closed her eyes desperately summoning the magic to shield herself. But it was too late. The arrows struck flesh and bone, making many dull thuds as they stopped suddenly.

Even so, Luna was unharmed.

"TWILIGHT!" Celestia screamed.

Luna opened her eyes, to see Twilight's body slump to the ground in front of her.

Starfall raised his own weapon to his head saying the words loud and clear, "In body, I serve until death take me. This I pledge." He pulled the trigger.

Black fire burned his body and the stage he stood on as Celestia took up a position in front of her sister, who was weeping over Twilight's body. Muffled screams came from the other ponies, who rattled their chains, desperately trying to get free.

The flames subsided, and in Starfall's place stood another alicorn. Her fluid black mane dulled the sunlight around her, choking any warmth that it brought to the ponies around her. She spread her wings over the stage, and flared her magic into the sky. Blackened clouds formed overhead, blotting out the sun, leaving only light from the dying torches left

over from the night watch. Laughter ripped the air to shreds, frightening some of the ponies watching the terrifying event unfold.

“Hello Celestia. My precious, *little*, sister.”

Celestia went pale, and her magic increased, “You’re nothing but a mistake. A *younger* half-sister that should never have been.”

“Perhaps. But here I am, more mature, and far more... sophisticated than you ever were.” She walked along the stage, pacing towards Celestia. The princess took a step back, **“What? Don’t you want to greet me with open hooves? Or was banishing both of your sisters too much to handle?”**

“Silence, Nightmare. You controlled her. You *made* her feel neglected.”

“Of course. You were too busy getting ready to take over to let her have any attention. That’s why I was allowed in the castle, so she would have a friend.”

“So you could use her to take the throne!” Celestia roared.

“Semantics.” Nightmare stared her down, summoning her own magic around her. It spread into the crowd, touching Starfall’s eager followers with her mind. The color of their eyes turned a light red and their irises changed to those of a dragon, **“If a thousand years ago I had known how much more willing Starfall would be, I would have waited. He massacred far more ponies than you did. An excellent step up the ladder, I would say.”** She clapped her hooves together slowly, looking behind her, **“Although, if you want, I can take our little sister’s body too.”**

Celestia began to summon more magic to her, “I call upon the great Elements of Harmony to heed my call.”

“Magic’s host is dead. She won’t come to you now.” Black lightning arced over her head into Celestia’s shield, bouncing out into the crowd behind her.

“Alicorns of greatest stature, my need is great. Equestria needs your presence.” She winced again, as another bolt of lightning arced off of her shield once more. The castle wall behind her exploded with its touch. Celestia ignored her crazed sister’s laughter, “I Celestia, eldest daughter of the royal line, order your presence be forthcoming.”

The last bolt of lightning stopped in front of Celestia, dying immediately. Nightmare stepped back.

Light glowed from each of the remaining ponies behind her, breaking their chains as they changed. Their glowing forms walked forward, taking their place by Celestia's side. Luna too stood and joined them, a luminescence coming from her, starting from her midsection, slowly encompassing her. Celestia stared wide eyed at her sister's new form, brimming with raw energy.

“No. NO. That’s impossible! A wielder can only pass down their element to family!” Nightmare gawked, comprehension turning her frustration to horror.

“Princess Celestia, your need is indeed dire.” The voice seemed to giggle as it left one of the glowing figures.

“It comes to you once more to decide how to handle this decision. We will trust your judgement, as you see our warnings were sound those many years ago.”

Celestia swallowed, “By the power vested within the line of Time himself, I banish you, Nightmare to never claim your eternal purpose. You shall spend eternity in nothingness, you poor foal. May your eternal damnation be your eternal nightmare. Those you have corrupted will be saved by death. But you will never have the chance.”

The six ponies nodded and glowed brighter, *“The right decisions are never the easy ones. Your father taught you well.”*

The elements stepped back and began to glow brighter. Color began to usher from their being, flowing out to the sides covering the ground, stretching as far as the eye could see.

“You cannot do this to me! I AM ROYALTY BY BIRTH!”

The glow overpowered Nightmare, forcing her to her knees. She covered her eyes with her hooves, shaking in pain from the light.

“Not anymore.”

Nightmare screeched as the six ponies shot across the stage, engulfing her and the entire crowd with light. Celestia was forced to listen to the screams of those who had fallen for Starfall's lies, those who had willingly followed and stayed blind to her words. But she knew the truth.

Death was their only escape.

Celestia walked over to Twilight's prone form, and laid her head on her student's neck. The clouds parted, and bathed the ground in warmth and light, but the presence of sorrow and pain persisted. There were no sounds, save her cries of anguish – cries for everything that had been lost, for everything that had been destroyed. There was no bright future for Celestia's star pupil to look forward to, no chance for her to see the fruits of her courage. Celestia cried for Twilight, for while the violet pony had helped usher in a new age for all of Equestria, she had died in the darkness before the light could shine again.

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Time's Cliff *1000 Years Ago*

The sun was only briefly involved in lighting the ground while clouds were left unattended. Even the rainclouds among them looked withered and dry, struggling to cling to the last bit of existence they had.

There, in a once beautiful capital, the princess of the day, Princess Celestia, walked along the cobblestone streets. She did her best to avoid the debris, and tried to muster the strength to see what her sister had cost her. She watched as a few survivors scoured the homes, looking for any signs of the plague. Almost everypony she saw was crying. It took everything she had to not do the same.

Two Pegasus guards slowly made their way to her and her royal guard. They looked bedraggled with most of their armor damaged or even broken clean off.

"Princess Celestia, your use of the Elements of Harmony appears to have worked. There is no sign of your sister, or her victims.

"I see... Thank you, Captain. I would like you and your partner to search for survivors, and begin evacuating them through the forest. I will meet you in Canterlot."

The captain saluted, and took to the air with his companion following in suit. Celestia watched them for a few moments before walking to the main hall of the palace.

The stones here were intact, but littered with scraps of tapestries once loved and admired. She smiled, thankful that this place was as intact as she hoped it would be. Her magic came to her, hovering a few books from her saddlebags, knowing perfectly well that they would be needed in the future. A pen and scroll accompanied the books, hovering in the air in front of her. She wrote a very short letter, signing and sealing it, before packing it into her bag.

Then, using her magic once more, she flooded the floor below her with magic. The tiles floated up into the air, and her magic pressed down a small area in the stone floor below it. The books nestled themselves into place, and she spoke into the spell.

"Use this well, Luna." Her voice was slowly brought into the spell, as she settled the tiles once more in their places.

She took flight then, aiming herself for the entrance to the city. The Everfree Forest was beautiful this time of year, teeming with flowers and apple trees bearing their first harvest. One of her guards stood by the ramp, moving aside so she would have enough room to land.

The pegasus bowed, "Everyone has left, Celestia."

"Thank you, Clear Sky. Can you stay with me?"

"Of course little one." He rubbed his wing on her head.

She frowned, but nuzzled into his side, "Thank you. I'm so sorry for-"

"Don't apologize," he interrupted. His eyes were solemn, but he smiled down at her, "You made a hard decision that few would be able to make. But it was for the best. Now," the aged pegasus took a step back, "Do what you must."

"I, Princess Celestia, last of the alicorns, call upon the founding makers of Equestria: Earth, Sky, Water, and Fire. Ones who have transcended the cycle of the great sleep, you have pledged your loyalty to the Kingdom of Equestria and its citizens. I call on you to hide the destruction that has befallen us. Until the time when you are called upon once more by royal blood, shall you change this place forever.

A voice responded, airy and light, *"It comes at a price. This land must be set free."*

She swallowed hard, "If that is what must be done, so be it."

The voice hesitated. After a moment it chimed back, *“Then it shall be done. No longer shall this place remain seen, and no longer shall ponies need tend to this forest. Until we speak again, Princess.”*

The cliff road sank into the ground below, a thick fog rolling in to obscure its fall into the city below. The fog spilled over the cliffs into the forest, slowly creeping into the trees.

“Let’s go, Sky.”

Clear Sky chuckled, “You have to learn to be more formal, Princess.”

She pouted, “But I don’t have to be now.”

He smiled, “I know. You have plenty of time to learn. Then when your sister comes back, you can save her from herself.” The pegasus walked along the path towards Canterlot, taking flight.

Celestia stayed for a moment. No one would know of what truly happened here. She made sure of that. But she would pay for it when her time to sleep came.

It would destroy Equestria.

“Are you coming?” Clear Sky called.

Celestia took one look back and took to the sky. She would worry about it one day. But for now, she had time to live and prosper in what was left behind. Her goal was clear.

She would make Equestria shine as bright as the sun.

-Epilogue-

It had been a year and a half and not a single day had gone by since she hadn't thought of Twilight. Rainbow Dash missed her something fierce. She wasn't the only one. In honor of her service, Celestia and Luna had a memorial built in the center of Ponyville, a statue commemorating her bravery, as well as those who had died in the war.

Rainbow remembered the war all too well. The fighting in Cloudsdale haunted her dreams: the sounds of dying screams, or innocent ponies fleeing for safety as the city fell apart. Even Twilight's death haunted her. Watching her launch herself in front of Princess Luna, and getting riddled with crossbow bolts played over in her head many times. Although as time had gone by, they had become less frequent.

She flew through the air, bucking away the clouds over Ponyville. Her thoughts were easily lulled into her mind by the steady thud of connecting with a cloud. The weather patrol had been dropped to only a few ponies after the soldiers came back to the town.

There had still been fighting going on after Celestia woke up from the Eversleep. It took her days to solidify peace between the two sides, still blindly egged on by their hatred for one another. That peace was still relatively uneasy. Even now there had been reports of squabbles in the streets over simple misconceptions, and anger at the aftermath.

The cities and towns that lost the most citizens saw the most turmoil. While Celestia focused on the cities that had been destroyed or damaged in the war, it did nothing to heal the communities that were now mostly empty. For the first time in modern Equestrian history there were hundreds of young ponies who had nowhere to go. Families that were destroyed in the fighting left behind colts and fillies that were eventually brought into orphanages. Most families were more than happy to have another addition to their home, but some were still left alone.

Celestia was under the most scrutiny of all. Accusations flared about her involvement in the plot, and that she knowingly released her other sister into the world. They even blamed her of setting up the war for some sick pleasure.

Rainbow thought it was completely undeserved. Celestia released many different private documents about alicorn anatomy and life-cycles. They were irrelevant to all ponies but herself and Luna. For the most part,

they were released in her defense. She noted in many different addresses that she wanted to spare the world from attempted overthrows during her one thousand years of rule. Her rhetoric over her sister's innocence in the affairs was just about the only thing that anypony talked about.

While they recognized that Nightmare could control a pony if she wished, the proof was undeniable from the execution - some were wary to believe that she was blameless.

It was commonly accepted that regardless of Luna's innocence or guilt, Twilight Sparkle had been one of the bravest ponies in the world. Her actions to save Luna's life were the only rationalization that anypony had to continue trusting the princesses. No pony as smart as she was would throw her life away so irrationally.

But, Rainbow Dash thought that there was something else involved. She had spent the last month of Twilight's life with her and Luna in the ruins. They were quite close to each other for only spending a few days alone. But that closeness seemed to grow as the time went by. She could have sworn she had seen them holding hooves at one point, but she was busy stuffing her face with vegetables at the time.

There was something more curious than that. Luna had been gone for several months. Celestia said she was continuing research in private on the effects of the Eversleep, should it ever become a problem again. While both princesses were fully rested from their first sleep - Rainbow Dash assumed this was the case - it would not occur again in Rainbow's lifetime. She did however, receive a letter from Princess Luna.

It was sitting just inside her house by the front door. Princess Luna had requested that they meet in the afternoon by the lake outside of town. Her hooves met open air, and it snapped her out of her thoughts. For as far as she could see, she had cleared the sky of all of its clouds.

Great. Glad that's over with, she thought. Her wings angled downwards and she glided out of town to the lake. *I guess I'll just wait for her since I'm done.*

Rainbow touched down on the sand. There was no sign of the princess yet. Instead she sat down on the shore. A slight summer breeze rippled over the water, blowing grass gently from side to side. A mother duck with her newborns swam across the water, gliding on its surface. Short quacks filled the air as she listened to the sounds of early summer. The hot sun beat down on the ground, warming her coat, forcing her to spread her wings to catch the breeze.

"Hello, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash was startled for a moment, but she turned to look at the voice. Just behind her, Princess Luna was walking about with two young fillies playing around her legs. Neither of them seemed to speak, but they giggled as they chased each other around.

Luna didn't seem used to it in the least. Her mane was a mess, ruffled from running around, most likely from chasing the two foals. Her crown was missing from her head, and her wings were loose against her body, moving slightly to catch the wind. One of the foals ran underneath her and she lifted her midsection so the other could chase her.

"Sorry about them. They're always so riled up."

Rainbow Dash looked at her quizzically, but failed to form any words in her mind.

"Come on!" Luna called sweetly, walking by Rainbow.

The two fillies responded by running towards the princess, who was walking into the lake. They ran straight past Rainbow Dash, plowing into the water. It was enough for Rainbow Dash to confirm something about them:

They were both alicorns.

Her mouth dropped, silence echoing around her, contrasted only by the two foals thrashing around in the water. Luna smiled wide, keeping them close to the shore. Occasionally they would jump out of the water, only to crash back into it.

One of the two looked up at Rainbow Dash and bolted over to her, shaking water all over the blue pony. Rainbow Dash finally got a good look at the foal. She had a beautiful indigo coat, accented by a deep blue mane, that slowly brightened to the color of a morning sky at the tip. Her tail was the same, but the colors were lighter, and seemed to contrast her coat, rather than blend in. It was the eyes that really stood out. They had a soft glow behind them, a fluid orange and yellow color, like the rising sun.

The foal nuzzled up alongside Rainbow's hooves pushing her gently in the direction of the water. Rainbow looked at Luna.

The princess giggled, "She wants you to come play, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash smiled and rose from the sand. The young foal laughed and giggled as she charged back into the water, drifting into Luna's open hooves. Luna let her go and she started splashing around in the water.

Rainbow flew over the lake and dropped into the water. She immediately regretted that decision, feeling the colder than expected water against her coat. Her head broke the surface and she swam back over to the shoreline where the foal splashed right over to her. The little pony

raised her front hooves in the air, smiling, as she did so. Rainbow picked her up, the blue foal giggling in delight, and plopped her right on top of her back. The foal had planned for this, as she climbed up the rainbow mane, until she was staring over Rainbow's head.

The other foal seemed to shy away when Rainbow approached, blushing and hiding behind her mother's legs. She looked exactly like the foal she was playing with, but with subtle differences in color. Her mane and tail started a little darker than her coat, but instead of lightening, it darkened into a deep blue, ending in the purple of a night sky. Her eyes were a cooler color, a light red mixing with all kinds of shades of purple. They were far more complex than her sister's, but they still held that familiar glow, hers just like moonlight.

"It's ok. This is Rainbow Dash. She's helped mommy many times."

The foal was hesitant, but with some guidance she floated over to Rainbow Dash. The light blue pony sat down in the water, lowering her head, so that the foal could see her sister riding the rainbow colored mane. The shy foal smiled and splashed her way back over to Luna, who used her magic to float her onto her neck.

Rainbow was having trouble forming the words to say, managing a sheepish smile as the little one pulled at her mane, giggling all the way.

Luna sensed the questions Rainbow might have had, "They're twins. The one you have on your neck is Dawn." The little one squealed in joy in hearing her mother's voice, "This is her sister, Dusk." Dusk smiled, and hid her face in Luna's mane. The princess walked out of the water, Dusk sliding onto her back.

Rainbow followed her. Dawn copied her sister's readjustment and giggled to her sister when they were side by side. "Twins are really rare. Who's the lucky stallion?"

Luna blushed. "That's... complicated. Its actually why I brought them to you first."

Rainbow raised an eyebrow. "Why me?"

"Because, I figured you'd have a better idea of who the other parent is, without me telling you."

Rainbow's face drained of it's color as her brain clicked. All of those nights that they stayed up talking, or when Twilight was always concerned when Luna wasn't doing well. She put herself in harms way for more than Celestia, and even Luna. She died to save *her* foals.

Their foals.

"Twilight...?" Rainbow Dash managed to say.

Luna smiled and nodded. She lead them onto the road back to Ponyville, taking a leisurely pace. "I asked her if she would be the other parent for a foal. It was more a precaution on my part, because I knew I would die without the extra boost of magic that comes with an alicorn's pregnancy."

Rainbow looked confused.

"I don't expect you to understand that part of it. I was more open to the idea since I had kind of fallen for her after I had arrived in Ponyville. When she comforted me over Sky Shroud's death... I was happy. The more time I spent with her, the more she grew on me. Even after I had asked her, I was still unsure about my decision. It worked out because she initially refused my request. But," Luna blushed. "The more time we spent alone those days before you arrived, she and I became more intimate."

"Then that night you came, after you had fallen asleep, she decided to go ahead with it. That specific type of spell we used allowed us to see everything about each other. Our feelings, or doubts, even our memories. It is called a "sharing". Only an alicorn can perform it, and it was used for ponies who wanted children, but didn't want to or couldn't... you know."

Rainbow blushed.

"There were many alicorns in the old days that performed the spell. But it took a while to figure it out, since it's been lost for many years. When we did..." Luna looked at the two fillies, using her magic to levitate Dusk to the ground. Dawn hopped off of Rainbow Dash, using her wings to slow down. They walked along in between the two mares occasionally skipping a little ways ahead.

Luna sniffled a little bit. Rainbow was concerned for the princess, who was visibly crying. She stopped and put a hoof around Luna, "You ok?"

The two foals stopped their running, and walked back over to their mother, nuzzling against her hooves. Luna nodded to Rainbow Dash, nuzzling her foals. "When we figured it out, these two were the result. I love them more than anything in the world. I'm sure Twilight would have wanted to see them." She used her magic to prod them on their way, smiling and laughing through her tears.

The twins smiled back and jumped ahead towards a candy covered building. Rainbow Dash didn't even notice that they had even arrived back in Ponyville. She was also thankful that no one was around to notice them.

Luna started walking towards the building, the two foals skipping back to their mother. Her horn glowed and the were scooped up onto her back. Dawn climbed on top of her sister to get a better look at Sugar Cube Corner.

“Thank you Rainbow Dash. I hope everypony else will be as accepting of all of this.”

Rainbow smiled. “I’m sure Pinkie Pie will have a fit over how cute they are. Or she’ll pull some crazy party for them. She’s so random sometimes.”

“Only one way to find out.” Luna said. She pushed open the door to Sugar Cube corner and walked inside.

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## The End of The Eversleep

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Endless Sky

Chapter 1

A light summer breeze passed through branches of the great library in Ponyville. The hollow tree inched to the left and right, reaching towards the last light of the setting sun. All of the windows were open, with the sounds of excited ponies escaping into the air. Shortly following yells of delight was the voice of another, much more tired pony.

“You can’t catch me!”

“Nuh, uh!”

“Girls! Settle down!”

A light blue pegasus darted around the library, ducking flying books and pillows as they soared through the air. Her body spun through the air, soaring through the room, landing in front of the door to the kitchen. One of the fillies careened out of the way, skidding into the wall, while the other trotted over laughing, tapping her with her hoof.

“Gotcha.” She announced. Her darker mane fell to the side, showing a wide grin. The soft glow behind her red and purple eyes brightened and faded with each laugh.

The other filly pouted, “Aw...” Her yellow-orange eyes stared up at the pegasus.

“Ok, girls. Why don’t you get ready for bed? I’ll read you a story.”

The two of them smiled and darted up the stairs. Those fillies were a handful, but they were great to have around. It kept her mind off of the past. Plus, Princess Luna had requested her to watch them while they went to school in Ponyville – something about being away from politicians.

“Auntie Rainbow! Can I borrow your hair brush?”

Rainbow Dash smiled weakly at the gesture. She had to admit; getting used to being called “Aunt” anything wasn’t easy. “That’s fine,” she answered back. The cyan pegasus trotted around the room, picking up a couple of books with her teeth. She tucked them into the crook of her wing, loading as much as she could before putting them back on the shelves.

A small smile played on her lips. Many times she had crashed unceremoniously into the same shelves that she was now meticulously fixing. Twilight was always upset when she did that, and as usual, Rainbow was reminded why.

The two fillies that made the mess were the last part of Twilight Sparkle's memory in Ponyville, other than the library. They were twins – rare in Equestria and made rarer still because they were alicorns. Twilight and Princess Luna had performed a particular spell called a “sharing” which allowed Luna to carry their fillies. They had also inherited the Element of Magic from Twilight. All before...

Rainbow's emotions threatened her level head once more. She forced them back into her state of calm. It had only been a few years since Twilight was killed, and she was still inconsolable at times. The twins had been the biggest factor in helping her move on. They had grown on her significantly since she had met them; she felt as though she were as much of a mother to them as Luna was.

“We're ready!” The two twins shouted in unison.

Rainbow smiled and lifted herself off of the floor, flying up the stairs into their room. The decorations were exactly the same as when Twilight had lived in the library, save for Spike's bed. After Twilight... died, Celestia took over for caring for him. nopony had seen him since, but the light blue Pegasus didn't question it. She hadn't gone back to Canterlot since.

Rainbow shook her head slightly to get the thoughts out of her head. Her teeth closed around a small book she had read to them many times before. Turning around, she hovered over to their bed – Twilight's old bed.

“Um, Aunt Rainbow?” The lightly spoken voice came from Dusk. While the twins had the same indigo coat, their eyes set them apart. Her eyes were a light red-purple, and her mane – which used to fade darker at the ends – was now a deep blue, with cyan streaks. She kept it long, spending tons of time brushing it before bed, and after she woke up. Rarity practically fawned over it the last time she saw her. “We wanted to hear about our other mom, Twilight Sparkle.”

Rainbow looked at her quizzically for a moment. In all the time she had taken care of them, they had never asked to hear more about Twilight. She knew Luna had told them plenty about what had happened that night, and Celestia had told them stories about Twilight's childhood. She put the book on the floor and looked back at the two of them. Hesitantly she began, “Well... what do you want to know?”

“The story of how she saved Aunt Celly!” Her excitement boiled over at the end of every word.

"It must have been totally cool!" The other twin was nearly bouncing up and down in excitement. Her name was Dawn, and she was the more active and friendly of the two fillies. While her sister took after her parents, becoming a studious young filly who loved books, Dawn wanted to be more like Rainbow Dash. Her mane and tail was the opposite of Dusk's – light blue, like the sky, with darker strands spread throughout. It was unkempt, and stuck out all over the place, occasionally spiking upwards. Her eyes were a bright red-orange, much like the rising sun.

"I... I don't know," Rainbow stuttered. "It has some cool parts, but... I'm not sure you're old enough to hear it."

"Please!?" They both moved as close as they could towards Rainbow, giving her a look like Winona begging for a treat after a trick. Needless to say, she couldn't resist that face – the twins knew it too.

"Fine," she said. They both cheered, clapping their hooves together. Rainbow held up a hoof to quiet them down, "But just remember: you can't tell your mom I told you."

The twins nodded.

Rainbow cleared her throat, "It all began on a cold winter day. I was trying to keep the snow light so that there wouldn't be a blizzard that day. Up in the clouds, I noticed that the Princess' chariot was slowly coming down the road. Naturally, I thought it was an unexpected visit from the Princess, so I went to tell Twilight.

"When we went outside to see what it was... it wasn't what we expected. The princess had fallen into a deep sleep. I didn't find out until the next day, after she had helped protect your other mom from a pony named Starfall."

"Wasn't he the bad pony who took mommy's place?" Dusk asked.

Rainbow nodded, "Yup. I see your mom already talked about it." Dusk nodded. Rainbow continued, "Well, he tried to capture your mom, but her brave guard-"

"Sky Shroud! The bravest royal guard ever!" Dawn interrupted.

"Yes, Sky Shroud. He protected her from Starfall's evil minions until they could escape. That's when they found safety in this library.

"That night was when Twilight and I found out that Princess Celestia was asleep. So we created a plan to wake her up. We zoomed out of Ponyville the next day, and while I went to Cloudsdale, Twilight went with Luna to the ruins of an ancient city.

"They searched and searched until they found the spell they needed to wake up Celestia. They worked every day to build that spell, adding magic when they had the strength, just so that they could save Equestria.

“But it wasn’t as fast as it needed to be. Not even a week after Celestia fell asleep, Starfall came to take away Cloudsdale. Brave pegasi flew to the sky trying to stop them. But then, POOF!” The two alicorns jumped, “They used their magic to make Cloudsdale vanish forever. I was flying away so fast, that I lost my balance, and fell.

“But that’s when Luna came to save me. I was wandering around, tired and lost in the Everfree Forest, barely able to stand or walk.”

Screams ripped through the air from all directions. Pegasi clashed with one another above the cloud city, firing indiscriminately on the fleeing citizens below. Black magic spread through the clouds paralyzing anypony it touched and sending them falling to the ground below.

“But Luna flew me back to the ruins, where Twilight helped her fix me up. They bandaged my wings so I they could rest while I was there. But, even though I couldn’t fly, I *could* help them with their big plan to save Celestia.”

“Ooo,” the twins said.

“What did Twilight do?” Dawn asked.

“She volunteered herself for the most dangerous part of the plan. She snuck into Ponyville and acted as though *she* was casting the big spell. That’s when the guards showed up. Twilight needed to stop them from finding out that Luna was casting the waking spell. Her magic was her defense.”

“BAM! Her magic stopped one of Starfall’s minions, sending him onto his flanks. They fired nets at her, and she flung them away. They used their muscles to try and stop her, but she used her magic, blocking each and every one of them.” Rainbow was up on her hooves, swinging her hooves around as if she were Twilight. “Everything was going perfect until *he* showed up.

“Starfall came with his sidekick, Dynasty, and hurled spells at her shield. But Twilight didn’t give up. She kept blocking and absorbing every hit, even flinging her own magic back.” Rainbow reared onto her back hooves and pretended to direct magic. Dawn and Dusk were completely locked into what she was doing.

“Then the spell ended, and Twilight managed to zip part of the way to me. But Starfall’s evil magic caught her. He dragged her back to the castle. One by one, his other followers grabbed the rest of her friends – including me while I was trying to run – and brought us to be locked up too.”

To be executed, she thought.

Rainbow struggled against her restraints, struggling to get free. They weren't supposed to be here, everything should have gone according to plan. She was safe!

One of the guards kicked her tender wings, a resounding crunch ensuring it stayed broken. She screamed in pain as tears fell from her eyes. Another swift kick knocked the wind out of her, silencing her agony.

"It'll be dawn soon, mule. Save your screaming for the show," the guard snickered.

"Twilight was brought in front of the crowd. They screamed at her, and called her a traitor. The whole crowd was filled with Starfall's minions. But as he was chanting his winning speech..." Dawn and Dusk were now just hanging on her words, waiting for the stunning conclusion. She smiled, "CELESTIA APPEARED!"

"YAY!" The two fillies shouted. They started bouncing up and down in their bed.

"She stopped Starfall from his speech, and Luna set Twilight free!" Her momentary happiness fell from her. Rainbow faked a smile, "That is how Celestia saved the day from the evil pony, Starfall."

"That was soo cool! Is there more to the story?" Dawn bounced up and down, giddy with excitement.

"Not that I remember," Dash lied.

*Starfall **was** far from finished, she remembered. He aimed his entire squad to aim their weapons at Celestia.*

Crossbows hefted skyward, the tip of every crossbow bolt itching for royal blood.

"Celestia, princess of all ponies, daughter of Sol, and eldest of the royal line. I hereby accuse you of betraying your duties to the ponies of Equestria and being the cause of many innocent deaths."

Luna loosened the bonds on Rainbow's front hooves, letting her move a little. Twilight was rubbing her leg with one hoof, and walking over to Luna.

"I judge the proper punishment..." Starfall paused, shifting his eyes to stare at Luna and Rainbow, aiming at Luna's unwavering focus. A smile played on his lips, and his eyes gleamed with an unnatural glow.

At the last second, he turned his aim to Luna.

The crossbows turned to face Luna's back. Rainbow's eyes went wide. "Lu..na..." she managed to speak over her cracked ribs. She pointed with one hoof at the crossbows.

"...is death," Starfall finished.

Twilight looked at Rainbow, smiling briefly. A small tear fell from her eye, as she mouthed the word: Goodbye.

Rainbow could barely contain her emotions any further. Tears welled in her eyes. She felt just as she did when she saw it happen: dead and hollow – like something was ripped out of her life, that she had grown so attached to.

But her sadness ebbed away when the two twins nuzzled up to her sides.

"Aunt Rainbow?" Dusk was staring at her, "Are you ok?"

Rainbow wiped her eyes with her forehoof. A genuine smile broke over her lips.

"Just something in my eyes. It must be from the late-season flowers. Now it's time for bed. You both have school tomorrow."

The twins nodded and snuggled into their blankets, smiling as Rainbow ensured that they were nice and warm. She gave them each a kiss on the top of their head.

"Good night Aunt Rainbow," Dawn responded.

"We love you," Dusk said, hugging Rainbow's arm.

Rainbow nuzzled against the two of them. Her leftover tears pressed into their manes, "I love you both very much. Don't ever forget that." She broke her embrace and walked to the door, "Good night girls." Her hoof flicked the light switch, and she closed the door.

The charade she had been holding the whole time fell away, and she stumbled down the stairs, before collapsing against a bookcase. Her body slid to the floor, as her body shook with each silent sob. There was so much more to her feelings that she simply couldn't or wouldn't try to make sense of. Time had only made it worse for her... and that was the problem.

All she had was time.

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Luna was out on her evening rounds, flying over Equestria to watch its citizens enjoy the warm summer night. She was exactly where she wanted to be, enjoying time to think and fly.

It was exactly where Celestia wanted her to be. The older princess milled about the castle, walking slowly through each hallway

unaccompanied by guards. Those that she passed offered to join her, but she politely refused. Tonight she needed to be alone.

Magic brimmed from her horn, adjusting pictures on the wall, and straightening sagging tapestries. She hummed while she walked among the artwork from all of the centuries she had ruled. It was chronological at least, covering the two main hallways of the castle. The one closest to her destination went back the farthest, leading to the days after she had banished Luna and her... baggage... to the moon.

The early days held a lot of fighting. Several wars to unite the great pony City-States of Canterlot, Cloudsdale, and Trotitsyn – renamed to Stalliongrad many years afterwards. It was peaceful for a long time – nearly four hundred years until the recent civil war.

She grimaced. While she never expected it to occur, she was partly to blame. Everypony had believed her dead when she fell into her Eversleep – a natural millennia-long sleep every alicorn went through to ensure their longevity. The ponies she had appointed to help Luna run the kingdom had brought war over Luna's past transgressions, namely, her time as Nightmare Moon.

Of course, that wasn't the real reason why. There was another player involved, and she had killed her prized pupil – and friend. No amount of suffering would atone for the crime Celestia felt **she** had committed against Twilight Sparkle, and the rest of Equestria. Not until now, at least.

She exited the hall through the door leading into the garden. Moonlight poured over the land, spilling its light onto the late summer flowers. Owls and other creatures moved quietly in the garden as she passed through the trees. A smile spread on her face as she felt the wind pick up behind her. A pleasant sigh escaped her as she turned to look at the newcomer.

"Welcome back. I trust the other dragons are keeping you well?" She asked.

A small purple dragon, roughly the size of a full-grown pony sat on its haunches, folding its wings against its sides. Green spikes protruded from its scales, and smoke billowed from his nose. The dragon smiled, "They are. But it's better to be back home."

Celestia smiled, "I'm glad you're back Spike. Will you be staying here for good?"

He frowned and shook his head, "Not yet. I have to return for a few more lessons before I'm allowed to roam about. Part of that agreement you made..."

Celestia nodded. Her smile slowly faded from her face. She looked at the faded pack tucked into his scales, "I suppose that's the reason you came back early? To drop off the exchange?"

Spike nodded. "It took the grand master years to find that book. He never told me what he went through to get it, but... I'm not really sure I want to know."

She nodded. Magic surrounded the book inside the package, and it floated down to the ground in front of her. It was a fairly simple tome, but it shimmered all sorts of cold colors in the moonlight. They all played on the surface of the book, enticing anyone to have a look inside.

"Is it... safe?" Spike still had a concerned look on his face.

Celestia smiled, "It will be. I made a promise to you Spike; the same promise I made to myself. Every year since that war I have been searching for the answer, just as you have. I will *never* stop until I find the answer." As the last words left her lips, her face became more stubborn than Spike had ever seen. It was as though a fire burned within her, threatening to consume everything.

"Just be safe. Equestria can't lose you again. I can't lose you again." Spike placed a clawed hand on her shoulder. "You saved me from a horrific future. Without you, I'll... I'll be doomed to what it could have been."

Celestia relaxed and looked up at the young dragon. The smile returned to her face, "I will be."

"Then I'll see you soon. I'll send another letter before I come back."

Spike took to the air, silently flapping his wings against the night sky. Celestia watched him fade into the night, heading high over the mountains. He passed into the mountain range, and dipped below a nearby peak, vanishing from sight.

Celestia's smile turned to a determined scowl as she lifted the book into the air once more. There was much more work to be done until she was sure that it would work. Everything had to be perfect. If she destroyed the opportunity she had, it would be years until she could try again. But that would put important lives at risk. She couldn't have that happen so soon after a war.

She turned down the hallway and headed back to her room, waving the guards to the sides. Her smile returned to her face, "No disturbances until morning. I have urgent work to attend to before tomorrow morning's court."

"Yes, your highness." One of them bowed.

"Thank you, Granite, Nightwind."

She entered the room, returning her focus to the book, leaving the two guards outside speechless and open-mouthed. Tomorrow she would work on peace.

But tonight, peace was the furthest thing from her mind.

Chapter 2

Rainbow Dash woke in a cold sweat on the floor of the library. The cool morning air filled the room, sending chills through her body. She knew she was still prone to nightmares, but... she never really knew when they would happen.

Her muscles were stiff and sore from sleeping on the floor all night. The dull pain shot through her legs as she pushed herself up against the wall. She used the wall to lift herself from the floor and when she was finally steady, she began the slow trudge into the kitchen.

It was earlier than usual. She looked at the clock hanging on the wall. A small sigh accompanied the number: 6:25. In a little while, the twins would be bouncing out of their bed to get ready for school. That was when she preferred to wake up, if she was lucky.

"You know you don't have to push yourself so hard, Rainbow."

Rainbow looked up to see Twilight sitting at the table. The hallucinations were early today.

"I know," Rainbow responded. She opened the fridge with her front hoof, and chomped down on the end of a bottle of apple juice.

Twilight gave her a look of disbelief. Rainbow rolled her eyes, and kicked the door to the fridge closed. She trotted over to the table and sat down. The apple juice bottle touched down on the surface, and she let go of the top.

"You know that no one blames you for what happened. I don't."

"I should have been able to knock Luna out of the way."

"Rainbow Dash!" She looked upset, *"You know better than anyone that you could barely stand when she unlocked your chains."*

Rainbow frowned, and turned away from Twilight's gaze. Regardless of Twilight being a figment of her imagination, she still knew how to make her upset. She hated this conversation.

"It's not your fault. The more that you keep thinking it is, the farther apart everyone else will become."

"It's... complicated."

"You're just making it complicated."

"Twilight." Rainbow's face hardened, "I left a lot of things unsaid. Things I needed to say, but never knew I wanted to say them."

Twilight raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that might have been a little confusing..." She took a sip of the apple juice. It stung her throat a little as it went down, which made her cough to clear her throat, "There were things I didn't realize until it was too late. I can't tell anypony about them, either. Too many things happened."

"You can always tell me. I'm not going anywhere."

"Who are you talking to, Aunt Rainbow?" Dusk walked in groggily, making a wobbly trail to the fridge. Rainbow looked at her, and instinctively went over and opened the fridge for her. When she looked back at the table, Twilight was gone.

"No one, Dusk. What did you want for lunch?" Rainbow pushed the nozzle for the faucet, while squirting soap onto her hooves.

"A daffodil and daisy sandwich please," she replied. The filly sat down at the table with an apple hanging gingerly in her teeth.

"I want peanut butter and raspberry jelly!" Dawn ran into the room, sliding on the floor, until she came to a stop in front of the open refrigerator, "Do we have any carrots left?" Her head was shoved into the fridge, while she shuffled things around on the shelves with her front hooves.

Rainbow sighed, "Dawn, let me get it for you, so you don't break anything."

Dawn hopped back from the fridge, knocking a glass jar over on the way out. Dash zoomed in the short distance, saving it from smashing all over the floor. She immediately regretted it, as every muscle in her body lashed out in protest.

Dawn smiled sheepishly, "Heh, heh..."

Rainbow sighed. She put the jar back into its place, and grabbed some carrots by their leaves, placing them on the counter. Magic covered one of them, and it flew over to the table, straight into Dawn's head. Dusk giggled at her sister's lack of control.

"Be careful!" Rainbow frowned, "You don't want to hurt yourself with a **carrot**, do you?"

Dawn shook her head, and chewed the carrot in her mouth, "I wuhn't," she said through a mouthful of carrot.

Rainbow smiled, laughing to herself. She went back to preparing food for the two twins, who ate in silence, occasionally giggling at some thought silently passed between them. Her hoof shot out behind her, pushing the refrigerator open once more, so she could return the left over food to its place.

"When you're all done, go get your saddle bags. Make sure your homework is in the bag this time, Dawn. I can't keep coming back to the house to bring it to school because you left it here."

“Ugh, fine...” Dawn groaned as she went into the main part of the library. Dusk picked up the crumbs Dawn left behind onto her plate with the apple core. She dumped everything on the plate in the garbage and then set the plate on the counter next to Rainbow Dash.

“Thanks, Dusk.” Rainbow ruffled her hair. Dusk smiled wide and trotted off into the library.

“Thanks for looking after them. I wish that I could.”

Rainbow glanced back at the table. Twilight was sitting with a cup of tea hovering in front of her. Tears welled her eyes, as the cup settled back onto the table.

“Aunt Rainbow? I think I broke the strap,” called one of the twins.

Rainbow smiled at Twilight before scooping up their respective sandwiches and trotting out of the kitchen.

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It wasn't a long walk to the schoolhouse from the library, but their path went through the center of Ponyville's market. During the fall and spring of each school year, Rainbow Dash and the twins made it a point to leave earlier so that they could stop by Applejack's stand.

The cart was in much better shape than before the war thanks to Apple Bloom's special talent. In the aftermath, the Apple family spent a lot of time rebuilding nearby towns destroyed by the fighting. It took some doing until she figured it out on her own, but Apple Bloom had a particular knack for building things. Her woodwork had been contracted several times for buildings in Canterlot, and even in Manehattan.

But when she wasn't working for somepony else, she helped out on the farm. Shortly after the twins came to Ponyville for school, Granny Smith passed on. It was horrible for

Applejack and Apple Bloom, but it paled in comparison to what Big Mac had to go through. All of a sudden, everything was dumped onto the stallion. He had to be the strongest of the three of them while both harvesting the apples on the farm, and taking care of the expenses. Normally it wouldn't be a problem, but with Sweet Apple Acres being practically the only food source for the other local towns, he couldn't slow down his pace. He broke under the pressure, leaving Applejack in charge for a few weeks.

It was a rough time, but she remembered that something wonderful came out of it. In the midst of Mac's grieving, Fluttershy had approached him to try and console him. But that eventually turned into more than

friendship, and almost half a year later, they got hitched. It was good for business and the party was the biggest one in Ponyville history to boot. Shortly afterwards, Mac went back to work as an apple harvester, and Applejack took over Sweet Apple Acres.

This morning, Applejack was running the stand, setting out fresh apples in the front and opening up two barrels filled with bottles of fresh squeezed juice. Her skilled hooves went from her cart to her stand, filling it up with expert speed.

"Morning AJ," Rainbow said, touching down in front of the stand. The twins swarmed around the stand to greet her.

"Hey Applejack!" Dusk hopped up onto the cart, smiling down at the farmer pony.

"Hey AJ! Anything new today? Huh?" Dawn bounced up and down, looking through everything on the stand, and peeking into the cart.

"Now, now, settle down, y'all." Applejack offered to the girls, "You know I ain't got no specialties this time o' year."

Rainbow chuckled at her predicament, "Come on AJ. They're always excited to see you on the first day of school."

"I know, I know," she chuckled, "What can I do you for, Dash?"

Rainbow picked out two ice-cold bottles of juice and placed them on the ground. "Just these today. I only had one left in the fridge after breakfast this morning." She reached into her saddlebags and placed a few bits on the stand.

Applejack scooped them up and placed them inside of the stand. "Ya need any more, I got plenty here today," she said, turning her attention to the girls. "Now, I know it's been a while since Apple Bloom graduated, but don't you girls have school?"

They nodded, and went back to the other side of the stand, picking up the bottles Dash had just bought, sticking them in their saddlebags.

"If ya see Fluttershy, tell her Big Mac's off early tonight."

Rainbow nodded, prodding the twins down the street to the schoolhouse.

"Bye Applejack!" Dawn called back, walking backwards to wave. She turned around and ran back to Rainbow's side.

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In a few minutes, they reached the other side of Ponyville, as many other fillies and colts were being brought to their first day of school. Rainbow hugged them both.

“Now don’t cause any trouble this year. I don’t want a repeat of the ‘smoothie’ incident.”

The twins cringed, a mortified look on their faces.

“I know it was Pinkie Pie’s idea, and that it was an... accident, but I still have to say it.”

They nodded, slowly returning to their former excited mood.

“Alright. Now have a good first day at school, okay?”

They nodded and hopped off, waving to her as they met with the other students.

“Oh. Hello, Rainbow Dash.”

Rainbow looked behind her. Fluttershy walked up with a small pegasus filly in tow that Dash recognized as Fluttershy’s daughter. Unlike her mother, her coat was a dull sandy-yellow, accompanied by a deep red mane and tail. Freckles dotted her face, and her eyes were a beautiful deep forest green.

“Hey, Fluttershy.” Her filly came around her mother to sit in front of Rainbow Dash. “Hello to you too, Early Blaze.”

“Hi Dash,” she said. “Are Dawn and Dusk here?”

“They just went inside, wh-”

“Thanks!” Blaze jumped to her hooves, running towards the school.

“Wait! Be careful dear, please- oh...” Fluttershy was filled with concern, but she was having trouble voicing them, as usual.

“She’ll be fine. They’ll have a lot of fun together this year.” Rainbow smiled, starting to walk towards the center of town, “Let’s go get something from Sugar Cube Corner. I’m sure Pinkie Pie wants to talk about the sleepover.”

“O-okay,” she managed, walking alongside Rainbow. Fluttershy glanced back at the schoolhouse, hesitating for a moment, before catching up to walk beside her.

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The doors to the throne room closed shut, leaving Princess Celestia, her guards, and her sister alone inside. Celestia sat lazily on the throne, sighing as she adjusted her position to get comfortable. Hours of court always made her tired and sore, her flanks in particular. Sitting all day was never comfortable.

But that was only part of the problem today. The book that she had gotten from Spike the night previous held mountains of information that she needed - particularly in certain less-documented forms of magic. Without

the books from the library in the City of the Alicorns, she was limited to the studies done by Unicorns in this city. She also knew better than to believe either unicorns or alicorns would have shared much expertise in the ways of this kind of magic.

Regardless of that fact, she had spent years in Canterlot's archives scouring for anything that might be of any use. There were a few spells that she had experimented with, but they were all small-scale. None of them had helped her work, no matter how much magic she added to the spell, except for one thing. She kept that under lock and key, never to be opened by anyone other than herself, lest anypony ruin all of her work.

"Celly?" Luna waved her hoof in front of her. Celestia had been staring past her, deep in thought for a long while. "Is everything ok?"

Celestia nodded, "I'm sorry, Luna. I've been preoccupied with the archives. They still need quite a bit of preparation before we can bring in the books from home."

Luna giggled, "Its fine. Though you've been working a lot harder lately to get the archives downstairs ready. Do you need some help?"

Celestia shook her head. "No, that's quite alright. You still have a lot of history to catch up on to understand the way I've been organizing." Her eye twitched momentarily, as she danced around the subject of her work. "Besides, there are books in there that are less than... 'Appropriate' for your young ones."

Luna thought about it for a moment, blushing upon realizing what might be in the basement archives.

"Speaking of Dawn and Dusk," she continued excitedly, "They just went back to school today, right? That means that the big sleepover is coming up."

Luna nodded excitedly, "Yes! I'm looking forward to another one of Pinkie Pie's incredible sleepovers!" Luna clapped her hooves together. "She always has tons of extra games that she never gets to use in her other spectacular parties. It's wonderful to catch up with all of Twilight's old friends."

Celestia smiled. She knew that losing Twilight was still a bit touchy for Luna, but she had shown a lot of progress in overcoming such a loss. After a thousand years of students coming and going, Celestia was more apt to let her life continue. But... despite all of that, she couldn't move on from losing her faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.

The frown that played on her lips was replaced by a smile, "I'm glad that you're excited for it. Of course, after the sleepover, you have a few

days off to spend time with those wonderful fillies. Will you give the twins a big hug for me when you see them?"

"Oh, of course!" Luna smiled, jumping into the air, "Just don't overwork yourself. You can always ask me for help if you need it."

Celestia kept her smile steady, "Of course, sister. I'll see you in the morning."

Luna took to the sky outside, leaving Celestia alone with her guards. Magic shimmered at the end of her horn, stretching her will far above her. She felt the warmth of the sun fill her body, the tickle of sunbeams ruffling her coat. Slowly, the sun descended below the horizon, until its glow faded into twilight.

The magic ended, and she felt the warmth turn to fire within her. Her determination flooded her with adrenaline as she rose from her perch. She walked to the doors, her guards leading the way. They opened the doors for her.

"Thank you, gentlecolts. You may have the rest of the night to yourselves."

"Yes, your highness," one responded.

She walked through the doors, watching as the two bodyguards took to the air, disappearing through the front doors of the castle. The smile faded from her face.

Within minutes she was at the end of one of the hallways, two doors before her. One was the door she passed through the night before which lead out into the garden. The other, was where she stored the book Spike had brought her. She looked down the hallway. It was completely empty.

Her horn lit with magic once more, sliding the complicated lock out of its protective position. Before opening the door, she glanced down the hallway once more. Satisfied that nopony was watching, she entered, locking the door behind her.

Complete darkness surrounded her. She took a few steps forward, remembering each step as it came beneath her hooves. Torches flared to life along the walls, coming alive as she passed them. Minutes went by, each step downwards becoming colder and darker. Each hoof step echoed up the stairs behind her, filling the staircase with hollow sound. Finally she reached the end: a small landing with a stone door, sealing the contents behind it from the rest of the castle.

Celestia glared at the door, forcing the stone locks to slide open. She turned her gaze up the staircase. A slight smile played on her lips. The torches in the hallway went out, letting the darkness swallow everything once more. In front of her, the stone door slid away.

There was work to be done.

Chapter 3

"That's all for today. I'll see you all tomorrow."

The sound of chairs sliding along the floor filled the classroom in the Ponyville schoolhouse. Young fillies and colts scrambled to gather their bags from the cubbies in the back of the room, talking excitedly to one another.

Dawn and Dusk rose from their desks, talking to Early Blaze as they walked towards the back of the room.

"What do you think of school so far?" Dusk grabbed her bags with her teeth, and slung them onto her back.

Blaze smiled excitedly, "I like it a lot! There's so much stuff to learn, it's amazing!"

Dawn rolled her eyes, "Try reading through the whole library like she has." She pointed a free hoof at her sister, "At least class is more interesting than all those books."

Dusk frowned, "Well if *you* had read anything, you would be able to control your magic. Remember what happened last year?"

Dawn kept her facial features flat, restraining from giving her sister the pleasure of a response. Blaze looked confusedly between the two of them, "What happened last year?"

"Nothing," the twins responded simultaneously.

"Ok..." Blaze shrugged, "Bye Cheerilee!" She waved her hoof as she left the classroom with the twins.

The sun was hovering just past the top of the sky, warming the air outside. Blaze breathed the air in deeply, feeling a sense of calm wash over her. It was immediately replaced by the excitement practically beaming from Dawn.

"Can you believe the big sleepover is tomorrow?" Dawn hopped up and down as the others walked, "I mean, it's going to be so cool. Mom is going to come down from Canterlot, and Aunt Rainbow is going to give us flying lessons!"

"Ooo," Blaze said.

"And Rarity is coming back from Canterlot! She'll be teaching us how to refine our magic," Dusk beamed. "Of course mom is going to teach us the actual spells."

"Wow," Blaze added.

"But the best part is that your mom and dad are bringing you too, Blaze! We're going to have a blast!" Dawn hopped around her friend, giddy with excitement.

Blaze's eyes lit up, "Really?"

"Yeah, didn't they tell you yet?"

"Well..." the red maned filly looked to the sky in thought, "I think she said something about it, but I was reading some of my mom's books."

Dawn rolled her eyes. Dusk lit up like a torch, "Ooo! Which book?"

Dawn sighed, tuning out their rapid conversation. As they walked through Ponyville, she gazed at the sky in thought. A gray streak went from cloud to cloud, knocking them lazily from the sky.

Dawn loved watching other pegasi fly. Even more than that, she loved the skies and everything that they held: stars, clouds, rain, snow, and Aunt Tia's sun. She would never willingly admit to reading about the sky to anyone but Aunt Rainbow and only then because she had been caught reading late one night after her sister had drifted to sleep.

She mused on that thought, as she lowered her gaze to the market, which was unusually crowded. Slowly the sounds around her began to trickle back to her ears.

"...I don't know. I never read that far into the book-"

"Hey Dusk, is there something special planned for today?" Dawn interrupted.

Dusk jumped a little, surprised that her sister was still there. She never noticed when she got carried away. "Uh..." The young alicorn racked her brain, trying to remember the list of local holidays, "Not that I remember."

"Hmm. I wonder why there's such a large crowd?"

A voice among the crowd shouted, "Darlings!"

They immediately recognized the pony attached to that voice.

A white unicorn barreled her way through the crowd, knocking down several unfortunate ponies in the process. Her well-groomed mane bounced along as she trotted over to the three fillies. The unicorn was wearing a deep blue dress lined with sapphires and amethysts, which sparkled in the late afternoon sun.

The white unicorn wrapped her forelegs around the twins, squeezing them tight, "My stars, have you grown! I've missed you so much these past months. You simply must tell me what you did over the summer."

"We missed you too... Rarity," Dawn managed. She found that it was becoming difficult to talk, let alone breathe.

Blaze grinned slyly at their ordeal, snickering under her breath.

“Oh, and Early Blaze!” Rarity removed her vice like grip from the twins, turning her attention towards the red-maned filly. Blaze’s smile dropped, a small whimper escaping her before she was engulfed in the mare’s grasp, “You should come with Fluttershy and I to the spa this weekend. It would do wonders for that marvelous mane of yours.”

“O...k...”

Rarity let go of Blaze, “Why don’t I walk you home, Blaze? I want to hear about **everything** you’ve been doing since I last visited. Ponyville is so much livelier than Canterlot – city life is **far** too predictable.”

Rarity prodded Blaze forward, leaving her no say in the matter at all. Journalist pegasi floated above her, taking pictures or scribbling away on their notepads.

“Let’s go before those journalists come after us too,” Dusk whispered.

Dawn looked at her quizzically for a moment, before nodding and following her into the nearest building: Sugarcube Corner.

Pinkie Pie was hard at work in the bakery, mixing tough batter in her favorite mixing bowl. A look of excitement and concentration on Pinkie’s face was all the twins needed to know that she was making something new. They waited patiently for Pinkie to finish, looking instead at all of the delicious treats in the case.

Inside were cupcakes with all different types of frosting smothered over them. Slices of cake lay on plates in different patterns, like rainbows, hearts, and flowers. Cookies filled the top of the case all in neat little rows, with a pair of tongs sitting next to each tray. The fillies, however, were far more interested with the bottom of the case.

In the bottom of the case was a large hollow area Pinkie made to store candy. It was more than enough to satisfy the sweet tooth of every pony in Ponyville *including* Pinkie.

“Hi girls!” Pinkie chirped. Her voice was followed by a heavy thud on the counter.

The fillies jumped, turning their focus on the multicolored ball on the counter.

“Whoooa,” Dawn stared in awe, “what is it?”

“Its my newest flavored taffy: Rainbow Fruit Punch! I made the flavor myself. I liked it so much that I just had to think of something to use it on. Then I remembered that the bestest, most fantastic flavor had to go in the chewiest, gummiest thing I could make. So I thought for a while, but couldn’t think of anything and then I got hungry so I went down to the kitchen to have a snack, which was taffy and it made me hungrier for taffy.

That's when I figured out that I wanted taffy with my favoritist flavor ever. Try it!"

Pinkie used the mixing spoon to cut two pieces of taffy, handing one to each of the fillies. Dawn shoved it into her mouth, chewing momentarily before swallowing. Her sister on the other hand decided to chew the taffy slowly, resulting in a very confused look on her face.

"So what do you think?" Pinkie asked.

"I like it!" Dawn said, hopping up and down.

"What do you think Dusk?"

Dusk had stopped chewing altogether, her brows now narrowed in frustration.

"You know you're supposed to swallow it, right?" Dawn said.

Dusk swallowed what was left of the taffy. She chewed absent-mindedly, still trying to figure out the flavors. Finally, she looked up incredulously at Pinkie, "Did you mix together every flavor you had in the kitchen?"

"No. I mixed every flavor I had in the kitchen **and** I went into the party catalog and ordered all the flavors that I **didn't** have. I even went into my personal party supplies for the ones that are super-duper hard to get. Then I mixed them all together."

Dusk simply couldn't comprehend what Aunt Dash referred to as 'Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie,' but she had a suspicion this was one of those times.

"You should totally bring that to the sleepover tomorrow!" Dawn chimed in. "I bet everyone would love to try some."

"That's a fantastic idea! I'll make sure to make more for tomorrow," Pinkie rambled. "But I have to cut this taffy before I can make more. Hey! I just had the bestest idea ever! You could help me make some more taffy!"

"Sure!" Dawn giggled.

"Uh... No thanks. I'll tell Aunt Rainbow that you're helping Pinkie Pie, Dawn. Just... try not to use magic this time," Dusk said.

"You know I won't," Dawn retorted. *You know I can't*, she thought bittely.

"Good," Dusk snickered to herself. "Maybe after the sleepover you can try baking with magic."

"I will, and I'll prove it."

"We'll see."

Oblivious to the argument, Pinkie Pie bounced to the front door. "C'mon Dawn, we have to make more Rainbow Fruit Juice! You can even taste it before we mix it in." Pinkie flipped the sign on the door to read

‘Closed’ and hopped her way into the kitchen. Dawn watched her sister leave the shop before dropping her mask of confidence. She looked up at her horn with disdain.

“I wish you would just work. Stupid horn...”

Pinkie Pie stuck her head out of the kitchen, “Dawn?”

Dawn perked up, plastering a smile on her face. “Coming,” she said, trotting into the kitchen.

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Rainbow Dash went about the library’s kitchen, picking through the stack of books she had laid out on the table. Most of them she had already read – they covered the basics of one of the most complicated things she’d ever done:

Cooking.

Not that it was terribly difficult for her to boil some water and stick some powdered soup, or macaroni and cheese mix in. No, the real challenge came when she was first asked to watch the girls during their first school year – she had to cook **real** food. Well, healthy food was what everypony else had called it. Too much grain wasn’t ok for growing young fillies, and neither was a lot of dairy. So the name of the game became balancing what kind of food they were going to eat.

But, even after years of learning how to cook, she still had trouble figuring out **what** to cook. That’s what the new books were for. A brand new set of books had arrived the day before, including a book on French Cuisine. Looking through it, she had found an interesting recipe, one that required several ingredients she had never heard of. So, she decided to improvise.

She stirred the pot on the stove. A sweet scent of lavender bubbled up into the air from the syrup she was making – one of Pinkies recipes she had borrowed. On the counter were several thin slices of pastry dough from Sugarcube Corner... and several burnt attempts at making the dough herself.

“Ok, I’m ready,” said a blue alicorn mare, entering into the kitchen. The princess of the moon, Luna, had completely removed her royal attire, exchanging it instead for a simple white cooking apron.

“Cool. Now, what I need you to do is to get a bunch of those violets from the fridge. The lavender syrup is almost ready,” Dash said, pointing a free hoof at the fridge.

Rainbow still thought it was a little weird to see the princess without her royal armor. But when it came to Luna's family, Dash knew more than most. Visits in the summer consisted of quick dips in the lake, followed by fireworks every Summer Sun Celebration weekend. Regardless of where the yearly celebration took place, the family would always come to Ponyville for a big cookout. Rainbow was almost always on alfalfa burger duty while the rest of her friends would gather to partake in the results. Despite Luna's position, she enjoyed being treated as any other pony; the apron simply added to that today.

Magic shimmered over her horn, gently prying the door open. A good-sized container hovered out and over to the counter, settling into place.

Dash took the pan off of the stove, flicking the power off as she turned.

"Luna, could you grab those pastries?"

"Sure." The plates containing the pastries floated over, landing on the counter in front of her. Rainbow moved some of the flowers into the center of each with a free hoof and with the other drizzled the hot syrup over the flowers and exposed pastry dough. She placed the pot back on the stove and turned back to the counter.

"Wow, Rainbow. You've become quite the chef," Luna said, watching her roll up each pastry.

"I guess. It takes a lot of work though," she said. She produced a pan from one of the drawers and placed it on the counter, "I've practically read every cookbook in the library. This is my attempt at making 'Crepes'. It's a French dish."

The oven door closed on the pastries. Rainbow set the timer and turned to Luna, "All set. I have to take a shower, but I'll be back down before the timer finishes. I have to put a storm together for tonight so it'll be clear for the sleepover tomorrow. The girls usually stop by Sugarcube Corner on the way home, but they should be here soon."

"I'll be here. Celly let me leave Canterlot today so I could surprise them." A big smile filled the mare's face, "They'll be so happy."

"Yeah," Rainbow smiled. "Thanks again for the help."

"Anytime," Luna said.

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The castle sat quietly in the evening storm, as thunder boomed in the air above. Rain pounded into the stone, causing a constant rumble within the castle interior. Further underground in the dungeons, storerooms, and

all the other nooks and crannies below, that rumble died down to a low hum. It was fitting to have a planned storm over the valley. It mirrored her mood: tired, sad, frustrated, and most of all, ready to unleash her fury upon anything at the slightest provocation. That fury fueled her determination ever since Spike had brought her that book – the only book with the answers she desired.

The sound of grinding stone filled the underground chamber as the large stone door slid shut. Torches flared to life all around the room, revealing empty bookcases and broken tables. It appeared as though it hadn't been used in ages. Except, that is, for one particular bookshelf.

Celestia made her way across the room, using her magic to begin the process of dusting the room. As the clouds of dirt and grime were tossed in the air, the princess' magic gathered it up into a ball. Her magic branched out further to the broken tables, binding the wood together. Fire poured out of her horn, filling the room with more light than it had ever been exposed to. The roaring noise from the flames became unbearable and the light began to white out the features.

The magic cut off abruptly, the room becoming immediately quiet and still. Celestia looked around at her work – the room was spotless. More importantly, unless one knew where it was, the secret entrance to her... private study... was well hidden. The telltale glow of magic enveloped her horn once more, loosening the seal on the floor, allowing the bookcase to slide downward out of sight. The torches behind her dimmed as she passed through the new entrance in the wall, extinguishing once the shelves rose back into place.

The new room was small, lit only by a single torch over a desk. The book she had studied over the whole week was propped up against the wall, with candles, salts, and other miscellaneous items around it. On the other end of the room, the back wall was completely shrouded in darkness. A wall of iron bars sealed off the darker part of the room, doing nothing to hide the smell of mold and rotting books coming from it.

However, this space had been perfect for privacy and security. Before the room became an archive, it served as a dungeon for prisoners in Equestria's first civil war. Those with enemy intelligence were left here below until they broke, or died.

The sound of chains scraping together filled the room with a hollow metallic ring. From the darkness came a bead of red, then, another. Each of them winked once, before becoming clear red orbs, with a slit of black in the center of each.

“Good evening, Princess,” came a voice behind her. It came slow, sweet, and dripping with malice, “I’m surprised to see you so soon.”

The princess hovered several of the salts onto the desk, mixing one into another. One of the pages turned. The sound of movement behind her did nothing to break her concentration.

“I suppose more research tonight as well? Surely its not an interrogation, as your techniques have gotten... rusty over time.” The red eyes disappeared for a moment, “It’s to be expected really, a monthly visit to my humbled existence lessens the blow of even the best techniques.”

The door to the archive room opened. The various materials lying around the book hovered out through the door. Celestia began rummaging through whatever was hidden in the desk drawers. Each new material was flung in the air hovering past the imprisoned pony before disappearing: dragon scales, leaves of poison joke, different colored candles, and several jars with things he couldn’t quite put his forehoof on. He heard two items land on the desk in front of her, but was having trouble seeing exactly what they were.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you while you’ve been so busy. Are you moving us down a level? I think it would be cooler. Its always so hot in here.”

Celestia glared in the direction of the cage. He always tried to get a rise out of her. But she wasn’t having it tonight. A sharp magical burst from her horn slammed into the bars of the cage. Electricity arced from the bars, slamming the prisoner to the ground.

He laughed. It started slow at first, soft chuckles like the ticking of a clock. But it grew. Simple laughter turned to mad hysterics that echoed from every direction – a chorus of insanity on all sides. Another burst of magic did nothing to stop him from continuing.

Celestia frowned and moved out of the room.

“Priceless! I was waiting for you to show me something new. How... refreshing!” Crazy giggles filled the room with whispered echoes. “**That’s** the teacher I remember.”

Celestia spun around and stormed back towards the cell. Her horn glowed as bright as the sun, pouring magic into the cage. The bars ignited blasting the inside with waves of searing heat. The prisoner dove under the cot in the corner. The smell of singed hair came from his smoldering, blue mane.

The fire died down until the flames stood only at the base of the cage.

“Is that sufficient for you? Have you had your fun, my traitorous, conniving, disgrace of a student!?” Celestia’s voice boomed throughout the

room and the ground quivered as she spoke. "You destroyed cities and marred the trust of everypony in this country! On top of that, you fake your death to give your body to that... that half-blooded brat. To this world you are dead! If you weren't necessary I would have killed you WHERE YOU STAND!"

There was silence. Then a smile crept onto the prisoner's face. He walked forward, his violet coat dulled and matted with grime. His blue mane had strands of silver and gold weaved throughout. The stallion stopped just behind the bars, "How long have you been fighting her, Celestia?"

Celestia snorted, slowly losing will to continue her rage. "What was that, **mule**?"

"Nightmare's left her mark. You've fought it well."

Celestia stopped short. A mirror sped into the room, hovering in front of the princess' face. There, in plain view was something... unusual. One of her eyes had become that of a dragon, a red glow coming from behind it. She closed that eye immediately.

"It seems it was destiny for me to survive," he egged on, now as close to the bars as he would dare. "Your greatest student to ever live."

"Not for much longer, Starfall," she responded with a smile.

Chapter 4

"Ready?" Luna asked. She was firmly planted in the center of the library with a series of objects floating next to her: a few books, a candle, and a glass of tea. On the floor in front of her were several more books taken from the library's shelves and just beyond those, both of her fillies.

Every time they were with Luna, their mother took the time to teach them something about magic. While this was something Dusk readily looked forward to, Dawn dreaded it. She felt as though the whole ordeal was another chance for her sister to outdo her. Today was no exception.

"Ready," Dusk chimed.

Dawn simply swallowed and stayed silent.

"Go!" Luna called.

The two twins focused in concentration. Almost immediately their horns were aglow with magic. Several books lifted from the floor, floating around Dusk albeit a little wobbly. One of the remaining books floated uncertainly upwards, shaking and shuddering the whole way.

Dusk looked triumphantly at Luna, beaming at her own accomplishment. Meanwhile, Dawn was struggling to keep her single wobbly book up in the air in front of her. The steady glow of magic around her horn showed signs of strain as another book lifted a few inches off of the floor. The light blue glow rippled before simply winking out with an audible pop. Both of the books fell back to the floor.

"Good job, Dawn! That was much longer than last time," Luna said, nuzzling her daughter. Dawn faked a smile, holding back her sense of failure. Her breaths still came ragged as sweat seeped through her coat.

"Did you see me?" Dusk asked, hopping up and down. The books she had held now firmly on the floor.

Rainbow smiled, watching them from the window. The smell of grilled alfalfa filled the air, wafted from the grill set up behind the library.

"They're learning so quickly," She muttered to herself, turning back to the food.

"*Aren't they?*" An image of Twilight Sparkle walked over to stand in front of the grill. "*But don't sell yourself short, Dash. You could have had a chef's hat for your cutie mark. This looks delicious.*"

"Thanks Twi', but, it's just a hobby."

Twilight looked into the window, her hooves placed on the windowsill. She stared longingly at the magic lesson. Rainbow knew Twilight wanted to be in Luna's place more than anything in the world. But... it was impossible.

She looked up. Big Mac had set up a stake for horseshoes and he and his sister were going arguing over who was better. A rouge toss flew straight over Rarity's head, which prompted a swift retort about Applejack's poor aim and 'brutish' methods.

Rarity didn't follow her words with any kind of action, simply turning in the lawn chair she had brought for herself. Beside her, Fluttershy was trying to continue the conversation, occasionally glancing at the game to ensure there weren't any loose horseshoes coming back in her direction.

Rainbow laughed as Early Blaze tried to toss one of the horseshoes, coming up quite short. She looked back down at the grill and flipped over a few of the alfalfa burgers.

"Do you think I would have been a good mom?" Twilight turned away from the window, sitting down next to the grill.

Dash let the spatula rest loosely in her grip. Her chest tightened and she looked straight down at the ground. She often wondered what it would have been like if things had gone differently. It brought up several painful memories, which she fought into the back of her mind. She turned to look at Twilight. "I certainly think so."

Tears welled in Twilight's eyes, a soft smile the only response to Dash's answer. She nodded her head, wiping away her tears.

"It's alright. Go get some tea. It'll help," Dash offered. Twilight simply nodded and walked around the library, disappearing from sight. She stopped for a moment, reconsidering what she had said – more importantly **who** she had said it to.

"Rainbow Dash, those burgers smell simply fantastic." Rainbow glanced up at Rarity, who was hovering a plate in front of her. She had neatly separated several condiments onto her plate and had sliced the bun with a knife to make small bite-sized pieces. Noticing the odd glance Rainbow was giving her, she explained, "They're much better once you cut them into smaller pieces. It releases the flavor of the seasonings."

Rainbow placed one of the ready burgers onto the plate, while moving the others onto a serving tray.

"Food's ready!" She called out, trotting over to the others with the tray of food.

Starfall grunted in pain as Celestia secured the bindings on his hooves. "Easy," he whispered under his breath. The bounds were yanked tighter, bringing another whine from the stallion.

Celestia looked down at her prisoner. Each of his hooves was firmly secured in the center of the archive room. Around them were magically reinforced straps holding them in place. On his horn was the same magic-inhibiting lock he had placed on Twilight. Over his back were several of the same chains recovered from that day, painstakingly placed together for this very moment.

Celestia felt satisfied with her work thus far. She had hoof-picked everything in order to have this happen on **her** terms.

It was well-crafted revenge.

Celestia went about her work sifting through the materials she had laid out the night before. Several containers hovered out of the pile to settle down beside her. She went around in a circle leaving a sickly green trail of powder behind her.

Starfall began to shift in his restraints. He didn't like what she was doing.

"So tell me," Starfall began. "How did you manage to keep Nightmare from taking over your mind?" He needed to distract her from whatever she was doing. A mistake would give him time to figure it out.

Celestia looked up at him, answering with a stern glare... or so he thought. "Training? Sheer force of will? It doesn't matter, Starfall."

Starfall tried to form another question but it faltered on his tongue. Not but a few hours ago, she had completely lost it. Yet here she was being **civil** – relatively so. He tried again, "But for a thousand years? There must have been some moments when you couldn't control the taint?"

"It was a plague, Starfall. Recurrences of that plague mean nothing to me."

Blocked. He tried to think of something else to ask, tossing one idea after another at his brain. "Might I remind you that you still have symptoms?"

Celestia simply stared at him, facial features flat. She was not amused. He averted his eyes, letting her win once more. Once she started moving again, his body tensed up and he swallowed hard. It was time to gamble.

"Luna probably thinks you're losing it," he began. "Is it really a good idea to prove her right?"

Celestia simply blinked once and laughed. "Oh please," she said, levitating something over the table. "She's merely concerned that I'm... overworking myself. Let me tell you a little something about Nightmare."

Please do, he thought.

"Nightmare made sure **everypony** was infected with that plague. But she didn't really make it. My foalish half-sister used Discord's magic to make it 'original', but it ended with Discord controlling her, even while trapped in that stone prison of his. He had complete control of her mind before she even considered the possibility. You see, unlike me, she had no experience with that manic. I've known him far longer than Nightmare ever had and I know how to fight his madness."

Starfall raised an eyebrow, "Discord? ...**That** Discord?"

Celestia simply smiled and turned back to her work. He wasn't getting anything else out of her.

The tome she was reading hovered over to the circle, now peppered with odd symbols Starfall didn't recognize. Celestia turned a page with her magic and turned slowly to face Starfall.

His heart started to pound in his chest. Sweat began to bead in his dirty mane as she went around the circle, sprinkling salt on his coat. The symbols flared to life with each dose glowing a blood red. Suddenly, he could now guess what was going on, with horrifying clarity.

Celestia's smile widened as Starfall began to visibly panic. He tried to escape his bindings but did nothing except tighten them further, eliciting more pained whines. Before long, he was swinging his head back and forth trying desperately to scrape the symbols away.

She had planned for that to happen. Starfall came up decidedly short, shaking as hard as he could to wriggle out of his predicament. He looked right up at her as she completed the circle, wide-eyed and baffled.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" he screamed. He noticed that one of her eyes had resumed that sickening red glow. "HAS SHE DRIVEN YOU TO INSANITY?"

"No. This is simply the best solution to two of my most pressing problems," she replied calmly. The symbols began to rise into the air, taking shape before spinning slowly around his body. A sickly green hue replaced the previous color of the symbols.

"Besides," Celestia continued, flipping to the right page in her book, "if I can't embrace chaos, I can't bring back the proper order of things. More specifically, I need the **proper** student roaming Equestria. Not you."

She began to read from the text, focusing on the intricacies in each word and phrase. It had to be recited properly, or she'd have to start over.

Starfall watched as an inky black film began to seep through the stone floor, painting over the walls and furniture in the room. It blotted Celestia from his view, leaving only her dismembered voice chanting in the darkness, while black hooves reached down from the ceiling above him.

He screamed, attempting to free himself from the assault on his mind. If he failed... he knew full well what the consequences would be. The screams became shriller as the hooves stretched closer to him. As a last resort, he lowered himself as close to the ground as possible to avoid their grasp. That's when the green glow he had taken for granted started to go out.

"Nononononono..." he muttered to himself, refocusing his efforts on keeping the eerie symbols from going out. But it was no use.

The viscous black hooves grazed his mane. He trembled at the ice-cold touch, frantically staring at the symbols around him. All at once they went out.

Outside the stone doors the eerie silence choked out his screams.

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The sleepover devolved into a ruckus of party games, relatively quickly. It was one of the few ways to keep the fillies entertained. At the moment, Applejack and Pinkie Pie were facing off in a heated game of charades.

"Uh... Work horse! Mac's Plow! Aw, horse feathers." Applejack was completely lost by Dawn's circular and erratic motions. Dawn was getting frustrated as well, glancing over at her sister to see how she was doing.

Dusk was having an easier time, spinning a pencil around her head with magic. She tried to help it along with wide round gestures, visibly losing her patience with her partner.

"A balloon! Cotton Candy! A spinning top!" Pinkie Pie bounced along throwing out whatever came to mind first, "Oh, I know! A ball!"

Rainbow sat with Luna, Fluttershy, and Rarity in the upper part of the library, watching the game over the banister.

Rarity levitated her teacup over to her, "Anyways. Business has been fairly good lately with the new fall fashions. I've been working on my winter line since then. It's going to be fabulous."

"That sounds wonderful, Rarity," Fluttershy said.

"It will be. I even took the liberty of designing one for you, Rainbow."

Dash looked at her, confused. "What could you possibly have designed after me? The gala dress was the only thing you ever designed

with me in mind.” Rainbow sighed, “Besides, you have more important clientele than a member of the weather patrol.”

Rarity ignored Dash’s attitude, “I designed it with you in mind because you’re my **friend**. You know I don’t need another reason. Everyone else had one designed after them too.”

Dash was a little lost now. The only reason she had ever worn a dress was for the Grand Galloping Gala and the fashion show for Hoity Toity.

“Rarity... I haven’t mentioned it to her yet,” Luna spoke quietly.

“No? Well now’s a perfect time to give it to her.”

Luna nodded, “I suppose so.”

“Give me what?” Dash asked.

A set of silver tickets popped into existence, settling down in front of her. “The new head of the School for Gifted Unicorns was poking around the archives and found a mention of the Lunar Ball that I held on the longest night of the year. He convinced me to start doing it again. I’m inviting all of you to the ball, I just hadn’t gotten a chance to give you your tickets yet.”

“This isn’t going to be like the gala, is it?” Dash said, mildly concerned.

“No. I’ve already asked Pinkie Pie if she wanted to re-invent my celebration event. I have the utmost confidence that this won’t be like the last time.” Luna smiled.

“Cool.”

Rarity continued with her discussion on the Lunar Ball, while Rainbow tuned her out. She looked to her right where Twilight was seated, taking in the conversation but adding nothing to it. By this point, Rainbow had all but forgotten that Twilight was a figment of her imagination. She rubbed her eye with a hoof. One day she’d have to start remembering that.

“Speaking of the ball, isn’t it time?” Rarity questioned.

Luna looked out the window at the setting sun, still hovering over the horizon, “It certainly is.” She rose from where she sat to lean over the railing. She called down to the others; “It’s time for sunset!”

The next few minutes of chaos jarred Rainbow from her spot, trying to get everyone over to the balcony. Somehow, in the confusion, Pinkie Pie and Applejack ended up on the treetop, bringing along all three of the fillies and “much protest from Fluttershy”. Big Mac and Rarity stayed on the balcony, neither of them wanting to climb up the Library’s branches. Luna took off into the sky to lower the sun as part of her planned display.

Rainbow went back inside to grab a few of the snacks. She floated down to the library floor, trotting into the kitchen. On the table she found the various bowls of hay chips and candied flowers still relatively full. She balanced them both on her back clearing the empty plates and a small blue teacup.

Rainbow looked at the teacup on the table, mildly bewildered. She couldn't recall anyone using that one during the party. She didn't have much time to question it, as the sunlight began to fade from the kitchen window. Leaving the teacup on the table, she flew back through the library and out onto the balcony.

The sky was bathed in colors of all kinds, starting with a dramatic orange-red color and melting into an inky blue. Slowly, the dark blue crept over the sky, heralding the moon as it rose from its bed in the eastern horizon.

Dawn and Dusk watched as the sky began to light up with bright stars. The sense of pride they felt in their mother's work left them speechless. When Rainbow offered them food, her words didn't even register with them. Applejack shrugged, and took the hay chips from Rainbow, popping a few in her mouth. Rainbow took a seat next to the twins, keeping her eyes focused on the night sky.

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Rainbow closed the bedroom door softly behind her. She was always surprised how long the girls managed to evade her efforts to go to bed at a reasonable time. With Early Blaze helping them it was darn near impossible. She glided down to the bottom floor of the library, where everyone else was seated, talking to one another in a hushed tones.

Dash settled down next to Applejack, "Coast is clear. They're asleep." Almost everyone else gave a sigh of relief.

"Excellent. Thank you for being so kind as to putting them to sleep," Rarity said.

"No problem. Any more of those chips left for me?" Rainbow eyed the bowl as Big Mac passed it over, "Thanks. I'm starving."

A small lapse of silence passed between them, filled with the soft sounds of chewing and the occasional crackle from the fireplace. Every year they had avoided the topic until later in the evening. It looked like it would be the same thing this year.

"Five years," Applejack started. "Can you believe it's been that long?"

“Not really,” Rarity replied. There was a pause. “Do you ever wonder what really happened on the front?”

“Nope,” Big Mac said, “glad I was tending apples. Family that came back still ain’t the same.”

Applejack shifted in place uncomfortably. Rainbow had stopped eating and put the bowl to the side. She looked across the room at the kitchen. Twilight stood in the doorway, frowning in anticipation.

“It hasn’t really ended.” Everyone looked at Luna in bewilderment.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself Luna,” Rarity tried to comfort the princess of the night, “most of those foals don’t really know anything about what happened.”

“No, really, you don’t understand,” Luna continued nervously. “There’s a reason I send the girls to school here instead of in Canterlot. Remember the riots that happened a few days before they came here?”

Everypony else nodded.

“It started with a fight between Dusk and a student whose parents disagreed with my co-rule. The headmaster at the School for Gifted Unicorns then was known for being very hands-off. When he didn’t interfere, the student’s parents stormed in with a few of the local radicals.

“Luckily one of the teachers, Bright Light, shielded the classrooms and students from the attack until Celestia and I arrived. He spent weeks in the hospital recovering.

“After that, I simply couldn’t let them go back. Bright Light was disappointed, but he has helped with remedial classes over the summers. Even so, there are still... incidents.”

Applejack looked dumbfounded. Fluttershy had her head buried in Big Mac’s shoulder, who comforted her with a light nuzzle. Rarity’s eye twitched uncontrollably.

“Incidents?” Rarity asked. Her voice started to grow in volume, “Somepony would **dare** continue?”

“Calm down Rarity. The little ‘uns are sleeping,” Applejack soothed.

“Please. Nothing major has happened in years,” Luna added.

Rainbow had lost her nerve to continue listening. She knew that was mostly true, except for the ‘major incidents’ part. It was part of the reason Rainbow never picked up the twins. She could recall bringing them back from winter break in Canterlot, and the hours they spent under the castle.

Some crazy pony – a follower of Starfall, when he was alive – was able to sneak in a group of unicorns that tore the palace apart. They went on a rampage looking for the twins, while one of the guards tried to hide them in the lower levels. They caught up to them in the tunnels, just as

Celestia came to help. They were apprehended but it was all very hush-hush. Only a few other ponies knew about the incident because of how high profile it was.

Rainbow felt helpless about the whole thing. Luna visited her to apologize personally. The twins had nightmares for a week. Even so, Dash couldn't imagine how Twilight felt without the details, despite the horrified look on her face from hearing that something happened at all. The only thing Rainbow could pick up was her talking to herself over and over.

"It's all my fault... I couldn't do anything..."

Rainbow tuned back in as the room fell silent, with everypony looking down at the ground.

"If only I was there. I could protect them." Twilight said, hanging her head low while she walked into the kitchen.

"Did you say something, Fluttershy?" Rarity said.

Rainbow looked at her quizzically. "I didn't hear her say anything."

Something fell in the kitchen, breaking the sudden silence in the room. Rainbow flew up to the bedroom door and peeked inside. The three fillies were still fast asleep. She settled down on the ground in front of the kitchen door. On the floor, several apples lay next to a nearly full barrel. Otherwise the room was empty.

This time, she was hallucinating something fierce.

"What fell?" Pinkie Pie asked, glad for a chance to shift the mood.

"Just a few apples," Dash replied. "They must have been loose the whole time."

"Aunt Rainbow? Mom?"

Everypony looked at the top step. Dawn's head peeked out groggily, "I can't sleep. It sounds like there's a thunderstorm coming."

Luna floated up to console her, "Its ok. Aunt Rainbow cleared the skies for the whole weekend. A few apples fell in the kitchen."

Rainbow floated up to the balcony, opened the doors and stepped outside. A low rumble echoed softly in the room. "What the hay?"

Everyone else rose to their hooves and went outside to see what all the commotion was about. A storm was brewing above Canterlot, pouring out from behind the mountain like smoke. Lightning danced across the clouds like fireworks. As the moon passed into the center of the sky, a blood-red hue trickled over its surface. Luna went pale, and fell to her knees on the staircase.

"Mom?" Dawn asked, visibly upset.

"Its ok, stay with me. Mommy's alright," Luna said, scooping her up with her hooves.

Rainbow flew back into the house, darting around looking frantically for her goggles. She tossed books onto the floor, pushing aside party favors and sleeping bags.

"What in tarnation is going on?" Applejack said as she ran inside.

"I dunno AJ. Put another log on the fire in case we need it later."

Dash sped into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding falling on the spilled apples.

"Rainbow... I feel funny..."

She looked to her right. Twilight was walking dizzily around the room, trying in vain to find something to hold on to. Something was wrapping itself around Twilight. *No*, she thought, *it's a hallucination*.

Twilight's colors seemed to be flickering brighter and dimmer with each step, until she fell to her stomach. Rainbow was fighting herself in confusion. Something wasn't adding up, even while her rational mind was telling her it wasn't real.

A sudden yank sent Twilight hurtling across the room screaming, "HEELP! RAINBOW, HELP ME!"

Her body passed through the wall.

Rainbow lost any train of thought she had. Goggle-less, she flew around the kitchen door and came to a dead stop in the living room.

"Applejack! Quick, you have to come with me, NOW."

Applejack began to protest.

"NOW!" Rainbow stomped her hoof.

Applejack pulled her hat tight around her head and nodded. Rainbow launched herself through the door towards the middle of town, with Applejack hot on her hooves.

Chapter 5

The halls of the royal palace shook from each bout of thunder. The rain hammered down on the stone over and over again. The freak storm was causing all kinds of trouble for the staff, who ran frantically to fix any of the electrical upgrades – namely the new lighting. Guards on patrol re-lit the torches in the hall as they passed by.

They had long since repaired the hallway that lead to the underground archives room when Princess Celestia passed through the door, locking it firmly behind her. It wasn't the comforting lighting she was hoping for, but she was simply too tired to complain. It took every bit of composure she had just to stifle the joy of her revenge.

Her hoof steps echoed throughout the hall as she passed the same historical tapestries for the final time that week. She paid no mind to the torchlight, as it seemed to bow in fear as she passed.

She reached the main hall in a few minutes, only to be overwhelmed by the noises of frantic castle workers sprinting through the main hall. Each of them paid their respects as they passed her, some nearly falling over from the sudden stop to bow.

On the other hoof, her personal guards still stood stoically outside the doors of the throne room. They were unmoved by the storm and continued watching the room for any sign of trouble. Celestia strode up the stairs to the doors.

One of the guards turned to her, bowing lightly. "Excuse me, your highness. Headmaster Bright Light is requesting an audience with you."

Celestia looked the guard over. His name was Granite: a strong pegasus who she had handpicked to serve as one of her personal guard. Despite his bright white coat, he was a smith by trade. Raised in the castle all his life, he had spent much of his time crafting armor for new guards until she had selected him for the job. His coat still gave off the smell of the forge.

"Is it about the storm?" Celestia asked.

Granite nodded.

She sighed. Keeping up appearances was more important than reveling in her victory. Though admittedly, it was quite difficult. She gave him a warm smile, "Alright. Give me a moment to settle in and then you may send him here."

He bowed, "Yes, your highness."

She watched the pegasus take to the air and dart down the opposite hallway. A curt nod to the other guard had him accompanying her into the throne room.

It was quiet for a while. She knew the trip to the school would be more complicated with the storm. But... there was always this apprehension whenever one of the guards took a while. It was why she always had at least one with her.

That other guard was Nightwind. He was a quiet pegasus, more so than the other denizens of the castle, including the elusive gardener. Many of the staff were wary of approaching him and fewer still had ever heard him utter a single word. Nevertheless Princess Celestia had taken time in making her choice. She always had somepony vouch for her wardens. With Granite, his upbringing in the castle and his sabotage of Starfall, before joining Stormbreaker in Manehattan, spoke volumes of his trustworthiness. Careful observation of Nightwind and his work, and a confirmation of trust from Bright Light's magic was all she needed to be sure.

A gentle breeze flowed through the room, sending ripples across the carpet before a light pop announced her new guest. He was a tan pony with a grey mane and tail that settled as the breeze died down. Water dripped from his coat, which was thoroughly soaked. Celestia giggled to herself - Bright Light hated wearing clothing. He was always particularly quirky about it, preferring to fully experience the wrath of nature - for science, of course.

"Good evening, Bright Light," she said. "I see that the rain hasn't been particularly kind to you this evening."

"Not in particular," he responded. He bowed in respect as his horn brimmed with magic. The water sizzled from his coat and evaporated into the air. "We at the School weren't aware that a storm was planed for this evening."

"I was under the impression that it would be clear skies."

Bright light nodded. His hazel eyes brimmed with knowledge, "Ah. Well, of course we assumed as such. You always keep us well informed." He walked closer to the throne, before taking a small area in front of it to pace. "We did take the initiative to find out where it came from. In the meantime, I suppose you would like to know that we have begun to dissipate the storm. It is slow going however."

She nodded once, "How slowly?"

"Quite. It seems that was the intention of the particular craft of storm. That's not all."

Celestia shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"It seems as though it corresponded with a mistimed lunar eclipse. Perhaps these are connected?"

She raised an eyebrow, "Perhaps it was my sister?"

"We have no reason to believe that she would be able to do that without coordination. It does require your sun to perform, in addition to her moon."

An awkward silence passed between them. Celestia looked to her guard, "Nightwind, please leave us."

The white pegasus nodded, flying across the room and exiting through the doors.

"What are you suggesting, Bright Light?"

He looked at her, genuinely concerned. His former confidence deflated, "I... don't know. It's quite odd, in fact rather disturbing. The kind of magic it suggests is quite..." The headmaster swallowed hard, "...dark. Even a large group of unicorns would have trouble with such a spell."

Celestia felt that same pressure pushing on the back of her mind. Feelings of panic and joy flooded her mind. On the one hand, there would be too many questions about the incident and her planned excuses were looking flimsy with the storm. On the other hand, she was filled with glee that everypony who found out would fear her unrivaled power to revive the dead.

However, her face showed no evidence of this internal conflict. She simply frowned in concern, "That is deeply troubling. I will have to think about this. It will likely mean that you will need to reconvene with more of your colleagues. I would like you to send a letter as soon as you can. I have a few specific names for your list..." Her speech quickly droned into a list of contacts to cover up her charade.

"Princess?"

Celestia looked up. Bright Light had calmly taken a seat on the floor where previously he had been pacing, "Yes Bright Light?"

"Did you leave her enough air?"

Celestia blinked at the question, completely confused. She failed to recover her thoughts in time as stone spikes rose from the floor and jutted out from the ceiling, trapping her within. A thick piece of iron dropped from the ceiling and clamped down on her horn, eliciting screams of pain from the white alicorn. The stone ceiling became more malleable as she struggled in vain to fly away from the stone spikes that surrounded her. It wrapped around her torso locking her wings to her side as it slowly encompassed her lower body.

Bright Light smiled wickedly as a pair of wings slowly pulled themselves from under his coat. The bones slid back into place popping and cracking as he flexed his new appendages. His new form forced a stifled scream from the princess.

“YOU!” She yelled.

“Yes?”

“It... can’t be... You should still be locked in stone! You and all of Discord’s mad assistants!”

The other pony laughed. He now stood a full couple of inches taller than Celestia. His coat had dulled to a light grey and his mane to a stark, bone white. He flapped his wings a few times, letting them stretch to their full length. “Nightmare had Starfall loosen my bonds a little – something about ‘starting over her reign’. I figured that I’d at least humor her delusions.”

“How long...” she stammered. Everything but her head was now fully encased in stone. Her breathing came in short rasps. “How long have you been Bright Light?”

“I waited a year before I became him. I needed some way to earn your trust, other than being some nopony watching every move your precious subjects have made. Watching you was the important part.” Magic poured from his horn once more and the stone spikes melted back into the floor and ceiling. He repaired the damage to anything else he had broken as an afterthought. “You’ve been quite the busy mare, Celestia.”

“**Princess** Celestia to you, Cunning.”

He considered her words for a moment, “How did you get a hold of such a rare book? Was the library insufficient? Perhaps my school is too good at archeology.”

She gawked at him.

“Yes, Celeste. I ‘found’ the book for the dragons. Your young dragon sure has some gusto giving away his precious childhood. What was his name? Spike, was it?”

Celestia broke one of her hooves free of the stone. He responded by creating a thicker layer. She was livid, struggling as hard as she could to get free.

“You didn’t think I had a hand in returning your faithful student? I almost forgot the best part!” His eyes glowed a deep red, the colors slowly spinning into the center of his eyes, “That spell requires a certain kind of darkness: Nightmare’s darkness, no... MY darkness.”

Sudden realization made Celestia sick and her heart dropped into the pit of her stomach. “You did this... you did that to Nightmare! YOU

CORRUPTED DISCORD!" Old wounds bled together, pushing those feelings of vengeance to the front of her mind. She tried desperately to push back.

"It wasn't hard. You did break their hearts: one after the other. I consider myself a teacher. If you hadn't been so close to Discord, I would've controlled everything. Your half-sister Nightmare gave me **two** chances to fix that."

Celestia's eyes started changing color once more. She started crying, unable to restrain the wild emotions any longer. She was losing control, and there was nothing she could do about it, "You stupid blank-flank... why... jealousy?" Her words slipped away into incoherent babbling, before tapering off into silence.

Cunning growled at her commentary. Indeed, his flank was blank. It had always been. He had no true special talent in the world. All he could do was take somepony else's... by becoming them. He had a talent for lies, deceit, and for being someone he was not. But it all paid off today.

"Celestia?"

She let out another burst of strength cracking the stone in several places. Magic shimmered at the end of his horn. The stone seemed to stretch and ripple as she howled in pain. The screaming died to whimpers before she went silent once more. He waited a moment, ensuring she was completely subdued.

"Celestia." Magic covered his horn once more, evaporating her stone prison. She stood, her red, dragon-like eyes staring blankly back, "Be a dear and go sit down. You look terrible."

She followed the command obediently, walking back to her seat and lowering herself onto the cushions.

"Now, you and I will talk every once in a while. I will leave the sound nullification magic intact, just for those times. Do you understand?"

Celestia nodded, "Yes, Cunning."

"Good. You will not remember this conversation, nor be aware of my presence. This disturbance is likely the work of Nightmare's minions. You will probably have to scour the world for them. Am I right?"

"Of course." Her voice was flat, without a single emotion behind it.

"You will remember nothing of trying to resurrect your most precious student. Those memories were spent mourning in the basement. However... if she returns to this world, you'll know that it was at the hands of Starfall's followers. She must be sent to the dragons. They will be able to remove any taint from her. After all, Spike was sent there just for this very real possibility."

She hesitated on this. A burst of magic surrounded her head. She twitched for a few moments, before she gave a submissive nod.

"Split up the twins if she comes back. Dusk is quite the asset to the family but Dawn needs some time abroad. It'll be just like Nightmare's time abroad. Though I sincerely **hope** something doesn't come between the two of them," he chuckled. "Besides, Rainbow Dash can keep her and Twilight Sparkle in line."

She nodded once more, "How?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You're a smart girl. You can figure it out. Besides, do you really want to let her have any idea of what you've actually been doing?"

She shook her head.

"Good." A few moments longer and he returned to his form as Bright Light. Cunning closed his eyes, melding back into character, "You may resume your duties at the end of three clicks."

Click. Click. Click.

"Princess?"

She looked up alarmed by the sound of another voice in the room. Her mind eased at the sight of the headmaster's concerned face.

"Are you alright? You nodded off for a moment there," Bright Light said.

Celestia could distinctly remember the list of people she had to contact to figure out what was going on. A freaky storm? A blood red moon? What did it all mean? Something in the back of her mind hovered around Starfall's followers. Surely they hadn't been acting up again? She tried to recall the last time this had happened but... it was a little hazy. She could only truly remember the attacks on Dusk and Dawn.

"I... I'm fine. Perhaps I've spent too long in the basement again."

Bright Light raised an eyebrow, "About the storm...?"

"I trust that you can break it up. I have a feeling this won't be the last time I'll need to call on your help."

"Of course, your majesty. I am always here to assist you," he bowed. He looked up into her now normal eyes, "If you'll excuse me. There is work to be done."

"Thank you, Bright Light."

He turned away from her, a maniacal grin spreading over his face before vanishing with a light popping noise. She lifted herself from her throne, putting a hoof to her head.

I've gotten too used to sleeping, these nights, she thought. Her wings propelled her to the throne room doors, and she exited for the night.

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The rain whipped at Rainbow and Applejack as they tried to power their way through the storm. Not even a minute after they had left the library, Rainbow was sent hurtling out of control.

"AJ!" She yelled. The wind sent her flying sideways, tumbling through the air. She fought hard to stay airborne, careening through an alleyway just to get back on track.

Applejack was struggling to stay upright in the gale force wind, let alone try to run through town in it. She looked around frantically for a way to bring Rainbow to the ground while trying to follow her erratic flight pattern.

"Dang it, Rainbow," she cursed under her breath. Panic was starting to settle in, as she started to fly ever closer to the buildings. Another strike of lightning narrowly missed the pegasus, slamming into a nearby tree. The branch came crashing down in front of AJ, forcing her into a full stop.

It was helpful, however. Right outside one of the stores was a cart tied to the side. In moments, she found herself undoing the rope as quickly as she could, whipping her head up every few moments to check on Rainbow. Even so, there was no way to tell how well she was holding up.

"Cuhm uhn," she said with the rope firmly between her teeth. The knots were really tight, and the water was not helping her predicament.

Up above, Rainbow was losing energy. The buckets of rain and biting wind were making her very, very cold. Every muscle in her body was telling her to stop fighting and get to the ground. But her mind was alive with adrenaline, focusing on getting to the center of town. She was losing that fight and eventually the wind started to take control.

Thunder pierced through the sounds of the storm, shaking the ground below Applejack's feet. She had the rope tied off in a lasso, spinning it furiously with her tail. Her panic deepened when she saw Rainbow suddenly and sharply drop in height. The wind launched Rainbow over her head like a rag doll, sending her in a direct collision course with a nearby building. Applejack took good aim: she only had one shot at this.

Rainbow gave a scream as she spun closer to the building. Applejack let the rope go.

Rainbow felt a sharp stop just inches from her collision course as the rope tightened around her waist. With the wind under her wings, she was nothing more than a kite. A grateful, panicked kite. Applejack heaved,

pulling her down bit-by-bit, trying not to let the wind take her into any other precarious obstacle.

When Rainbow was firmly on the ground, Applejack loosened up the ropes. Rainbow was shivering fiercely even with her wings snapped tight against her sides. Applejack was a little warmer, but she wouldn't be for much longer.

"Dash! We have to go back!" Even when screaming at the top of her lungs, Applejack's voice barely registered with the pegasus.

"We can't! Twilight's in serious trouble!"

Applejack's eyes went wide, "Are y'all SERIOUS!?" She felt livid. "You ran out into this storm because of another hallucination? I ain't said nothin' to nopony else, but Dash, I think you need **serious** help!"

Rainbow pleaded with her, "I **am** serious, AJ! I think she's alive! I can't explain it, but I have to check!"

"OUR LIVES ARE AT STAKE HERE!" Applejack was hollering something fierce. Anypony would have backed down from that, but Rainbow stood firm.

"I'm serious AJ! If I'm wrong, I'll tell everyone what I've been seeing. But right now, I have to be sure!"

Applejack stared hard at her friend. Out of all the foolishness she had ever put up with, this was by far the stupidest train of thought she had ever heard come out of the pegasus' mouth. Dash getting caught in the fall of Cloudsdale was one thing she had no control over. But this? This was suicidal. She seriously thought that Rainbow Dash had gone off of the deep end. It hurt her to know that she was crazy enough to believe Twilight could come back to life. It was impossible.

Even so, her friend was just so sure...

"I'm out of mah mind too," she muttered to herself. "Where to?" She yelled.

Rainbow smiled, taking off towards the center of Ponyville. They whipped through the side streets to avoid the wind, weaving their way across town. Lighting continued to arc over the town, illuminating the dark streets. They rounded a corner into the main square, where they were immediately assaulted by the wind once more.

There in the center was the statue. Celestia put up the statue to honor Twilight's sacrifice all those years ago. Rainbow remembered the funeral when Twilight was buried underneath it in a crystal coffin. That was Celestia's last gift for her - to last forever untouched by time. She dreaded what she would find.

They made it to the statue, where Rainbow immediately put her ear to the bottom of the stone. Nothing.

"Rainbow! There ain't nothin' here!" Applejack yelled.

Come on, Rainbow thought. *She has to be...*

"RAINBOW!" Applejack yelled again.

That's when she heard it, muffled below. "Help! Somepony please!"

"Help me move this!" Rainbow yelled. She rammed herself up against the statue. It wasn't budging.

"Nuh-uh sugar cube! We ain't raiding her grave!" Applejack chomped down on Rainbow's tail.

Rainbow responded by grabbing the orange pony into a headlock and jamming her ear against the stone, consequently freeing her tail. Applejack struggled against her grip, "DASH LET GO OF-" The farmer pony went pale.

"NOW DO YOU BELIEVE ME?" Dash screamed. She slammed herself against the stone, trying to make it move even an inch. Her eyes winced in pain every time she hit into it. Applejack slowly backed away from the statue.

"AJ! Help me!" Dash was getting sleepier by the second as the cold started to set in again.

Applejack staggered back on her hooves. She was in shock. Rainbow trotted right up to her and brought her hoof across her face. "PLEASE!" Rainbow begged. At this point she was crying from a mix of pain and desperation.

Applejack nodded sheepishly stepping back into a charging position. She put all the speed she could muster behind her and bucked the statue as hard as she could. It slid back a few inches. Rainbow joined her bucking as hard as she could in unison with Applejack. The screams for help got louder as they uncovered the steel grating underneath it. It was as if somepony had planned for there to be some kind of air below it.

"HELP! I'M DOWN HERE!" Twilight's voice came loud and clear this time.

"Twilight, watch your head!" Rainbow called down. She nodded to Applejack and they kicked at the floor.

Once.

Twice.

On the third kick it gave way, clattering onto the partially melted crystal coffin below. Rainbow dove down into the pit and landed in front of Twilight.

“Rainbow Dash?” She said with a gasp. The ceremonial clothing was strewn about in the coffin. Twilight was breathing heavily. Her coat was pale and she looked sick. Her coat was getting soaked in the rain that fell down the hole. But she was alive.

“Twilight... I... you’re... alive!”

“I just had the strangest dream...” Twilight swayed back and forth. Her legs gave out and she collapsed into Rainbow’s hooves.

“It wasn’t a dream Twilight. It wasn’t a dream.”

Chapter 6

The library rocked back and forth under the unrelenting winds while rain hammered away at the tree, filling the whole library with a constant hum. Whatever power the library had previously was clearly gone. Candles were the alternative tonight, filling each room with a dim glow.

A fire crackled softly in the lone fireplace. Everypony in the house huddled close to the fire to receive its warmth before it dissipated in the cooler air. Early Blaze was nestled in Fluttershy's forelegs as they slept in one of the sleeping bags. Macintosh sat to her left, still awake with worry. To his left, Pinkie Pie and Luna slept in the semi-circle, exhausted from trying to console Dusk and Dawn. The fillies slept quietly under one of her wings.

Rarity was the only other pony still awake, sandwiched between Luna and the wall. She glanced up at the clock. It was 1:30 in the morning. Applejack and Rainbow Dash had been gone for over an hour, and the storm hadn't let up in the slightest. She exchanged a glance with the red stallion.

"They're alright," he replied quietly.

"It's been over an hour Macintosh," Rarity fidgeted in place. "I'm just about to go find them myself."

Mac opened up one of his saddlebags and pulled out a sprig of hay. He chewed on the thin end thoughtfully, "You wouldn't last one minute in that storm."

"But--"

"They can take care of themselves just fine. Just get some shut eye."

Rarity opened her mouth to push the point a little further. A calm look from the older stallion silenced her, and she laid her head on her pillow. Despite her complaints, she was asleep in minutes.

Big Mac lost himself in thought, absent-mindedly tossing another log into the fire. He was confident in his words, but the situation really bugged him. Rainbow was all in a tiff about something, and he had to admit, he thought he heard somepony screaming before he came inside. It sounded a lot like the former librarian.

He snorted. Despite his more laid-back nature, he was smarter than others gave him credit for. Though knowledge of the supernatural was out of his expertise, he was raised to always trust his gut. Applejack had

confided in him that Rainbow was having “hallucinations”, and pretty vivid ones at that. She almost went to fetch Nurse Redheart when it started getting bad. That added to his sense of unease.

He looked up at the clock: 1:51. Everypony looked fast asleep. He rose to his feet, walking quietly to the front windows. Lightning filled the sky, illuminating the empty streets. He waited for another, and another.

Luna lifted her head from her place, staring at the worried stallion.

“I s’ppose you want to stop me from goin’ out there?” Mac’s voice was quiet. Every word seemed well thought out and meticulously chosen.

Luna shook her head, “There’s nothing I can say. You’ve already made up your mind.”

Mac never turned to look back at the princess. He opened the door, struggling to keep it from slamming into the wall. The sudden sound made some of the other ponies stir, but he grabbed hold of the door with his teeth and dragged it shut.

The wind tried its best to blow the stallion over, whipping water into his coat. Lightning pounded at the ground in the distance, lighting the paths once more. He took off down the road. Every time he came to another side street he would poke his head around the corner. Nothing. There was nopony out in this damn storm, not even his sister.

Mac slowly rounded another corner, making his way towards the center of town. A wave of relief fell over him when he saw his sister stubbornly tugging away on a rope. He shook the water out of his eyes as he started running towards her.

Her eyes lit up when she saw her brother. “Macintosh! Ah need you’re help!” She yelled.

He looked down the hole. He recoiled immediately and the color drained from his face, “AJ! Is this what I think it is!?” He started moving towards her.

She backed into the statue, eyes wide. Even though the yelling was necessary, she was terrified whenever he did yell. “Mac, she’s **alive!**”

He scrunched up his face, confusion and anger filling his head.

“Ah don’t know how, just grab hold of that damn rope!” She barked, before grabbing the rope in her teeth once more and tugging like a mare possessed.

His anger slowly subsided. She was passionate about her friends, he knew. But he worried that she had finally lost it - just like Dash. The quickest way to find out was to pull. He grabbed hold of the rope just in front of her, giving it everything he had.

It was tough going. Part of the road had already started to wash away. Mac had to dig his hooves into the slippery mud for every inch of rope he gained. Applejack was coated in a mixture of mud and sweat. Already chilled to the bone, she was starting to lose her concentration.

Just as Rainbow's hoof grasped onto the edge, Applejack collapsed into the mud, panting heavily. Mac gave the hardest tug he could manage, dragging the cyan pegasus and a shivering purple unicorn onto solid ground.

Macintosh spit the rope out of his mouth and yanked his sister up by the scruff of her neck. She shook herself off and staggered over to Rainbow Dash and Twilight. Mac followed close behind her.

Twilight was out cold from the ordeal and Rainbow was still barely hanging on to what traces of energy she had left. Carefully, Dash balanced the purple unicorn on her back, taking a few steps to make sure she could handle the extra weight. Twilight was warm, but Rainbow was worried that she wouldn't be for long.

Applejack tucked herself underneath Twilight as well splitting her weight with Dash. She smiled at the pegasus, who returned a weak smile. Big Mac pushed the statue back into place, covering the hole back up.

He led the way back through the storm, staying just far enough ahead to have some time to think to himself.

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Big Macintosh had been gone for almost a half an hour. Luna had risen from her bed and had been pacing for quite a while now. The storm was brutal... almost deliberately so. The fact that it hadn't died down even now put her on edge. What could be taking Bright Light and his school so long?

The answer to her silent question was almost immediate. The room filled with light, bright enough that the princess of the night was forced to shield her eyes. She could feel the familiar warmth of the sun as the light faded away, letting the walls bleed back into her field of vision.

Standing in the center of the room was Princess Celestia, a deep look of concern on her face. The magic dissipated into the air. Celestia rushed forward, grabbing Luna in a tight embrace. Celestia sighed, "Oh, Luna! Thank goodness you're all right."

Luna nuzzled warmly against her sister, finally feeling a little more relaxed. "I was worried about you Celly," she said. Her voice picked up in

speed, fueled by her concerns, "What is going on? Did you find Bright Light? Is Canterlot alright? What?"

Celestia pulled her closer, "Shh... It's alright. Bright Light is working on clearing the storm. It should dissipate soon."

Luna calmed herself. She glanced over at everypony else, ensuring that her excitement hadn't woken them.

"Did anything happen?" Celestia's voice still wavered in concern. There were several empty sleeping bags lying on the floor, "Where is everypony else?"

"I don't know. Rainbow Dash seemed pretty worked up about something. She even dragged Applejack outside with her." Luna swallowed, trying to shuffle through her mind for the right words, "And... Big Macintosh left a half an hour ago to find them. They haven't returned yet."

Celestia frowned, staring at the front door. Her sister should have stopped Applejack from following Rainbow Dash, as she had no way to help break up the storm. Further, Luna should have stopped Big Macintosh from going out to find them, especially since Celestia was certain that they had been gone for quite a time before the stallion felt it was necessary to brave such a dangerous storm. It was almost intentional.

She gazed at Luna, who was fixing the covers for her young fillies.

It didn't add up. Luna had become strong friends with every one of Twilight's friends. Over the last four years she and the twins had become like family to these ponies. Celestia had to admit, she and Luna certainly felt the same way about them.

Still, that didn't compare to keeping Luna's little ones safe. With all the minor and major incidents, she wouldn't want to drag any of the others into the same situation by leaving her foals and Fluttershy's daughter in the midst of a dangerous storm.

The conflict tore at Celestia's attention, but she managed to shove it into the back of her mind. Luna wouldn't do anything to destroy everything she had gained.

"Do you think they're alright?" Luna asked.

Celestia smiled, "I'm sure they're fine. Although it is quite the storm."

Luna nodded. Silence washed over the room. Celestia lifted another log with her magic, placing it neatly on the fire. The embers piped up into the chimney, glowing for a few moments before disappearing from sight.

Suddenly the door slammed open, nearly falling off of its hinges. Wind whipped the water across the floor with thunder booming in the background. Macintosh was panting heavily, his hooves planted firmly on the floor

“P-p-princesses.” Mac stammered, taken aback by the unexpected appearance of Princess Celestia. He gave a quick bow before sprinting over to the fireplace. “We need to get to Nurse Redheart’s, **now.**”

The cacophony of sound had long since awakened Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and all of the fillies. Luna was doing their best to calm the three young ones, holding them close to her as Applejack strained to drag two unconscious ponies into the library.

“What happened to Rainbow Dash?” Pinkie Pie shouted, running over to help her. She never made it the whole way. Silence followed as almost every pony in the room stared at the unconscious purple unicorn.

“Mom? Who is that?” Dusk asked, pointing a hoof at the stranger.

Luna had been too busy fussing over the three of them to get more than a glimpse at the unconscious ponies. She turned to look as well, causing the color to drain from her face. A mix of confusion, horror, and excitement flooded her brain.

“Twilight...” she whispered under her breath.

Celestia stared on, filled to the brim with questions. Is she real? Is she alive? But the most prevalent of them all worried her the most:

Is she a threat?

She couldn’t take that chance lightly, not with all the disturbing occurrences that had happened tonight. Everything seemed connected... and tonight had “danger” written all over it.

“Twilight?” Fluttershy peeped, stepping forward first. She put a hoof to her neck and jerked it back in surprise when she felt a pulse. Her previous apprehension melted away. She put her hooves on both Rainbow’s and Twilight’s foreheads.

“Oh my goodness!” She cried, turning on the group, “We need to go right away! They’re both far too cold.”

No pony moved.

“Please!” She yelled, getting more upset by the second.

Applejack came up from behind her, stopping short in front of Princess Celestia, “Princess! It’d be mighty helpful if you could use your magic to help us. I dunno if we can make it in time.”

Princess Celestia hesitated for a moment. She couldn’t destroy her subject’s trust, even if it was a trap. She would have to risk it.

“Very well. I will take them both by magic.” Her horn started glowing, raising Dash and Twilight into the air. She turned to Luna, “Luna. Take everypony else with you and meet me there as soon as you can.”

Light began to envelop Celestia and the other two ponies, erasing their outlines as it grew brighter. Then, just as suddenly as it grew bright, it disappeared. So did Princess Celestia and her burden.

Luna turned to look at the other girls who still stood in various states of shock. Pinkie Pie was mumbling off a list of party favors while talking to herself, worried that they wouldn't be alright. Fluttershy had hovered over to Luna's side, embracing her daughter and whispering in her ear. Rarity decided this was the appropriate time to collapse onto the floor, out cold.

Applejack turned to look at Luna, "When are we gonna follow?"

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Twilight lay sleeping peacefully in her hospital bed. Wires were strung all over her coat, connected to all different types of machines. A steady beeping synchronized with her heartbeat. The clock on the wall read 3:40.

Throughout the room were several chairs, each of them empty. Right beside her, Rainbow Dash lay in the other hospital bed. She had her own slew of wires and connectors, complete with a similar heart monitor that chirped in harmony with the other.

The only other noise in the room came from the murmurs outside the door, where Princesses Celestia and Luna stood alone, talking quietly to one another.

"Are the girls alright?" Celestia asked.

Luna looked down the hallway. She could see them sleeping next to Applejack in the waiting area, "They're fine for now. I haven't even figured out how to tell them what's happened. I'm not even sure if I can without upsetting them."

Celestia frowned slightly, "I know. It's better that you haven't yet."

A moment of silence passed between them. Luna looked up at her sister, "It is really her... right?"

Celestia looked in through the window at her former student. Not even an hour ago she had thought the same thing. Nurse Redheart had set up the space in the clinic without hesitation; much less cautious as Celestia had been in bringing her here. With all of her tests and machines, she seemed so absolutely convinced that it was really Twilight. That was enough for Luna, but Celestia took a moment to verify it with her magic.

"Without a doubt. But..." Celestia trailed off. She couldn't help being apprehensive about her resurrection being without motive. Too many

coincidences pointed at her being dangerous. Or being controlled. Silence filled the hallway once more.

Luna's heart sank in her chest, dreading the words Celestia had on her mind. She had never truly stopped missing her closest friend and - although it was purely circumstance - her mate. Her daughters never new Twilight as she did: smart, brave, and passionate about the stars and her friends, and the list went on.

"Luna... I think she was brought back to hurt us," Celestia said. It hurt to say it. Twilight **was** family to them both, more than ever before. The thought of her being used against them... Celestia felt sick.

Luna felt as though a dagger was being shoved into her heart. She simply gawked for a moment, struggling to form the words to respond. She looked back at Applejack, knowing that every one of Twilight's friends would have turned on Celestia right then and there. It took a lot of composure not to do the same.

"How... how could you say something like that?" Luna asked.

Celestia cast her eyes to the floor.

"She saved my life." Luna found herself raising her voice, "She saved you! She saved all of Equestria!"

"Luna."

"Celly, I **love** her!" she pleaded as she started to cry.

It nearly broke Celestia's heart to see Luna crying.

"She would never..." Luna slumped down against the wall, "she would never..."

Luna cried softly to herself. She couldn't bear to be torn away from the one she cared about. It would be more painful than before, when she believed Twilight was gone forever.

But, as blunt as her sister's words were, they held truth. The feeling of the moon being yanked away from her control had made her physically ill in the Library. Whatever or whoever was doing this had her nervous and scared. Not just for her safety, but for the safety of Dawn and Dusk.

Luna flinched when Celestia lay her neck across her own, but after a moment she buried herself in her sister's mane. She poured all of her confusion into her sobs, unable to think straight or do anything else.

At least ten minutes passed. Celestia held up her calm demeanor to sooth her sister. But it was flimsy. It was there for Luna, just as much as it was for herself.

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curse, but it was what it was: a curse. Tonight was just another reminder of that.

"You know I don't want anything to happen to Twilight... right?" Celestia whispered.

Luna slowly stopped her crying to listen. She leaned more of her weight on her sister's shoulder.

"Twilight is family to me. I watched her grow up into a brilliant mare. She fell in love with you, even when the world fell apart around you - when I was helpless and unable to hear your thoughts." Celestia swallowed. She paused to find the words to say, "... she sacrificed everything for you to be happy."

Luna nodded.

"So we need to make sure that she can't get hurt again."

Luna was quiet. She looked hesitantly at her sister.

Say *it*, a voice in the back of Celestia's mind egged on. "Just listen to me. I have an idea." Celestia placed a hoof on her shoulder, "Spike has been studying with the dragons for quite some time. Remember when we said goodbye?"

Luna nodded again.

"He has some excellent teachers. Teachers that could make sure nopony can hurt Twilight, or let her be used by anypony else."

Luna nodded once more, hesitating for a moment before doing so.

"Then she could come back here without any harm done to you or anypony else. Am I right?"

Luna looked away from her. It would probably hurt their friends more than anyone else. She hated to admit it, but... Celestia was right. Luna still needed time to explain to her fillies. She also needed time to think about what to say.

"I..." Luna tried her best to act calmly. She didn't want Celestia to ever find out her feelings, "I don't know."

"Take a little time to think about it. The sun will be up in a few hours, and you know I can't stay here after that." Celestia embraced her sister once more, draping her head over her neck. She was finding it hard to continue her solid composure, "I don't want to be right, but think about what would happen if I am."

Luna nodded and broke away from her sister, walking down the hall and into the waiting area, disappearing from Celestia's view. She walked through the doors and out into the evening air. The heavy rain clouds had finally been tamed by Canterlot's unicorns, leaving the moon to cast its pale

glow over the drenched ground. She spread her wings, kicking off into the night air. There wasn't much time for her to figure things out.

Chapter 6

The library rocked back and forth under the unrelenting winds while rain hammered away at the tree, filling the whole library with a constant hum. Whatever power the library had previously was clearly gone. Candles were the alternative tonight, filling each room with a dim glow.

A fire crackled softly in the lone fireplace. Everypony in the house huddled close to the fire to receive its warmth before it dissipated in the cooler air. Early Blaze was nestled in Fluttershy's forelegs as they slept in one of the sleeping bags. Macintosh sat to her left, still awake with worry. To his left, Pinkie Pie and Luna slept in the semi-circle, exhausted from trying to console Dusk and Dawn. The fillies slept quietly under one of her wings.

Rarity was the only other pony still awake, sandwiched between Luna and the wall. She glanced up at the clock. It was 1:30 in the morning. Applejack and Rainbow Dash had been gone for over an hour, and the storm hadn't let up in the slightest. She exchanged a glance with the red stallion.

"They're alright," he replied quietly.

"It's been over an hour Macintosh," Rarity fidgeted in place. "I'm just about to go find them myself."

Mac opened up one of his saddlebags and pulled out a sprig of hay. He chewed on the thin end thoughtfully, "You wouldn't last one minute in that storm."

"But--"

"They can take care of themselves just fine. Just get some shut eye."

Rarity opened her mouth to push the point a little further. A calm look from the older stallion silenced her, and she laid her head on her pillow. Despite her complaints, she was asleep in minutes.

Big Mac lost himself in thought, absent-mindedly tossing another log into the fire. He was confident in his words, but the situation really bugged him. Rainbow was all in a tiff about something, and he had to admit, he thought he heard somepony screaming before he came inside. It sounded a lot like the former librarian.

He snorted. Despite his more laid-back nature, he was smarter than others gave him credit for. Though knowledge of the supernatural was out of his expertise, he was raised to always trust his gut. Applejack had

confided in him that Rainbow was having “hallucinations”, and pretty vivid ones at that. She almost went to fetch Nurse Redheart when it started getting bad. That added to his sense of unease.

He looked up at the clock: 1:51. Everypony looked fast asleep. He rose to his feet, walking quietly to the front windows. Lightning filled the sky, illuminating the empty streets. He waited for another, and another.

Luna lifted her head from her place, staring at the worried stallion.

“I s’ppose you want to stop me from goin’ out there?” Mac’s voice was quiet. Every word seemed well thought out and meticulously chosen.

Luna shook her head, “There’s nothing I can say. You’ve already made up your mind.”

Mac never turned to look back at the princess. He opened the door, struggling to keep it from slamming into the wall. The sudden sound made some of the other ponies stir, but he grabbed hold of the door with his teeth and dragged it shut.

The wind tried its best to blow the stallion over, whipping water into his coat. Lightning pounded at the ground in the distance, lighting the paths once more. He took off down the road. Every time he came to another side street he would poke his head around the corner. Nothing. There was nopony out in this damn storm, not even his sister.

Mac slowly rounded another corner, making his way towards the center of town. A wave of relief fell over him when he saw his sister stubbornly tugging away on a rope. He shook the water out of his eyes as he started running towards her.

Her eyes lit up when she saw her brother. “Macintosh! Ah need you’re help!” She yelled.

He looked down the hole. He recoiled immediately and the color drained from his face, “AJ! Is this what I think it is!?” He started moving towards her.

She backed into the statue, eyes wide. Even though the yelling was necessary, she was terrified whenever he did yell. “Mac, she’s **alive!**”

He scrunched up his face, confusion and anger filling his head.

“Ah don’t know how, just grab hold of that damn rope!” She barked, before grabbing the rope in her teeth once more and tugging like a mare possessed.

His anger slowly subsided. She was passionate about her friends, he knew. But he worried that she had finally lost it - just like Dash. The quickest way to find out was to pull. He grabbed hold of the rope just in front of her, giving it everything he had.

It was tough going. Part of the road had already started to wash away. Mac had to dig his hooves into the slippery mud for every inch of rope he gained. Applejack was coated in a mixture of mud and sweat. Already chilled to the bone, she was starting to lose her concentration.

Just as Rainbow's hoof grasped onto the edge, Applejack collapsed into the mud, panting heavily. Mac gave the hardest tug he could manage, dragging the cyan pegasus and a shivering purple unicorn onto solid ground.

Macintosh spit the rope out of his mouth and yanked his sister up by the scruff of her neck. She shook herself off and staggered over to Rainbow Dash and Twilight. Mac followed close behind her.

Twilight was out cold from the ordeal and Rainbow was still barely hanging on to what traces of energy she had left. Carefully, Dash balanced the purple unicorn on her back, taking a few steps to make sure she could handle the extra weight. Twilight was warm, but Rainbow was worried that she wouldn't be for long.

Applejack tucked herself underneath Twilight as well splitting her weight with Dash. She smiled at the pegasus, who returned a weak smile. Big Mac pushed the statue back into place, covering the hole back up.

He led the way back through the storm, staying just far enough ahead to have some time to think to himself.

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Big Macintosh had been gone for almost a half an hour. Luna had risen from her bed and had been pacing for quite a while now. The storm was brutal... almost deliberately so. The fact that it hadn't died down even now put her on edge. What could be taking Bright Light and his school so long?

The answer to her silent question was almost immediate. The room filled with light, bright enough that the princess of the night was forced to shield her eyes. She could feel the familiar warmth of the sun as the light faded away, letting the walls bleed back into her field of vision.

Standing in the center of the room was Princess Celestia, a deep look of concern on her face. The magic dissipated into the air. Celestia rushed forward, grabbing Luna in a tight embrace. Celestia sighed, "Oh, Luna! Thank goodness you're all right."

Luna nuzzled warmly against her sister, finally feeling a little more relaxed. "I was worried about you Celly," she said. Her voice picked up in

speed, fueled by her concerns, "What is going on? Did you find Bright Light? Is Canterlot alright? What?"

Celestia pulled her closer, "Shh... It's alright. Bright Light is working on clearing the storm. It should dissipate soon."

Luna calmed herself. She glanced over at everypony else, ensuring that her excitement hadn't woken them.

"Did anything happen?" Celestia's voice still wavered in concern. There were several empty sleeping bags lying on the floor, "Where is everypony else?"

"I don't know. Rainbow Dash seemed pretty worked up about something. She even dragged Applejack outside with her." Luna swallowed, trying to shuffle through her mind for the right words, "And... Big Macintosh left a half an hour ago to find them. They haven't returned yet."

Celestia frowned, staring at the front door. Her sister should have stopped Applejack from following Rainbow Dash, as she had no way to help break up the storm. Further, Luna should have stopped Big Macintosh from going out to find them, especially since Celestia was certain that they had been gone for quite a time before the stallion felt it was necessary to brave such a dangerous storm. It was almost intentional.

She gazed at Luna, who was fixing the covers for her young fillies.

It didn't add up. Luna had become strong friends with every one of Twilight's friends. Over the last four years she and the twins had become like family to these ponies. Celestia had to admit, she and Luna certainly felt the same way about them.

Still, that didn't compare to keeping Luna's little ones safe. With all the minor and major incidents, she wouldn't want to drag any of the others into the same situation by leaving her foals and Fluttershy's daughter in the midst of a dangerous storm.

The conflict tore at Celestia's attention, but she managed to shove it into the back of her mind. Luna wouldn't do anything to destroy everything she had gained.

"Do you think they're alright?" Luna asked.

Celestia smiled, "I'm sure they're fine. Although it is quite the storm."

Luna nodded. Silence washed over the room. Celestia lifted another log with her magic, placing it neatly on the fire. The embers piped up into the chimney, glowing for a few moments before disappearing from sight.

Suddenly the door slammed open, nearly falling off of its hinges. Wind whipped the water across the floor with thunder booming in the background. Macintosh was panting heavily, his hooves planted firmly on the floor

"P-p-princesses." Mac stammered, taken aback by the unexpected appearance of Princess Celestia. He gave a quick bow before sprinting over to the fireplace. "We need to get to Nurse Redheart's, **now**."

The cacophony of sound had long since awakened Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and all of the fillies. Luna was doing their best to calm the three young ones, holding them close to her as Applejack strained to drag two unconscious ponies into the library.

"What happened to Rainbow Dash?" Pinkie Pie shouted, running over to help her. She never made it the whole way. Silence followed as almost every pony in the room stared at the unconscious purple unicorn.

"Mom? Who is that?" Dusk asked, pointing a hoof at the stranger.

Luna had been too busy fussing over the three of them to get more than a glimpse at the unconscious ponies. She turned to look as well, causing the color to drain from her face. A mix of confusion, horror, and excitement flooded her brain.

"Twilight..." she whispered under her breath.

Celestia stared on, filled to the brim with questions. Is she real? Is she alive? But the most prevalent of them all worried her the most:

Is she a threat?

She couldn't take that chance lightly, not with all the disturbing occurrences that had happened tonight. Everything seemed connected... and tonight had "danger" written all over it.

"Twilight?" Fluttershy peeped, stepping forward first. She put a hoof to her neck and jerked it back in surprise when she felt a pulse. Her previous apprehension melted away. She put her hooves on both Rainbow's and Twilight's foreheads.

"Oh my goodness!" She cried, turning on the group, "We need to go right away! They're both far too cold."

No pony moved.

"Please!" She yelled, getting more upset by the second.

Applejack came up from behind her, stopping short in front of Princess Celestia, "Princess! It'd be mighty helpful if you could use your magic to help us. I dunno if we can make it in time."

Princess Celestia hesitated for a moment. She couldn't destroy her subject's trust, even if it was a trap. She would have to risk it.

"Very well. I will take them both by magic." Her horn started glowing, raising Dash and Twilight into the air. She turned to Luna, "Luna. Take everypony else with you and meet me there as soon as you can."

Light began to envelop Celestia and the other two ponies, erasing their outlines as it grew brighter. Then, just as suddenly as it grew bright, it disappeared. So did Princess Celestia and her burden.

Luna turned to look at the other girls who still stood in various states of shock. Pinkie Pie was mumbling off a list of party favors while talking to herself, worried that they wouldn't be alright. Fluttershy had hovered over to Luna's side, embracing her daughter and whispering in her ear. Rarity decided this was the appropriate time to collapse onto the floor, out cold.

Applejack turned to look at Luna, "When are we gonna follow?"

--*--

Twilight lay sleeping peacefully in her hospital bed. Wires were strung all over her coat, connected to all different types of machines. A steady beeping synchronized with her heartbeat. The clock on the wall read 3:40.

Throughout the room were several chairs, each of them empty. Right beside her, Rainbow Dash lay in the other hospital bed. She had her own slew of wires and connectors, complete with a similar heart monitor that chirped in harmony with the other.

The only other noise in the room came from the murmurs outside the door, where Princesses Celestia and Luna stood alone, talking quietly to one another.

"Are the girls alright?" Celestia asked.

Luna looked down the hallway. She could see them sleeping next to Applejack in the waiting area, "They're fine for now. I haven't even figured out how to tell them what's happened. I'm not even sure if I can without upsetting them."

Celestia frowned slightly, "I know. It's better that you haven't yet."

A moment of silence passed between them. Luna looked up at her sister, "It is really her... right?"

Celestia looked in through the window at her former student. Not even an hour ago she had thought the same thing. Nurse Redheart had set up the space in the clinic without hesitation; much less cautious as Celestia had been in bringing her here. With all of her tests and machines, she seemed so absolutely convinced that it was really Twilight. That was enough for Luna, but Celestia took a moment to verify it with her magic.

"Without a doubt. But..." Celestia trailed off. She couldn't help being apprehensive about her resurrection being without motive. Too many

coincidences pointed at her being dangerous. Or being controlled. Silence filled the hallway once more.

Luna's heart sank in her chest, dreading the words Celestia had on her mind. She had never truly stopped missing her closest friend and - although it was purely circumstance - her mate. Her daughters never new Twilight as she did: smart, brave, and passionate about the stars and her friends, and the list went on.

"Luna... I think she was brought back to hurt us," Celestia said. It hurt to say it. Twilight **was** family to them both, more than ever before. The thought of her being used against them... Celestia felt sick.

Luna felt as though a dagger was being shoved into her heart. She simply gawked for a moment, struggling to form the words to respond. She looked back at Applejack, knowing that every one of Twilight's friends would have turned on Celestia right then and there. It took a lot of composure not to do the same.

"How... how could you say something like that?" Luna asked.

Celestia cast her eyes to the floor.

"She saved my life." Luna found herself raising her voice, "She saved you! She saved all of Equestria!"

"Luna."

"Celly, I **love** her!" she pleaded as she started to cry.

It nearly broke Celestia's heart to see Luna crying.

"She would never..." Luna slumped down against the wall, "she would never..."

Luna cried softly to herself. She couldn't bear to be torn away from the one she cared about. It would be more painful than before, when she believed Twilight was gone forever.

But, as blunt as her sister's words were, they held truth. The feeling of the moon being yanked away from her control had made her physically ill in the Library. Whatever or whoever was doing this had her nervous and scared. Not just for her safety, but for the safety of Dawn and Dusk.

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curse, but it was what it was: a curse. Tonight was just another reminder of that.

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Luna nodded.

"So we need to make sure that she can't get hurt again."

Luna was quiet. She looked hesitantly at her sister.

Say *it*, a voice in the back of Celestia's mind egged on. "Just listen to me. I have an idea." Celestia placed a hoof on her shoulder, "Spike has been studying with the dragons for quite some time. Remember when we said goodbye?"

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"He has some excellent teachers. Teachers that could make sure nopony can hurt Twilight, or let her be used by anypony else."

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"Then she could come back here without any harm done to you or anypony else. Am I right?"

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"I..." Luna tried her best to act calmly. She didn't want Celestia to ever find out her feelings, "I don't know."

"Take a little time to think about it. The sun will be up in a few hours, and you know I can't stay here after that." Celestia embraced her sister once more, draping her head over her neck. She was finding it hard to continue her solid composure, "I don't want to be right, but think about what would happen if I am."

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glow over the drenched ground. She spread her wings, kicking off into the night air. There wasn't much time for her to figure things out.

Chapter 7

"I truly hope you've reconsidered, Luna." Celestia was sitting on the floor of the library. Her fore-hooves were crossed, paired with an exasperated look on her face.

Luna had gotten away without giving her a straight answer yesterday. On top of that, she added a condition that Twilight be allowed to meet her fillies, before she made a decision on sending Twilight to the dragons.

Celestia thought it was reckless - what would be the point in sending Twilight away for their safety, if Luna was going to put her fillies in possible danger now. Even with certain precautions, like inhibiting Twilight's magic, she had no guarantee that somepony controlling her wouldn't remove it from afar.

"Celly, how can you seriously ask me to hide her from them? There is only a small risk. Plus, I'll be there to protect them if something goes wrong." Luna continued her pacing around the room.

"Luna, that's just **asking** for trouble!" Celestia frowned, "Are you willing to have that small risk happen. They could be hurt! Or worse..."

Luna stopped her pacing. An uneasy silence passed between them. Luna walked over to her sister, curling up beside her.

Celestia stared at the ground, "We've been mourning her for so long... it's hard to even consider any of this."

Luna looked up at her sister. She sounded hurt, vulnerable. It was very rare that she let down her emotional guard. Luna nuzzled against her shoulder, resting her neck over her sister's.

"But..." Tears fell from her eyes, "It's harder still to think of life without you, or Dusk, or Dawn. If I lost you... I... I don't know..."

"Celly..." Luna whispered.

Luna's fillies deserved to meet Twilight. Hiding her from them was painful and felt... wrong. All their life they had never known her and until now, they never would have. How long would that opportunity last? Luna feared above all else that she would lose her mate once more.

But she was torn. Here was her sister - her stead-found support when she was lost or sad - struggling not to bawl her eyes out. It nearly broke her heart to know that it was her selfish desire to have some sense of family with Twilight that sent her sister over the edge. Celestia was always there for her, through good times and bad. But here she was, pushing Celestia to

the background just to see her fillies meet Twilight, endangering her and them.

Pushing her sister away was just as bad.

"Alright," Luna whispered. "I'll do it for you, Celly. Just... promise me that she'll come back."

Celestia nuzzled her sister, "I swear that no one will keep her from you. Any who so much as **dare** to harm or use her will rue the day they came into this world."

Luna lifted her head from her sister's staring deep into her eyes. If the fire behind her sister's eyes was real, her tears would turn to steam.

"And I won't stop until whoever is using her and any pony who assists him, suffers a far greater fate than what I have ever done."

Luna's hooves started to shake from the force of her sister's words. She was a mare of her word above all else. Her conviction had no end. Once she started, it would take the entire world to stop her. It made her smile, that Celestia would go so far to make her happy.

"Thank you Celly," Luna whispered. "I love you."

"I love you too," Celestia spoke. She kissed her sister's forehead, "I would give anything to keep you safe."

The two alicorns leaned against one another for a while. Celestia's mind was focused now - no one would stand in the way of making sure Twilight came home safe and sound. No pony would harm her family or friends. She would find whoever did this and remove them from the face of the earth.

Indeed. The voice echoed from the recesses of her mind, *Nothing will be too far for her. Not even bringing the world to its knees.*

--*--

Light flooded in from the window, covering the two sleeping figures in the room. The steady beep of the heart monitors filled the room with a lingering hum. The seats were still empty, but the room was decorated with flowers and balloons. Get well cards and sugary treats sat on each of the side tables, wrapped neatly in the same color of their intended pony.

One of the figures stirred and flipped onto her back. She sat up straight, groaning in pain.

Rainbow Dash felt as if she had failed one of her high altitude tricks. Her muscles were sore, but not entirely out of commission. She stretched her wings, met with even more sore muscles. They were far more painful

than any of the others, causing her to fold them tightly against her sides. She winced, waiting for the pain to subside.

Fighting the storm was a terrible idea in retrospect. It would have been a lot easier - and faster - if she had simply stayed on the ground, instead of flinging herself headlong into the winds. She did know better, especially after all of her experience with dangerous storms. But she had a reason. She glanced over at the other hospital bed.

Twilight lay fast asleep in her bed facing away from her. Braving the storm on a hunch turned out to be one of the best things she had ever done. Of course, she'd still get an earful from Applejack. It didn't matter.

Rainbow smiled. She didn't really know what she'd say to Twilight when she woke up, but just being there was fine.

The door quietly slid open, followed shortly by Nurse Redheart carrying a tray of food on her back. There was a look of surprise on the nurse's face when she saw Rainbow sitting up in her bed. The white mare closed the door and walked over to the pegasus, setting the tray down at the end of the bed.

"Good morning, Rainbow Dash. I'm glad you're finally awake."

Rainbow looked at her confused, "Finally?"

"Yes. You've been unconscious for two whole days. Well, today would be the second day," she said, walking around the bed to the bedside table. She moved the gifts to the end of the bed and placed the tray on the table. "Your friends have been in to see you two every minute of visiting hours. They'll be back in a few hours."

Rainbow nodded. Nurse Redheart helped Rainbow adjust to a more comfortable position, adding a few pillows to prop her up. The nurse poured her a cup of tea and handed it to her. Rainbow smiled in thanks, taking a sip of the hot liquid. She hadn't realized how thirsty and hungry she was until now. Her stomach growled.

Nurse Redheart smiled, "There's soup over here on the tray if you're hungry. I do believe Pinkie Pie left some cakes and sweets for you as well."

"Thanks," Rainbow said.

The nurse smiled and walked to the door, "Just pull on the cord if you need anything." She opened the door and walked out of the room.

Rainbow took a moment to lift the bowl with her fore-hooves, before devouring the whole thing in a few big gulps. It was better than she had expected for hospital food. Then she stretched her hoof over to the treats Pinkie brought, dragging it closer to her. In a moment she had the packages wide open with their contents in her stomach.

Finally satisfied, she looked over the card. In typical Pinkie Pie fashion, it was vibrant with colors and glitter all over. When she managed to get it open confetti shot out all over her face.

"Ugh..." Twilight muttered, turning over to face Rainbow.

Rainbow smiled from ear to ear, "Twilight! You're awake?"

"Now I am. What was that noise?" Twilight sat up in her bed, rubbing her head.

Twilight still looked awful. She wasn't as pale as when Rainbow and Applejack found her, but her coat was still dulled. Dash however snorted, covering her mouth with a hoof to stifle a laugh. After all these years without Twilight, her bed mane still made the pegasus laugh.

Rainbow gained some composure, lifting the get well card.

"Pinkie Pie?" Twilight lifted an eyebrow.

"Yup."

Twilight looked over at her own bedside table, being careful not to remove the wires from her front legs. A similar package sat neatly wrapped in a pile of various gifts and flowers. Though a little slower than Rainbow, she followed the same motions in tearing apart her package, eating the treats inside. She looked around for something to wash it down with, but came up short.

"Here," Rainbow said. She offered Twilight the cup of tea Nurse Redheart had poured for her. "You must be a lot thirstier than I am."

Twilight smiled in thanks. She put her will into her horn trying to levitate the cup over. Nothing happened. She put as much effort as she could to bring it over to her, but ended up with the same results. Her heart sank.

"Can you bring it a little closer? I... think I need more rest before I can use magic again." Twilight blushed in a mix of embarrassment and worry. Why couldn't she use her magic?

Rainbow nodded, shifting her body so she was sitting facing Twilight. She passed the tea over to Twilight, who swallowed the whole thing in one gulp. Seemingly satisfied, Rainbow shifted herself back against the pillows set up for her.

"Thank you," Twilight said softly. "For everything."

Rainbow turned her head so her gaze met Twilight's. She smiled, finding a response difficult to formulate in her mind. Fortunately, she was saved having to come up with an answer.

The door to the room opened. But it wasn't Nurse Redheart that entered.

"Princess Celestia!" Twilight managed to raise her voice to a soft shout. Her body responded with a few stray coughs.

The Princess walked up to Twilight, cautiously nuzzling into her. She was tense, ready for anything out of the ordinary. Twilight didn't seem to notice.

The Princess' voice was soft and sincere, "My faithful student. I've missed you so much."

Tears fell from Twilight's eyes. It felt like it had been a few days since she'd seen Celestia last. But from what Rainbow said about her 'dreams', it had actually been years.

Applejack spit the rope out of her mouth, leaning her head over the hole. The rain battered the top of her head.

"I'm gonna see if I can find a better way to hoist ya both up!" she yelled down.

Rainbow Dash still had Twilight in her arms. The unicorn was still taking in shallow breaths. She wasn't sure how long Twilight would last down here, let alone in the storm above.

"Don't take too long!" Rainbow called back up. Her voice echoed in the chamber as she spoke.

Applejack nodded and disappeared back over the ledge, leaving Rainbow and Twilight alone.

"Hey, Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow looked down at the unicorn, who shifted position to carry more of her weight. She had a concerned look on her face.

"How long have I been asleep?" Twilight coughed a couple of times. She was shaking from the cold water pooling on the floor.

Rainbow looked at the floor, still a little shocked from her reappearance. The question made her a little queasy. There was usually no way to tell another pony they were dead for a while, "Five years."

Twilight was shocked, nearly falling over, "Five years? I've been asleep for five years?"

"No, Twi'. You were... dead for five years." Rainbow winced at her own words. Painful memories started to resurface again, but she shoved them back into the recesses of her thoughts.

Twilight stood dumbfounded. Her mouth hung open, stuttering and coughing to try and make a coherent train of thought. "But..." she managed. "I... Luna and I... Starfall..."

"Starfall is gone, Twilight." Rainbow looked at her, "You saved Luna's life when he tried to kill her. You also saved the lives of your fillies."

Her cheeks burned red, "So we really do have... twins?"

Rainbow nodded. "Everything you probably dreamed, was you as a ghost or something. I admit, I thought I was going crazy. But... I guess you proved me wrong this time."

Even under normal circumstances Twilight would have trouble figuring out how it was possible that she was returned to the world of the living, but right now, she didn't want to think about it. She was just glad to be alive.

"Princess. Rainbow told me I've been gone for five years. Is that...?"

"True?" Celestia finished. She pulled her neck away from her student, backing up into a more comfortable distance. "Yes. You... died, saving Luna. Do you... remember that?"

How could she forget? The memory was still vibrant in her mind.

Time slowed down. At least all her friends would be able to live... and Luna... She would never get to see her foals grow up - take their first step, say their first words, or start learning magic.

Twilight heard the whistling get closer.

She kept her smile as she stared at Rainbow Dash, realization now twisting her sky blue face in a mix of horror and... something else. The purple unicorn turned her head away.

Please, she thought. Don't hate me...

Twilight doubled over in pain, writhing under the covers. Her stomach felt filled with cold steel and pain hammered into her chest. She couldn't breathe or make a sound. The beat of her heart filled her ears, pounding on her skull.

Rainbow tried to rush to her, instead falling out of the hospital bed. The IV ripped out of her fore leg, its stand clattering to the floor. Rainbow's heart monitor flat-lined once the readers disconnected, while Twilight's sped up, hammering at the calm silence beforehand.

Celestia backed into the far corner, only the slightest hint of magic starting to cover her horn.

The door slammed open. Nurse Redheart and two others stormed into the room in a panic. Nurse Redheart helped Rainbow Dash up off of the floor, while the other two swarmed around Twilight, trying to get her to talk.

"Where does it hurt, Miss Sparkle?"

"Can you breathe?"

"Get me a dose of-"

Twilight's hearing tapered off into a a muffled hum. She felt sick to her stomach as the memory played over and over again in her mind. Her vision blurred, becoming a series of lights flashing on and off, shadows flowing like water before her. Figures became blended in the vision, fading into black.

"Twilight?" Celestia asked.

Twilight's senses slowly faded back into place. The pain in her head was gone, but the room looked like it was from a nightmare.

The closest wall was nearly blasted clean outwards. Chairs had been flung through the door and one stuck through the far wall. The bed she was laying in lay in a mangled heap behind her, along with her monitoring machines. Celestia had a shield in front of her and Rainbow, consequently saving that part of the room from any substantial damage.

Twilight shakily rose to her hooves, looking up at her mentor. She saw the three hospital ponies poke their heads up from behind Rainbow's bed. Celestia had a concerned look on her face. Twilight looked confusedly at her.

"What... what just happened?" Twilight asked, wobbling as she walked.

"Your magic just went crazy!" Rainbow said, still in shock.

"Crazy?" Twilight asked, a little panicked.

Celestia feigned a smile, "Not unlike a certain entrance exam, if I recall correctly."

Twilight flushed red in embarrassment, turning her gaze to the floor.

Celestia put the shield down against her better judgement. While the two incidents were similar, this had proved slightly more dangerous. She hadn't been expecting the sudden burst of magic. The fact that it hit the opposite wall first was quite lucky for everyone in the room. By the second burst of magic, Celestia had everyone well protected.

"What the hay was... that..."

Twilight looked towards the source of the noise. Applejack had stuck her head through the hospital door, but was now gawking at the damage to the room. Behind her followed Rarity and Pinkie Pie who were also left speechless by the state of the room.

"It appears we have something to discuss," Celestia began. Her magic began repairing the damage as she crossed the room towards the orange earth pony, "Perhaps we should take that discussion somewhere more private."

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The sun was slowly falling towards the mountains that held Canterlot's castle. Ponies who had been hard at work all day, slowly trickled back into their homes, or into Ponyville's market to shop for ingredients to make a late dinner. Sweet Apple Acres was relatively quiet, the apple bucking quite finished for the day.

Things were far from quiet in the library, however.

"What do ya mean, 'she needs to leave?' Beggin' your pardon yer majesty, but isn't there something you can do?" Applejack was pacing frantically in the main floor.

"Yeah! You're the princess! You can use your super duper powerful magic to fix anything!" Pinkie Pie added, her face in a pout.

Celestia dropped her smile into a frown. If she had been truly able to fix anything she would've prevented the entire civil war by magicking away the need for her eversleep. Instead, she left all of her work for Twilight and Luna to complete and forced them to wake her up. She would pay for that later, she was sure of it.

"I cannot fix everything, Pinkie Pie." Celestia walked over to one of the pillows on the floor and sat down, "There are things in this world in which I have no control over. While a great amount of magic is one of those things I can fix, this is a different situation.

"We don't know anything about resurrection. I don't know anything about it for sure. It was forbidden in olden times and that taboo has continued today. It's dangerous. Any cruel pony could bring back somepony's loved ones just to hurt them."

"But Twilight wouldn't hurt any of us," Applejack said, raising her voice.

"True. But somepony controlling her would."

"She would've done it already!" Rainbow cried. She stood closest to Twilight and the Princess.

Twilight had long since gone quiet, deep in thought. Rainbow couldn't accept that Celestia thought someone was controlling Twilight. Sure, she had no knowledge or experience in magic, but she had a good feeling about her being safe. The fiasco in the hospital was probably a side effect from being woken up. Twilight had control over her magic again, although it was still pretty weak.

"Plus, she just got back and now **you** want to sent her away?" Dash was freely venting her anger now, "Don't you care about how we feel?"

Rainbow's comment was just another slap in the face for the princess. Of course she didn't want to send Twilight away. But the frightening display of magic paired with the strange occurrences was more than compelling enough.

"Did you not see what happened in the hospital?" Celestia said calmly.

Dash went to continue her verbal barrage, but couldn't form the words. Twilight put a hoof in front of Rainbow's chest. Her anger simmered down. She lowered herself onto her haunches, wincing at the pain as it returned full force.

"Girls," Twilight turned her back to the princess. "I actually agree with the princess."

The other five mares' jaws dropped. Their eyes were fixed on the lavender unicorn, silence filling the room. Twilight cleared her throat.

"Considering what happened in the hospital without me noticing, or even **remembering** any of it, I think that the princess has a point. I have no idea if I'm being controlled, or watched, or whatever could be going on. The last thing I'd want to do after five years is to get anyone hurt..."

"Well... that's might noble of ya'..." Applejack started, "But... I dunno Twilight. What if we lose you again? It was never the same without you here."

The group of ponies lowered their gazes to the floor.

"I'm going with you."

Twilight looked up. Rainbow Dash walked over to Twilight, staring at the princess. She raised an eyebrow at Dash.

"What? I'm not letting her go alone. I don't care what the risk is, I'll stick it out."

Twilight smiled.

Applejack stepped forward as well, "I'm comin' too."

The others each stepped forward in kind, surrounding their long lost friend. Twilight grinned even wider than before, tears welling in her eyes.

"I... can't have you all come along. You all have lives now. I mean, Fluttershy, you have Big Mac and Early Blaze to take care of." She looked at Rarity, "Rarity, you have a business to run in Canterlot. Pinkie Pie, you have Sugar Cube Corn-"

Applejack shoved a hoof in her mouth, "Even so, they can help what they can. Now that you know what we're up to, you've forgotten about what we'll do for our friendship with you."

"You can discuss in what degree you will assist Twilight in a moment," Celestia butted in. They all turned their attention to her, "But the

fact of the matter is that Twilight has agreed to leave. You will have an hour to decide. After that, pack your things for Canterlot.”

She walked to the door, opening it with her magic. Two guards walked into the room, before she shut the door behind her.

Chapter 8

At the base of the far tower, Luna was leading Dusk and Dawn out from the stairwell after having spent the afternoon studying in the observatory. They had returned to Canterlot together after leaving some get well cards with the nurse to give to Rainbow and the stranger. Something important had happened, though the twins didn't really know what.

Dawn frowned. She didn't question what their mother did for them, but she wanted was to know whatever was really going on.

On many occasions she let curiosity get the better of her. Consequently, that caused a certain amount of trouble for her. Rainbow was far more lenient about her adventurous nature than her mother was, for while Rainbow let her have more room to explore, Luna kept her close by her side. That was why she hadn't bothered asking her mom who the mysterious purple unicorn was. She wouldn't get an answer.

"Ah, Princess Luna," a unicorn said in the hallway, bowing deeply.

Dawn examined him for a moment, unable to remember who was speaking to them. After a moment, she recognized him as their former teacher, Bright Light.

"Master Bright Light!" Dusk yelled, running up to him and giving him a big hug.

"My, my, haven't you grown!" He returned the embrace warmly, ruffling her mane with a hoof.

"Headmaster Bright Light. I take it you received my message?" Luna smiled.

He let Dusk go and rose to his hooves, "Of course! I am always pleased to serve the royal house."

Dusk and Dawn looked up at Luna, Dusk far more enthusiastically than her sister.

"Girls, Aunt Rainbow isn't feeling very well after that night in the rain. The nurse says that she'll need some bed rest, which means she won't be able to look after you for a little while. So I asked if Headmaster Bright Light would like to help with your schooling." Luna paused for a breath, "It's only temporary, just until Aunt Rainbow is better."

Dusk squealed in delight, jumping up and down. Dawn rolled her eyes, turning her gaze to the floor. Luna gave her a reassuring nuzzle.

"Bright Light is an excellent teacher. He has many stories from his travels abroad. Don't you remember?"

"No..." Dawn mumbled.

Luna gave the twins a gentle push towards the stallion, while flagging down one of the guards on patrol. The guard trotted up to the princess, stopping in front of her.

"Princess?" The mare stood at attention, barely shaking her armor as she did so. Bright Light looked up, raising an eyebrow at the guard.

"Cloud Skimmer, will you take these three to the practice room? My sister wishes to speak with me shortly."

"Of course." Cloud Skimmer walked around Bright Light, "If you'd follow me."

Luna watched them walk down the hall, ensuring that they disappeared around the corner. She let out a sigh, walking slowly down a different hallway towards the throne room.

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"Excellent work, Dusk. I see that you have been practicing magic." Bright Light stood between Dawn and Dusk. Each of them was tasked with hovering a small glass ball as high as they could manage without it wobbling.

To Bright Light's surprise, Dusk was much farther along than he had imagined for her age. Of course, from a future Princess this level of aptitude seemed correct. Her orb was at least three or four feet off of the ground, holding steadily above her.

Her sister was trying hard, but she was only achieving levels reserved for second graders and younger. Bright Light watched the orb stay steady perhaps a few inches off of the ground. It was a tad disappointing. But his expectations were set... differently for her.

"Good, Dawn. Keep focusing. Try thinking that the orb is the moon and that you are helping your mother lift it to the sky," Bright Light added. The little bit of encouragement helped slightly, as the orb rose about a foot off the ground. It held for a moment before wavering and clattering to the floor.

The stallion frowned. Dawn simply didn't have the stamina for drawn out magical exercises. He would have to try a different approach with her.

"I believe that's enough for now. Why don't you go get something to eat for lunch and take a walk in the garden? The leaves are turning such lovely colors this time of year."

Dawn nodded, while Dusk pouted.

"After lunch, I'd like to work on magic with you individually. After all, you have different interests."

The twins bounded out of the room into the hallway. Dusk ran down the hall towards the kitchens, while Dawn slowed down, stopping short at the juncture in the hallway. Seeing no sign of her sister returning, Dawn took off towards the throne room. She still hadn't shaken her curiosity about the lavender unicorn and she was now more determined than ever to find out.

She ducked down a hallway near the throne room. A group of guards walked down the main hall, passing the side hallway without a second glance. The sounds of their armor plates banging together dulled, until it was silent once more. Dawn dug her face into her wing, biting down on a little metal key and drawing it from its hiding place.

She snickered to herself for swiping the key off of the groundskeeper over the summer. Since she hadn't been caught with it yet, Dawn had used it to explore many of the hidden rooms and chambers the castle workers used on a regular basis. Some places were just for storage, mainly filled with books and odd tools she saw them using.

The room she was standing in front of was much cooler. She inserted the key and unlocked the door. She slipped inside, making sure that the door shut without a sound.

Inside hung a set of poles with large, claw-like ends. A few boxes were piled in the back corner, but had long since been emptied. The most interesting part of the room, however, was a steep staircase which led into the crawl space above the throne room's red carpet.

As she trudged along the wide tunnel, she did her best to shield her eyes from the hanging lights. The tunnel was designed for earth ponies to replace those lights, but it also allowed her to listen in on "royal business".

She tucked herself into the end of the crawlspace, which hovered above the carpeted circle, just before the actual throne. Some of the lights here were still broken, making it easier for her to see the floor below.

"Are you sure its alright to let her go?" Dawn recognized that as her mother's voice almost immediately. She was addressing two ponies who were unfortunately obscured by the light fixture. Dawn did her best to get into a better position, but she still couldn't see.

"Of course." That voice belonged to Celestia, "I wouldn't want her to go alone or with a stallion she doesn't know."

"Relax Luna," a blue pegasus walked into the forefront. Dawn shoved a hoof into her mouth to stop from shouting. Aunt Rainbow was standing in

the throne room. She didn't even look sick, as her mother had claimed. "Me and Twilight will be fine. We'll be back before you know it. If you're so worried, we can bring AJ along for the ride. She's already offered to come with us."

Dawn's breathing stopped cold. Wasn't her other mom's name Twilight? She had read plenty about her in books. Even Rainbow's story was as fresh in her mind as the day she heard it. She leaned her head over the edge of the tunnel in a last ditch effort to get a good look at the other pony.

It paid off. The lavender unicorn stepped into Dawn's view, smiling despite the obvious restraint on her horn. "As long as this is on to stop any more of those crazy bursts of magic, I'm sure we'll be fine. Besides, I'd just like to see our fillies."

"I'm afraid you will have to wait a little longer.." Celestia's spoke once more. She sounded sad, "I'll have the wagon ready for you by this evening. If Applejack wishes to join you, she'll have to be here by midnight. You'll leave then."

"Thank you, Princess," Twilight said.

"Be safe, my faithful student."

One of Celestia's guards led Twilight and Rainbow Dash from the room. Dawn crawled along the tunnel, trying to get another glimpse of the unicorn before she reached the doors. She was entranced by her new found parent, but conflicted by her mother's lies. Why would her mother lie to her about something so important? More importantly, what else had she lied about?

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Bright Light entered the practice room for the last time that evening. His session with Dusk had been very fruitful. There were so many questions that she had about magic, he had trouble getting her to agree to learning the basics. She was without a doubt one of the most curious fillies he had ever taught in his career at the School for Gifted Unicorns. It was simply a matter of time before she would be pleading to stay in Canterlot.

Dawn was sitting on the floor, rolling the glass orb back and forth between her hooves. He wasn't sure it was possible to see a struggling student who was less excited about studying magic.

"Dawn? Are you ready to start?"

"Uh-huh..." Dawn muttered absent mindedly. She stopped the orb between her fore-hooves.

"We won't be doing anything with the orb this evening. You can set that aside for now." Bright Light hovered a few books over to one of the tables in the room. He walked over to the table, beckoning her to follow.

Reluctantly, she rose to her hooves and trudged over to the table. Spread out were several different books, each with a different kind of magic outlined in the title. She glanced at each title, rejecting them almost as soon as they registered with her brain.

"These books detail the most important schools of magic: Illusion, Telekinesis, Alteration, and Elemental. Each of them function very differently from one another, yet at the heart of each school, they are connected. That is why everypony has the potential to learn more than one school of magic. Is there one in particular you would like to start with? One that catches your interest perhaps?" Bright Light looked down at his pupil. She was completely removed from whatever he was trying to say.

"None of these interest me," she replied. Her expression stayed flat.

The books flew back to their appropriate place on the shelves, "Then perhaps you would like to tell me what you are interested in. Is something on your mind?"

Dawn nodded.

The magic glow faded from his horn. "Would you like to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I'll get in trouble if mom finds out."

Bright Light looked at her quizzically, "Finds out about what?"

"Things."

Bright Light sat down on the floor next to Dawn. He placed a reassuring hoof on her shoulder, "As your teacher, I have a lot of knowledge that might be able to help you. I won't tell Princess Luna if it makes you feel better."

A moment of silence passed between them. Deep inside the facade of Bright Light, Cunning was itching for a new opportunity to expand his control. He knew that the twins would be the easiest to manipulate. It was simple and best of all, it didn't even require magic.

"... Do you promise?"

"Of course."

She hesitated for a moment before she began, "I saw my mom today."

"Did you have a fight with your mother?"

"No. I mean... I saw Twilight Sparkle, my other mom."

Bright Light looked taken aback, going into deep thought on about this revelation.

"They're sending her far away tonight, but they all sounded so sad about doing it."

"Who sounded sad?"

She leaned to the side, "Mom, Aunt Celestia, and Aunt Rainbow. But what was confusing was that mom said Aunt Rainbow was sick. That's why you're here to teach us."

Bright Light nodded.

"Does mommy not want us to see Twilight? All the books we read say she died. But... I definitely saw her."

Bright Light gazed into the far wall of the room, pretending to run through his thoughts. Deep down, there was only one solution for this opportunity.

"There is a story that I know that may help. Would you like to hear it?"

Dawn nodded.

"Once upon a time, many years before Equestria, there were two fair princesses and their baby sister. They lived in a grand castle with the King and Queen, who ruled their land with a just hoof.

"Now these princesses were friends with the sons of another King. Both of these brothers longed for the eldest sister, but she could not decide which brother she loved more. So the king asked the two of them to do something very special for her."

"Go to the King of the Dragons, Thereweil, and become his students. Learn all the magic you can before you come of age and when you return, show me what you have learned." Celestia stood in the corridor of her castle, her pink mane blowing in the wind.

Before her stood two alicorn stallions each bowing low. They rose simultaneously smiling with pride.

"I will not disappoint you, love of my heart," one said.

"Nor will I, my sweet," spoke the other.

She smiled at both of them, "Just remember that I care for you both, no matter what comes of this challenge. If I had the choice I would have you both. But..."

Each of the brothers put a hoof around her neck.

"It is not easy for us either. Right, Cunning?"

"Not at all, Discord," Cunning replied. "But we would brave any challenge to show our love for you, even if nothing comes of it."

"But we are willing to take that chance. We have always won at games of chance." Discord smiled and let go of her shoulder.

"Each of the brothers went to the King of the Dragons, to learn some magic to win over the princess' heart. The first brother asked for the power to change things around him to whatever he willed. The king told him that it would change the way he looked, but the prince claimed he would do anything to use that power for his love."

"Celestia will love me no matter what I look like. I will happily trade, King Thereweil." Discord stood regal before the king, bowing in respect for the king's kindness.

"So be it." The king boomed.

"The other brother asked for the power to do anything anyone else could do."

"Hmm." The King clawed at his neck, scraping along his scales, "I can teach you that power, but... it comes with a higher cost."

"Anything is worth it, your majesty." Cunning bowed low.

"Indeed? The cost is your cutie mark. You will never be able to earn your special talent."

"But in trade? A special talent where I can utilize any power or talent in the world. It is a fair trade in my eyes."

"So be it."

"They spent several years studying for the princess. When the time came they returned to show her their gifts. The first brother used his magic to turn a field of dirt and muck into rolling hills filled with wild flowers and roses.

"The second brother used the power of her father, the king, to fill the sky with clouds, drawing the symbols of his love.

"Of course the princess loved each of their displays equally. But it was not her choice. While the king thought both feats of magic were indeed impressive, he chose the first brother.

"This confused the second brother, who asked why he did not win the challenge with a larger feat of magic. The king replied that rather than study power for himself, the second brother had chosen to study how to become someone else."

Silence passed through the room. Dawn looked up at Bright Light, a little bit of confusion still on her face.

"Did the story not help?" Bright Light asked.

"I'm not sure what the brothers have to do with what I heard."

"Your sister studies hard, Dawn. But she is very willing to be told what to learn and to do what others have done, rather than to create something new.

"You, on the other hoof, explore new things in order to discover the things that make you happy," he poked her playfully on the nose. She giggled a little. "Perhaps all you need to do is explore a little by yourself. Or in the words of the first brother, 'Add a little chaos', Dawn."

She smiled, "Ok."

"Good. Now I'm going to let you go early, but I want to hear what new and exciting things you have done. Ok?"

She didn't nod. Instead she hugged the older stallion, "Thank you, Bright Light." She let go and ran out of the practice room into the hallway.

A wicked smile shot across Bright Light's face. This was going to be interesting.

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The garden was filled with the sounds of insects singing their songs of autumn. The night sky was filled with clouds, blocking much of the light from the full moon. The light that did manage to escape flowed down from the sky, piercing the night with pillars of pale white. The gardener was whistling into in the cool air as he put away his tools to go home for the night. But while he believed that there was nopony in the gardens, something stirred within the fields of green.

Tonight there was a visitor.

Far from the castle, deep within the labyrinth, a soft popping noise was muffled by the high walls. He spread his wings as the magic subsided from his horn. Cunning had memorized this place: a location covered with vines, complete with four small braziers and a gazebo. Everything he needed for this evening was here. Plus, it was the perfect spot to go unnoticed.

He summoned his magic once more, lifting the braziers over to him. Three of them caught fire, illuminating the dark space, while the other simply settled down before him. From under his wing, he produced a small pouch, filled with a few small strands of blue hair. He dropped them in the unlit brazier.

A quiet guttural hissing ushered from his mouth. It grew to short, unintelligible syllables with far more force and volume than his other persona. The liquid in the last bowl burst into flames, shifting from a normal color into a sickly green.

“O’ dragon hunters high with eagle’s vision, narrow my sight upon my prey,” Cunning growled.

The oil rose from its vessel, spinning wildly in front of the alicorn. As it spun, the liquid spread itself to its limits, becoming almost as thin as a scroll. The green flames siphoned off to the sides to form a circular border around the mirror-like surface. An image flickered to life on the surface.

An image of Dawn, pressed up against a wall came into view.

“And what might you be doing, Dawn?” He whispered to himself.

The blue filly looked around the corner.

She was staring into one of the lower entrances to Canterlot’s streets. The archway had one guard on either end of the opening. The room itself was no more than an empty stone chamber that looked very old and probably poorly maintained. Probably.

The only other item of interest was a small carriage, built to hold two or three ponies inside. It had an extension for luggage on the back that was more than large enough to hide in. She looked around again – there were no other guards.

Her wings unfolded from her sides. She flapped them furiously, lifting herself a few inches off of the ground. Slowly, she pushed herself across the hallway, pulling her hooves up as far from the floor as possible. Sweat began to bead all over her coat. The lessons on flying from Aunt Rainbow were paying off today.

When she touched down behind the carriage, voices began to echo from where she came. Panicking, she opened one of the flaps for luggage and dove inside. The pouch she had chosen was filled with scrolls, which she pulled from beneath her as best she could so she was covered.

“I still don’t see why I can’t pull this here wagon,” Dawn recognized Applejack’s voice. She was in deep trouble if she got caught now, “Won’t three of us be too much for you ta pull?”

“Not at all, Miss Applejack.” Dawn knew the voice, but couldn’t place a name to it. He was one of the guards, that much she knew.

“Well, alright. Just holler if you need a hand, sugar cube,” Applejack replied.

One by one, she felt three ponies entering the carriage above her. After about a minute or so, the cart lurched forward and drove out into the night.

“How deliciously predictable, Dawn,” Cunning laughed. His voice had returned to normal after the spell. The oil mirror faded to nothing and the green flames went out. “It appears that you’ve done my work for me. As expected, of course.”

His horn glowed once more and the other fires went out. He replaced the braziers in their proper locations, before passing through the nearest hedge. The stallion moved like a ghost towards the castle, passing through walls like mist while he mused to himself.

Eventually he arrived outside of the Labyrinth, staring at the line of statues. A smile worked its way across his lips, “Ah the games we play, my dear Celestia. With one hoof you protect your kingdom,” he raised his fore-hoof. “But with your horn you crush dissension.”

His horn suddenly burst with light, releasing a huge amount of power into the night air. The statues shook imperceptibly at first, then more violently as the magic increased. The earth rumbled and vibrated under the influence of the magic. The light became blinding as Cunning’s magic filled the air. It engulfed the entire garden, glowing as bright as the sun.

Then, it was over.

Cunning was gone... and so were the statues.

Chapter 9

Celestia shot upright in her bed. The cool air coming through her window ruffled her curtains, competing with her panting to be the dominant sound in the room.

At first she thought she had just experienced another one of her nightmares. Discord and his followers had escaped from their prison, stealing away into the world to take revenge on her. She visibly shuddered. Slowly, he had turned the world against her, turning her beloved country into a wasteland of chaos and war.

Celestia pressed a hoof to her head and wiped away the sweat. For a late summer evening, the breeze was unusually warm. She tossed the covers to one side and rose from her bed. On nights when she didn't sleep well, she found that flying soothed her mind. Tonight was one of those nights.

As Celestia prepared to jump out of her window, the whole floor began to shake. Magic burst from her horn, shielding her from whatever danger had caught her off guard. But instead of finding an attack, the vibrations increased, knocking her off balance. She stumbled around for a few moments before steadying herself against the wall. Light poured through her window, growing in intensity.

Before it even disappeared, she was running full force down the hallway towards the astronomy tower. She needed to check on the twins. Luna would never make it in time from the throne room if somepony had broken in. She rounded the corner and kicked off the ground hard, soaring up the tower. Taking the stairs would waste time.

As soon as she touched down on the landing she ripped the door from its hinges with her magic, tossing it haphazardly behind her. The occupants of one of the beds squeaked loudly, diving under the covers. The princess of the sun let out a sigh of relief.

"Aunt Celly?"

Celestia watched Dusk poke her head out of the covers. The filly's eyes were wide open. Underneath the covers she was shaking in fear - from the sudden earthquake and from the loss of the bedroom door.

"It's ok Dusk. I'm just making sure you and Dawn are alright. Right, Dawn?" Celestia walked over to the other bed, gently nuzzling the form under the other blanket. A shiver went down her spine. She pulled the

blankets off of the bed. Underneath was a large pile of pillows, neatly moved into a position to mimic a sleeping filly. Her heart started to thump out of her chest.

“Dawn?” She called. Her magic reached out to the closet door, pulling it open. No luck. “DAWN!?” Celestia was in a full on panic.

“She’s probably running around the castle again, Aunt Celly.” Dusk said, climbing up onto her sister’s bed. She shifted one of the pillows around but stopped short.

“Celly...?” Dusk backed away from the headboard.

The princess turned around from her search watching the filly starting to shake. Her eyes never moved from the headboard. Celestia grabbed her under her wing, softly trying to calm her.

The words etched into the wood told a different story. Slowly the wood began to change. Inch by inch the wood began to turn to stone, permanently engraving the phrase into her memory.

Decide through truth, Through Trust, through Brawn,
Then Sun and Moon will have their dawn.

The elder sister began breathing through her teeth, only hiding her rage for the sake of the now crying filly under her wing. Only one pony had the **gall** to leave such a message. The only pony powerful enough to take Dawn without being seen or even leaving so much of a trace: Discord.

A hard landing outside of the room made Celestia throw up a defensive shield. Her magic bent to her will, forming enough magic for an immediate counter attack.

“Sister?”

Celestia dropped the shield immediately, “Luna! Discord is-”

“Free. I know. I tried getting here as quickly as I could through the chaos. Where are the girls?” Luna was speaking frantically, sweeping the room with her eyes, over and over. Celestia gently lifted her wing and Dusk lept from it into her mother’s open hooves.

“Mommy!” Dusk cried, sobbing into her blue coat.

“It’s ok, Dusk. Mommy’s here,” Luna cooed, stroking the filly’s mane. She looked up, panic still playing on her features, “Where’s Dawn?”

Celestia stayed quiet, casting her gaze to the headboard. After a moment she began to whisper angrily, “I’ll ensure he suffers the worst fate I can imagine...”

Luna couldn’t make heads or tails of the headboard. It was cryptic, yes and the implications...

"Where is she Celestia?" Luna's voice began to crack and her eyes began to fill with tears.

"...he'll wish that he was encased in stone when I'm through."

"No... please tell me he didn't..."

Celestia could feel Luna's heart breaking from across the room. The rage she was containing began to spill over into her magic. The stone bed shattered crumbling to the floor, only leaving the headboard intact. The window shattered behind her and the floor began to crack. As the cracks wound their way up the wall, the guards that accompanied Luna backed away in sheer terror, unable to leave their princesses, but wanting to put as much distance between them as possible.

Luna sobbed lightly into her forehooves, bringing Dusk into a tighter embrace. Celestia was only able to manage one coherent word in her rage:

"DISCORD."

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Cunning was dancing. His hysterical laughter filled Bright Light's large office, as he hopped to and fro.

The office was quite cozy - it was a perfect place to do research and for certain conversations. The room had long since been sound-proofed. As an added bonus, he had taken the liberty of preventing scrying within the room's confines. Well... it really only prevented somepony else from scrying on **him**.

Behind the desk, settled on the wall between two large windows was a mirror which at the moment held the fury Princess Celestia was experiencing on the news that his brother was wide awake. A large wooden desk sat a few feet in front of that, scattered with notes and alchemy materials. Bookshelves covered the side walls from the floor to the ceiling, filled with books on various topics that held his fleeting interest.

In front of the doors stood five interesting figures, each staring forward and unmoving. Their eyes were a light glowing red, completely under Cunning's control. He bounced over to them, giggling as he did so.

"Oh what a **wonderful** day this is!" He spoke, chuckling to himself. "Not only do I get a reunion with my friends and compatriots, I get to see my brother for the first time in years! How has the stone been treating you?"

"It's been a rocky experience," one of the figures replied, devoid of emotion or feeling. The creature stood on his two different hind legs, his

serpentine tail motionless behind him. His head was that of a pony, with an antler on one side and a rams horn on the other. His forearms were at his sides.

Cunning laughed, pretending his brothers voice matched the display of wit, "I suppose it has, brother. But it hasn't crumbled your wit in the least. I suppose that's good for me in the long run."

His brother nodded.

"Especially now that my dear Celeste thinks her former beloved, Discord, Prince of Chaos has stolen away little Dawn." Cunning slowed his dancing to a trot, walking straight up to his brother, "So I suppose for my sake you'll be happy to play along?"

Discord nodded.

"Good." He trotted back to the desk. One of the most surprising discoveries he had made since his plan unfolded, was how strong his control still was. Of course, he had spent the last hour reinforcing his magical hold on them, but he was giddy at the thought that Celestia's use of the Elements of Harmony had **preserved** his clever spell. It was priceless, to say the least.

Cunning turned around, leaning his flank into the table, "Listen closely. Princess Celestia is starting to tip over the edge into darker water. With Princess Luna now suitably broken, she will either back down, or join her sister's witch hunt. In order for... us, to control the whole world, we must avoid war between other kingdoms unless absolutely necessary.

"Therefore, you are all tasked with stirring up Starfall's insistent rabble in Equestria.. Create a commotion in other lands with their rebels and dissidents. Have the world unite under the princess and then crush every resistance we create. For when fear looms, the Princess will be their guiding light. A light that I hold in my hand."

Discord and the four ponies bowed at once to Cunning.

"Brother, you will need to stay for a moment. The rest of you may leave unseen."

One of the four ponies' horns glowed. Shadows stretched down from the walls and wrapped itself around the other three. As soon as it seemed to envelop their bodies, the shadows and the ponies disappeared without a sound.

"I have a special task for you, brother. One of the new Elements of Harmony is being sent to our old master. I want you to make your way to the dragon kingdom as well. But you must not be seen and you cannot arrive before she does." He tossed a picture across the room, using his

magic to hover it in front of Discord, "She is the purple unicorn in the picture. You may take it for reference."

Discord nodded, snapping his fingers to make it disappear.

"When you arrive, you will be unconscious for three days. You will remember nothing of my control over you, nor of the events which led you to be banished. They will be... cloudy. Eventually they will return, but not for many years. It is the least I can do for you, brother."

Discord nodded once more, his eyes still blank.

"Go."

Cunning's brother snapped his fingers and vanished. The silence hung in the room for a few moments, before Cunning let out another burst of laughter. He had let go of his brother, only to have him not know why Celestia no longer loved him. It was a fitting end, since Discord had her love to himself all those years ago. Love that Cunning believed he deserved, even if he had to control her to get it.

He most certainly wasn't going to share her with anypony else.

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Dawn groaned as she turned over in the little carrying compartment she stowed away in. She could hear the wheels of the carriage floating over the cobblestone streets through the muffled sounds of whatever place they were in. She shifted some of the scrolls to the side, reaching up with her hooves to grab hold of the top, tossing the flap over her head to look outside.

The city was full of ponies of all colors and talents. Pegasi flew about the sky, tossing papers every which way. Vendors stood on the street corner, competing to sell their food. A newsstand was surrounded by ponies in gray and black suits, carrying professional-looking saddlebags. The pegasus in the center of the crowd hoisted a paper over his head shouting some of the daily news.

She looked towards the sky. Just beyond some of the buildings the sun poured its rays over the city streets. But it was dwarfed by massive structures, reaching high into the skies. In all her life, she had only ever seen the castle towers in Canterlot. These must have been several times bigger, maybe more. As they glinted in the morning sunlight and she realized most of these buildings were made from metal and glass. To the side, she watched earth ponies walking treacherously across steel beams high in the sky. They were working with other pegasi, but from this distance, they looked like ants.

She gaped in sheer amazement. Distracted, she barely noticed the nearest carriage pass hers, cutting them off. Their carriage stopped short, causing her to tumble back into the bag. There was a bit of yelling, accompanied by a few words she had never heard before. The driver of her carriage let out a few of the same words. She'd have to ask Twilight what they meant later.

Dawn frowned, looking at the back of the carriage. Through the back window, she noticed Applejack sleeping against the side of the carriage. She hadn't even considered how to tell them she had stowed away in their cart. Aunt Rainbow would likely be furious with her. The guard Aunt Celestia sent would probably insist on turning the whole cart around to bring her home.

She slid back down into the cart. The first thing she needed now was a plan. There had to be some possible way to stay with them. A sigh escaped her lips. If she could figure out whoever it was Celestia sent, she might be able to worm her way out of being brought back home. Especially if it was one of the guards she had caught doing something weird with the other staff. Like that time she had caught Just Desserts kissing Thunder Cloud, when she was alone in the kitchen. Or the time Stormy Sea changed the locks on all of the guard lockers.

The carriage continued down the lane, as she settled deeper into the confines of the scroll pouch.

Inside, Applejack began to stir. It had been a long night of travel from Canterlot. With the guard flying the carriage, they had cut their time significantly. Early on, Rainbow hooked into the reigns and helped fly it across the country fields.

She remembered passing over the ruins of Fillydelphia before nodding off to sleep. After the civil war, the road that went through the city was never really repaired. For almost four years the ruins from the battle deteriorated, with nopony returning to rebuild. Within the last year ponies began to return in droves to start over. But they had barely started repairs on the road, since Celestia had a new road built between Canterlot and Manehattan to avoid passing through the ruins.

It didn't matter though. Whatever effort the two ponies had done together had been enough to get them here very quickly. This was just one day in the long journey that lay ahead of them.

Across from her, both Twilight and Rainbow Dash were fast asleep. She hadn't expected differently. Rainbow had pulled for as long as she had been awake to watch the scenery go by and Twilight was still recovering from her... ordeal. She shook the thought from her head. This was no time

to dwell on the past, especially since that had all already changed. Instead, she opened the door to the carriage and lifted herself onto the seat in the front, closing the door behind her.

"I ain't seen Manehattan fer a while and its as if I'd never been," she said to herself, taking in the sights.

"Miss Applejack?" The guard turned to face her.

"Mornin'... uh..." Her train of thought fizzled out. She had already forgotten his name.

"Thunder Cloud, Miss."

"Of course. Sorry 'bout that."

He nodded shortly, turning his attention back to the road. Manehattan drivers were some of the worst in Equestria.

"So, uh... where exactly are we heading off to?" She asked.

He worked his way around a stopped taxi carriage, "To Grand Central station. Canterlot's train line is still shut down by the storm, otherwise we would have taken the train instead."

"Is it gonna be one of them sleeper trains, like the one to Appleloosa?"

He nodded.

She chuckled to herself, "We'll try not ta keep you up."

It didn't take much longer until they reached the station. Applejack woke up Rainbow and Twilight, while Thunder Cloud walked around back to unload the bags. Twilight shifted slightly in her position, while Rainbow Dash grunted, rubbing her eyes.

"We're here," Applejack said. Thunder Cloud tossed a few articles of clothing at Applejack, which she caught in her teeth. "Y'uhll 'eed da but dis on," she spoke.

Twilight squinted at Applejack, trying to understand her words between the clothes in her mouth and the lack of restful sleep she received. The iron clamp still on her horn didn't help the sleeping part much.

Applejack tossed them each one of the cloths, throwing one over herself.

"Twilight, yours is a hooded sweater and Rainbow, that's a jacket o' some sort. Rarity made them for each of ya. She said it'd help ya fit in here and they'll keep ya warm up north. They ain't no frou frou fashions, but they'll help us blend in. Especially you Twilight."

They nodded, although Rainbow Dash was far less enthusiastic about the new dress. Applejack pulled on a green sweater, before going into the back to help Thunder Cloud. He was struggling to lift the some of the compartments out of their holsters.

"Need a hand?" She asked, sliding one of the detached bags over.

"Yeah. I can't seem to get these untied," he pointed at one of the still hanging bags. "The other bag is a lot heavier than I imagined it to be, but I can't get that one untied either."

"Consider yourself lucky, I'm here. I know my way 'round knots."

Applejack waited for Thunder Cloud to grab hold of the bag, before she clamped on the first knot with her teeth. It was a delicate process, but after years running around on the farm it was as good as untied. A sudden grunt from the guard confirmed the bag falling freely into his hooves.

She moved onto the next bag, working her teeth around the knot. It came loose as well, but the guard fumbled with the catch. It fell to the ground.

Dawn stifled a grunt as she hit the ground.

"Yer sure you don't have more than maps in here? Like those fancy travel books?" Applejack was unprepared for the actual weight of the bag, but she lifted it with her mouth to place it on the sidewalk.

"Perhaps. Some of the books are more accurate than the scrolls," the stallion shrugged. He waved over an attendant who brought out a large cart from inside the building.

"I also asked for a few books to read on the trip," Twilight said, appearing from the other side of the carriage. The navy-blue hooded sweater fit snugly over her body, covering her cutie mark and - as intended - the clamp on her horn. Her saddlebags were a plain gray color, seemingly filled to the brim with books. "I figured I needed to see what I've missed. I have the ones I want to read now in my saddlebags."

Rainbow hovered onto the sidewalk, wearing a thin denim jacket and a pair of shades on her head, "That shouldn't be a problem. We'll just pile them onto the cart for the train." She lifted the bag with the maps - and Dawn - preparing to put it on the cart.

"That bag goes last, Ms. Dash." Thunder Cloud and Applejack took a few moments to unload the carriage of the other small bags, placing the other large sack neatly in the corner of the cart. The stallion motioned to Rainbow Dash, who placed the map bag on top.

"This way, officer," the attendant spoke, pushing the cart down one of the side entrances to the station.

They followed the side hallway until it opened up into a fairly large shopping area. Stores lined the hall selling an assortment of souvenirs, food, even clothing for the unprepared traveler. They rounded the corner past a Star Buck's before arriving at a series of elevators. The bag attendant pressed the button to call an elevator car.

“How long is the train ride going to be?” Rainbow asked, breaking the lingering silence.

“About 10 days. If the lines need to be cleared from fall snow, it could take a few more,” Thunder Cloud said.

Applejack shook her head and stared at the guard, “**Ten** days? I thought you said that this was like a the ride ta Appaloosa?”

“In terms of comfort? Yes. However, our destination isn’t nearly as close as Appaloosa. Where we’re going is several **thousand** miles from home. Plus some distance we’ll have to cover by hoof.”

“But we’ve seen a dragon before, just outside of Ponyville! They can’t possibly be that far from home.” Rainbow looked clearly irritated with the stallion.

The elevator doors opened. Each of the ponies clambered into the elevator, but Thunder Cloud continued, “Indeed you have. I believe Miss Sparkle knows much more than I do on the matter of why they live so far away.”

“Their ancestral home has always been in the Far North. But a few decide to inhabit other free places where the environment isn’t regulated by pony kind. The tradition of territory is still very strong in their culture - space in the ancestral homeland sometimes isn’t enough.” Twilight beamed at her quick recollection of Dragon history. It had been ages since she last picked up the book it was in even before she had moved to Ponyville.

Dawn couldn’t help but be impressed. She had lay as motionless as possible to avoid raising suspicion. But that didn’t stop her from listening to where they were going. It would be important to plan ahead so she could force them to let her tag along on the rest of the trip. The whole point after all was to meet her mother.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she was lifted once more into the air before being set down on something hard and hollow. She heard the other bags landing somewhere below her.

Outside the attendant was walking away, while one of the conductor stallions began closing up the baggage car. “You’ll be able to have someone retrieve your luggage during the ride. As you saw each bag has a tag attached to it with a number corresponding to your train ticket.” The conductor smiled at them, “Enjoy your trip.”