

# Sunshine and Fire

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# Table of Contents:

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Magic Mirror</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Lay of the Land</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>The Prisoner and the Slave</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Apple Underground</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>A Twinkle in the Mind's Eye</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Lady of Liberty</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>The Forgotten Princess</b>	<b>130</b>

# Chapter 1

## Magic Mirror

It felt good to be back home.

Twilight Sparkle still caught herself thinking that when she happened to visit Canterlot, to her honest dismay. She had a cozy house in the nicest town in the nation, as perfect a home as a home could be, but it was hard to forget her roots. Whenever she returned to the city of her birth to visit her parents or the Princess or on some random business or another, she was hit with an overwhelming sense of longing. The smell of familiar magic in the air was too much for her. Magic was Twilight's talent, her passion, her life, and Canterlot was the capital of magic; it was as if they were created for each other. The notion always made her feel a little guilty, like she didn't appreciate what she had as much as she should have.

Twilight was in an open-air pavilion on top of one of Canterlot's taller towers. The Tower of the Horizon (as it was called) hung over the outer edge of the city, facing away from the mountain that it was built on, and offered a gorgeous view of the countryside. Equestria stretched forth before her, all the way to the horizon – woodlands and grasslands, lakes and rivers, hills and swamps, towns and hamlets, a thousand farms and fields and orchards for carrots and wheat and apples and everything else. Ponyville was there as well, or at least the silhouettes of its roofs were, there between the Lonely Mountain and the Everfree Forest. The land was covered in spring greens. It looked beautiful. Twilight had never paid much attention to the scenery while she'd still lived in the city, but now she was glad to soak in the sights.

The sky was blue and clear. Canterlot had always favored an open view of the heavens, conceding clouds for rain and snow only when they were truly necessary to maintain natural equilibrium. This was especially true on days of import like today. There would not be a single speck of white or gray in the sky, on the honor of the weather patrol.

It was quiet this far up. The hustle and bustle of the streets and the rush of the city's waterfalls were distant and muted. Twilight appreciated the calm.

She closed her eyes and took a moment to enjoy the feeling of the afternoon sun on her coat. It was perfect to bask in. Canterlot was far above sea level; it was, in fact, the highest altitude non-pegasus settlement in Equestria. The sun was closer here, its presence more powerful, its rays almost tangible. It was warm, but not hot. Local climate spells kept the air in circulation, so there was always a pleasant breeze to be had.

Twilight felt someone step up next to her. She didn't even need to look to know it was Spike.

"Do you want some ice cream?" the dragon asked, "It was melting, so I had to take a few licks, but it's still good."

Twilight glanced down at him, and levitated the ice cream cone from his hand. It was chocolate, with peanut shavings. She happily took a lick.

"Thank you, Spike."

The taste was familiar to her. If she knew Spike – and she did – then he'd probably walked all the way to the Royal Palace to buy the ice cream from the same vendor that he'd frequented when they still lived in Canterlot. He was far from a picky eater, but most definitely a loyal customer. He enjoyed his homecoming as well, no doubt.

"So which do you like more," he asked, "Ponyville or Canterlot?"

"Oh, Spike," said Twilight, "You know there's no way I can answer that."

"So you don't want to move back here? At all? Not one tiny bit?"

"I didn't say that – of course I do. It would be great to be back. I could visit a different library every day and see the Princess whenever I wanted, and I wouldn't have to talk to mom and dad by letter. But I'd miss my friends." She instinctively glanced over her shoulder to check around for them. "It's been an hour since we split, and I miss them already."

There were a lot of other ponies in the pavilion now, peering off the edge of the tower, conversing with each other, killing time until the show. The Tower of the Horizon was wide enough for hundreds of spectators. An elaborate stage had been set up in the middle of the floor, on which a large rectangular stack covered with black velvet cloth featured prominently.

Right next to it, there was a small platform with mats for the guests of honor to lie on.

Twilight had to finish off her ice cream in a hurry so she could greet the ponies she was familiar with – mostly teachers and librarians she happened to know, or else acquaintances of her parents. Quite a few of her fellow students at Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Youngsters were there for the exhibition as well, and she made sure to be extra friendly to them, to make up for her past irreverence. Most everyone there were academics. Spike climbed on her back and spoke his courtesies as well. One of the other gifted youngsters had a dragon companion of his own, standing beside him on all fours. The other dragon was of the winged kind, sharp and lean and the color of bronze. He was a few years older than Spike, at a guess, but they quickly got to talking. Twilight had to break it off when she saw her friends come up the stairs. They were all there: Applejack, Fluttershy, Rarity, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. She quickly made her excuses and galloped over to them.

"So, have you enjoyed your time at the Symposium so far, girls?"

"Oh, it's been a terrific experience!" burst out Rarity, "I truly thought I knew everything I needed to know about unicorn magic, but I found this *wizard* of a pony running a telekinesis workshop on Amalthea Avenue that gave me some inspiring tips for fine handling – at no charge! And I'll have you know, Rainbow Dash, that this gentlepony thought my perfume was lovely, not anything like a 'flowery industrial accident', so there!"

"It's been pretty interesting," admitted Applejack, "The demonstration for that quick-grow enchantment for plants they were advertising was mighty impressive, to take one example, though that sure was a lot of effort and preparation for one spell! The poor pony doing the casting nearly threw her hooves up once the deed was done. I don't think something like that could ever be economically feasible, thank grace. Besides, I'm not sure who'd want an eggplant thirty hooves high."

"Oh, ahem, I've had a wonderful time as well," said Fluttershy, "There's an entire square set aside for the study of foreign magic, did you know? Oh, sorry, of course you do. There were these nice scholars who talked about dragonflame and fairy-glamors and it was all very pleasant and peaceful.

They even brought in this old griffon lady to demonstrate her powers. I think they called her one of the last remaining aeromancers..."

She'd barely finished when words positively exploded out of Pinkie Pie:

"Oh, it's been tons and tons and tons of fun, even the bits that weren't fun! All these stuffy, serious unicorns are so much fun once you loosen them up with a *party*, and it gets people a lot more involved with their work too! I especially liked that show where one unicorn created a magical double of himself – but I only liked it ironically, you know? I mean, why would you need a spell for *that*? But what I *especially* liked was those giant, pony-shaped mechanical contraptions they animated with the power of love! It's just too bad one of them went berserk and tried to destroy the city. Hmm, I'll have to remember that stomach growl, eye twitch, droopy ears, eye twitch means incoming rampage by giant thing. Don't worry though, the city wasn't destroyed! Me and Trixie – she's here too, I hope you know that! – went and borrowed the other robots and fought off the bad one, so everything turned out all right!"

No pony quite knew what to say to that. While Twilight exchanged questioning looks with the others, Spike hastily leafed through his event guide.

"I don't think there's anything like giant robots in the program, Pinkie Pie," he said.

"Really? Well, maybe it was just all in my head then. That happens sometimes!"

Suppressing a chuckle, Twilight turned to the last member of their group.

"What about you, Rainbow Dash?" she asked.

"Meh," said Dash with a shrug, "Hate to say I told you so, but it's just been a bunch of boring talky stuff, just like I expected."

"Oh?" wondered Fluttershy, "But I thought you said you really liked that spell they invented to make walls and ceilings look like the sky outside? I hope I didn't misunderstand you."

"Well, yeah, there was that..."

"And that gravity-affecting device they came up with to help pegasus flight training?" asked Applejack, "Shoot, I thought for sure you'd love it."

"Granted, but..."

"And I saw you giddy as a little filly watching that magically recorded puppet show," said Rarity.

"Okay, okay, okay!" exclaimed Dash, now flushed, "So the event's had its moments and I'm glad you took us along, Twilight."

"Hear, hear!" echoed the others, and Twilight had to smile.

In truth, Canterlot's Symposium of the Magical Arts was bittersweet for Twilight Sparkle this year. She had hoped to see a presentation of her own featured there, but things hadn't quite worked out. Her research exploring the effects of emotional states on teleportation spells had been very promising, but she'd been plagued by one interruption after another until she'd hopelessly lost her way with her work. By the time she had everything in order, it was already too late – which was rather embarrassing for someone who prided herself on being a good planner. Of course, nopony could blame her for the schedule slip after that bizarre body swap incident and the great Ponyville library heist...

Despite everything though, there was so much interesting magic at the Symposium that she couldn't help but have a good time. All the cutting edge magical research in Equestria was represented: there were shows and seminars and and readings and everything else. Some unicorns demonstrated newly invented spells, quite a few of which were still unpredictable and unworkable, while others presented forgotten magics they'd uncovered from forgotten literature. Hanging out with her friends in an intellectually stimulating environment was a perfect malady for disappointment.

"I'm glad you've had a good time," said Twilight, "but you've seen nothing yet. Princess Celestia tells me the final presentation is going to top everything else so far. They always save the most impressive experiments and most significant discoveries for the end. This one is directed by Brainy Bright, one of Equestria's leading magical theorists!"

For some reason, nobody looked quite as excited about hearing one of Equestria's leading magical theorists as she had expected.

Not long after that, the sound of trumpets blaring the first notes of the Equestrian anthem heralded the arrival of Princess Celestia and her entourage. They swooped into the pavilion from the air, some of them on their own wings and others in pegasus-drawn carriages. The group included a number of courtiers and government officials, and puzzlingly, they were flanked by an entire squad of royal guards. It was unheard of for the Princess to move with an escort even half that size. But that was no matter. Celestia herself was at the center, looking beautiful, dignified and – above all – constant. She never looked any different. Even though her shimmering mane waved as if it was caught in the wind, as soon as she put her hooves down, she became as firm and unyielding as a rock. She gazed around with half-lidded eyes and her usual mild smile, and to Twilight's great delight, she steered directly towards her.

Twilight would have liked nothing more than to trot right up to her and nuzzle her, but they were in public and certain procedures of formality had to be followed. She bowed like everyone else. Celestia received her as she would have received anyone else as well, but when she spoke, there was an extra dose of warmth in her voice that she reserved only for a select few.

"Twilight Sparkle! You've grown since the last time I saw you, my little pony. I hope you've found the Symposium a rewarding experience." She passed her gaze over Twilight's friends. "I'm glad you decided to join us, girls. There is more to Canterlot than the, ahem, enchanting nightlife." Finally, she bent down her neck down to Spike and grinned. "And hello to you too, Spike. If I may be so bold as to offer a suggestion, perhaps you shouldn't volunteer to help Fluttershy with her chickens when you have a cold, hmm?"

Spike grinned sheepishly and blushed. Only when Celestia stood up straight again did Twilight notice that Princess Luna was present at well, stooped down and pressed close to her sister's side. For Luna, unlike for Celestia, getting lost in a crowd was easy.

"Princess Luna," said Twilight with a deep bow, "It's a pleasure to see you again! I had not thought to find you in attendance."



"I wouldn't have missed this for the world, Twilight Sparkle," replied Luna with a stiff nod.

She looked tired and disheveled. There were dark circles under her eyes and her mane and tail were matted with inexpertly applied mane gel. Her crown was slightly askew. She'd either had not enough sleep, or too much of it. Twilight sensed a strange, pungently flowery smell about her and tried not to make a face. She heard Rainbow Dash muttering something behind her:

"Ugh, I take back what I said about your perfume, Rarity!"

Luna fixed a glare on Dash as only a goddess could. Twilight chuckled nervously and tried to think of something to say, but Pinkie Pie was already rushing to the rescue. She pushed right past old Lady Blueblood and Paper Cut, the director of Canterlot's Institute for Magical Research (who just happened to be the organizer of the whole Symposium), to shake Luna's hoof.

"Oh, I was so worried you'd spend the whole day cooped up in your room, I don't know, *sleeping* or something!" she said, beaming, "Boy am I glad you proved me wrong!"

Indelicate as that was, it seemed to brighten Luna a bit. She still didn't smile though.

"As I said, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I am a student of magic myself, after all, and this is the event of the year when it comes to magic and learning both. Even if it a little too... busy."

Fluttershy quivered slightly. "Mmmm, I'm not good with crowds either," she said as if she was talking to no one in particular.

"A student in a figurative sense, at least," said Celestia, "Your knowledge of the field overshadows that of mortal ponies. I would be surprised if there was much you learned today."

"One never stops learning," replied Luna without looking up at her, "And magic has developed a lot over the last millennium. You still know much more than I do..."

Celestia's entourage was starting to realize that she hadn't paid them any attention in a while now, and slowly dispersed to mingle with the rest of the crowd. Half the guards stayed close by the Princesses, while the others spread out in the pavilion.

"Uh, that's a lot of guardponies, Your Highness," observed Spike, "You wouldn't mind if I asked if anything was wrong, would you?"

Celestia seemed hesitant to answer. "My captain of guard strongly urged me to bolster by bodyguards. There is a matter that concerns him – a death threat found in my quarters."

There was a moment of shocked silence.

"That's outrageous!" rasped Rarity.

"Oh my," said Fluttershy.

"No. Way!" exclaimed Rainbow Dash.

Applejack cursed quite strongly. "Er, pardon the language, Princess. *A death threat?*"

"Pull the other one!" said Pinkie Pie, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"But why would anypony want to harm *you*?" asked Spike.

"It might have been addressed to me," said Luna quietly.

"It was delivered to me," said Celestia, "And anyway, this is not the first such message I've received in my life. Few such threats ever materialize, and I am hardly easy to kill. No pony has ever successfully assassinated me, you know, and the last time anypony attempted it was over a hundred years ago. It's my captain's job to be paranoid, but this is not something for you to be concerned about, children."

Her tone was light, but Twilight couldn't help but worry whether the threat was affecting her after all. She wasn't for one moment afraid for the Princess's physical safety, but for all her power, she was still pony, and had feelings to be hurt.

Princess Celestia was loved by most, but not by all. There were always at least a handful of political extremists and self-professed freethinkers that opposed her rule, and the return of Princess Luna and the validation of the legend of the Mare in the Moon only added fuel to conspiracy theories that she was an unlawful despot. They rarely did more than spread leaflets and rant on street corners. There were few things that angered Twilight as much as such unfounded and malicious attacks against her person. Celestia went out of her way to get to know her people whenever possible, and yet there were still ignoramuses who didn't know anything about her.

But this letter was delivered directly to her quarters, meaning a member of the palace staff was most likely responsible. How could that be? They should have known first-hand how gracious and good she was; they should have known better than to do something like this, whoever it had been.

Twilight and her friends were Celestia's personal guests, so they got the best seats in the house, on the dais right in front of the stage. Twilight uncomfortably realized that the place of highest honor seated three, with Celestia on the center mat between Luna and her. That did not seem right. Luna looked impassive, but she must have been aware of it herself. Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie took their places on one side of them and Spike, Rarity and Applejack on the other.

No sooner had they all laid down than Paper Cut headed their way, pushing a stone-faced earth pony with a grain-gold coat and a close-cropped white mane in front of him. He was relatively young. Twilight peeked a look at his cutie mark and recognized it for an Old Equestrian rune. She was uncertain about its meaning.

"Come on now, it's only polite to say a few words to your sponsor," Paper Cut was saying.

"But the preparations..." muttered the earth pony, just before being thrust in front of the dais.

For a moment, it looked like he was struck deaf by Celestia's majesty. It must have been his first time seeing her up close, and that was a natural enough reaction. Eventually, he found his voice and wits and bowed.

"It's an honor to make the acquaintance, Princess."

"The honor is mine," said Celestia, "Your name has been ringing out in Canterlot a lot in recent years, always alongside favorable references to your character and work. Please, allow me to introduce my sister, Princess Luna."

She held out a hoof towards Luna, and wiggled an eyebrow to boot. It took the earth pony a moment to catch on that he was supposed to bow to her too. Luna ignored his bow and courtesy.

"And this is my star pupil, Twilight Sparkle, along with her dragon companion and her friends, the wielders of the Elements of Harmony. Girls – and Spike – this is Brainy Bright, who will head up the forthcoming demonstration."

Twilight gasped. "*You're* Brainy Bright? But – you're an earth pony!"

"What of it?" asked Bright defensively, "Unicorns aren't the only ones interested in the field. I am a theoretical magicianist – I research and document, and in some cases, invent. I don't see that it matters whether I can do magic or not."

He was completely right, of course. Twilight blushed over her outburst. She had never met an earth pony with magical expertise before, but the fact that he had reached his current eminence without actually being able to cast spells himself only spoke higher of his brilliance.

"I'm sorry, Mister Bright. I really look forward to your demonstration."

"As do I," said Celestia, "I know we're in for something special today."

"You most certainly are, Your Highness!" boasted Paper Cut, "When I signed off on this, I knew I was making history. This is something without precedent! Why-"

Bright interrupted him with a cough. He shuffled awkwardly on his hooves, peering at the guardponies around them.

"I'd rather not give anything away, Princess. It's only a few minutes until we begin anyway."

"Of course," said Celestia graciously, "Don't let me keep you."

With one last glance at Princess Celestia, Brainy Bright turned around and headed for the stage. The rest of his team, a group of four unicorns, was there waiting for him. Paper Cut left them to their own devices as well. As soon as they were out of earshot, Celestia turned towards Luna.

"He's a handsome one, isn't he? And he is rather clever as well."

"I don't know what you're implying, sister."

The expression on Celestia's face bizarrely reminded Twilight of Rarity's cat Opalescence during her smuggler moments.

Rarity launched into a lengthy critique of the decorations in the pavilion, which she held to be too ostentatious for an event as informal as a magical exhibition. Spike was completely enraptured with her and merrily nodded along without hearing a thing she said, while Applejack kept sighing in exasperated boredom. On the other side, Rainbow Dash was flustering Fluttershy with some sort of bawdy tale and Pinkie questioning (or possibly interrogating) Luna about the quality of baked goods in the Royal Palace. When Pinkie paused to take a breath, Celestia leaned over to her sister and whispered something in her ear, causing her to snort and giggle.

Twilight, meanwhile, was watching the preparations on the stage. Bright's staff had thrown aside the black cloth and revealed a stack of thin plates about the size of a doorway. They looked to be made of a substance similar to glass, but were somehow both far more transparent and far more reflective, giving them a hazy, fractured appearance. The plates were levitated up in the air and folded into each other; somehow, they melded together as if they had no substance or mass. At length, the unicorns visibly started to strain holding the construct up. After a brief argument with Bright, they gently floated it down on the stage in a standing position – it really did look like a doorway, though bigger now.

The pavilion was near to full by this point, but the crowd was quiet. Some final conversations were dying down, muffled under the weight of expectation. Everypony could sense that something was happening. When Brainy Bright stepped to the front of the stage and cleared his throat, the hush was absolute.

"Some of you may have read the dissertation I wrote for my entry into Canterlot's Institute for Magical Research six years ago. It's not a well-

known piece, but nothing else in my career has polarized the magical community quite as much. It's been praised and denounced in equal measure – the ideas I proposed in it have been held up as the Holy Grail of space relativity magic by some and decried as a sensationalist fantasy by others. The subject matter has always fascinated me, and remained a passion even as I moved on to other projects. The title of my dissertation was 'The Many-Worlds Hypothesis.'"

A wave of murmurs passed through the crowd. Most of the gathered ponies were lost and confused, but the rest were suddenly very excited. Twilight was furious at herself for never having read the work in question and being in the dark about it now. She was familiar with most of Bright's research, but not that. Why not? There was just so much to read, and she didn't have as much time as she used to...

"Twilight," whispered Spike beside her, "Hey, Twilight!"

"What is it, Spike?" she quietly asked.

"I can't see anything from here. Can I climb on your back?"

That's right, Spike was little... Twilight nodded without taking her eyes off the stage. Spike crawled on top of her for a better view.

"There are worlds beyond ours," continued Bright, "There are alternatives to our pasts, presents and futures. Every choice we make or don't make creates an alternative universe, a different branch of reality. This is what I posited in my hypothesis. To put it bluntly, I was right. And I can prove it. My associates Golden Perfect, Glimmerbum, Enigma, Life Saver and I have conceived and created a method for accessing such alternate universes – a window, if you will. Today, we will be looking at a few worlds we've already cataloged."

Bright fell silent, and the silence drew on. He seemed to be lost in reverie, his face scrunched up, and ponies were starting to get awkward and restless.

"I am not a braggart, but... I truly believe that this is a very significant discovery. It's a new and potentially dangerous territory, but one with uncountable promises and possibilities for learning. This is science, this is

magic. I hope..." His voice faltered; he started anew. "I hope this is what I will be remembered for."

That sounded reasonable enough, but his expression was so pained that Twilight was genuinely confused as to what he meant. But Bright shook his head and smiled, and everything seemed to be all right.

"We haven't come up with a name for it yet, but it's my pleasure to present it to you all the same."

The four unicorns took this as their cue to lift the 'window' back up and to start feeding magic into it. All of them held their eyes shut, their horns lit up with a colorless glow. The portal flashed and bubbled with light like waves in the sea. Twilight couldn't take her eyes from the spectacle. Eventually, the window settled into a square of perfect blue, indistinguishable from the sky around the tower. Bright muttered some instructions to one of his associates, and the picture shifted to show the countryside. Everything looked normal enough, and Twilight couldn't have sworn it wasn't just a vision of Equestria or one of the other nations they shared their planet with. At length though, she started to notice little oddities in the plant-life. She was no expert on flora, but even the unfamiliar vegetation looked queer to her eyes. When they got their first view of a settlement, many in the crowd gasped.

This strange new world wasn't inhabited by ponies, but bears, colorful bears that walked on their hindquarters. As stunned as she was by what she saw, Twilight tried to be analytical. Their town looked much like Equestrian towns in architecture. The tools they used were similar to their own. They seemed to talk and live as ponies did. They even had their own version of cutie marks – large symbols on their chests. She spotted a maple leaf, a bow and arrow, stars and a heart. Truly, the bears were just like them.

The portal reset. The sky they saw now was the color of ash. Thick clouds blanketed everything. When the view slid downwards, it was hard to make out anything concrete through the smoke. The earth was an ugly patchwork of black fields, jutting crags and rivers of fire. The ceaseless flow of lava was threatening to engulf the entire planet. There had never been any life there.

"Our world as it might have been, save for the grace of the goddesses," announced Bright, his voice curiously dull.

He gave more directions to the unicorns, and after a pause, they obliged. The view changed again, but while most everyone was intently watching another blue sky in the portal, movement in the corner of her eye caught Twilight's attention. Bright was slinking away to the other side of the stage. Just when she started to wonder what he was doing, he sped up and bumped roughly into one of his colleagues.

"Look out!" shouted Twilight, but it was already far too late.

Bright had pushed the unicorn right off the stage, and the weight of the portal was too much for the other three. It was tilting dangerously, and it was tilting directly towards *them* on the dais.

Suddenly there was sound all around, a hundred questions asked and a hundred panicked shouts. The guardponies were pressing closer to the stage. Everything was happening so fast.

Princess Celestia was up on her hooves in an instant and tried to catch the portal with her magic, but her horn seemed to have no effect on it.

Spike's tiny claws were in Twilight's mane and tugging sharply.

"We need to move!" he was saying, but she barely heard him.

Just when it seemed like the three unicorns were starting to stabilize the sinking portal, Bright leapt and crashed into it from above. The telekinetic field gave out under his extra weight.

"Princess!" shrieked Twilight.

"No!" gasped Luna.

"Stay back!" said Celestia.

She had spread her wings, but the sky was already falling. The portal had shattered into shards of indistinct blue, and Brainy Bright was gone.



Twilight instinctively threw herself towards the Princess, vaguely aware of the black glow of Luna's horn, and the next thing she knew, the world unfolded itself around her.

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When Brainy Bright woke up, the first thought on his mind was fear of failure.

After sorting through his jumbled memories, and trying to make a judgment based on the element of surprise and the angle of his descent, he concluded that there was no way to know for sure whether he had really gotten the Princess. The idea that it may have all been for nothing and that he might never know what really happened made him want to retch. He had to hope that he'd succeeded, that he'd managed to exile Celestia from Equestria forever.

Bright was slowly becoming aware of the fact that it was very, very hot. He was outside, he could smell it, so that must have been sunlight that was aggressively seeping in between his eyelids. Laboriously, he opened his eyes and – to his surprise – found himself standing up, leaning heavily against a wall. His head was spinning, and he felt as weak as a newborn foal. There was no way to tell how long he'd been unconscious.

He whinnied and took a few experimental steps. It seemed to be that he was in a city. An alleyway stretched forward in front of him, and there were rows of tall, white buildings on either side of it. Who lived in the city, he could not say, since he couldn't see anyone. The sun hung low in a cloudless sky, but it was as light as if it was midday.

He didn't really know where he was. How could he tell? It didn't really matter anyway. He'd been prepared for the possibility of getting lost in an alternate universe himself all along. The only things he'd had to look forward to back home were imprisonment and dishonor, both well deserved.

Bright had never hated himself as much as he did at that moment. Misusing his greatest creation for an act of terrorism at the day of its own unveiling betrayed every scientific ideal he'd ever held, but there had been no other option. An opportunity like that may never have come again. Celestia was

just too powerful to take on by conventional means. At least this way, nopony had gotten killed.

He wondered whether the portal had swallowed Celestia alone, if it had swallowed her at all. Her sister may have been caught as well, but perhaps that wouldn't have been so bad. There was no point in exchanging one absolute monarch for another; it was best to have no deities at all. But Bright sincerely hoped that Celestia's young student hadn't shared her fate.

Without the Princesses, ponies were finally truly free. They no longer had an immortal and unknowable jailor deciding their destinies for them. The invisible eye was gone. The three pony races would get an even footing in society. Nature would no longer be beholden to any one individual's whims, and surely even the other species would be glad for that. Perhaps the democratic faction would start to gain support in Equestria at last...

Bright did have one regret about being lost, and that was that he didn't know what would happen next. He hoped it would be enlightenment and equality, not violence and uncertainty.

Someone was calling. Bright turned and saw two figures approaching, but the sun blinded him and he couldn't make them out clearly.

As they got closer, Bright recognized them as pegasi. They were asking him who he was. It was a small burden off his back that he'd at least ended up on a world with a pony civilization. As he was trying to figure out what to say, one of the pegasi swooped forward and smashed a hoof into his face. Bright was flung to the ground, a streak of blood running from his nose.

"It's a lousy earth pony," growled the pegasus mare who'd kicked him.

"Stupid animal," said the other one, a stallion, "Doesn't he know you're not supposed to go out during a curfew?"

They were both wearing golden armor, emblazoned with a pair of wings and a jagged white sunburst. Bright noticed that just before they kicked him again.

"What is this?" he groaned.

"What are you doing out here at this time, huh, earth pony?" asked the stallion.

"Dirt-eater!" hissed the mare, "Giftless!"

Bright cringed before them. "Wait! Wait! I'm not *from* here! This isn't my world..."

The mare pushed him down on his back and stood on his chest. Her ironed hooves dug painfully into his torso.

"Stop! Please!"

"You broke the Queen's law," said the stallion.

"And we just don't like your face!"

"So you're going away forever."

Seeing them bent over him and staring him in the face with mocking grins and rabid eyes, Bright couldn't think of anything to say.

"This isn't right," he tried to explain, "This world is *wrong*."

He would have called it a nightmare, what was happening to him, but the day was clear and bright.

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"*Hellooooo?*"

Nothing. No reply.

"*Is anypony there?*"

No pony was there. Not a single living thing.

"*Celestia!*"

Celestia was gone.

Or else Luna herself was gone, she wasn't sure. They hadn't just fallen through a crack in the fiber of the universe, they'd been blasted through.

The magic of the broken portal had been wild, and Luna worried that the telekinetic push she'd unleashed at the last second had contributed to the force with which they had been thrown apart. Luna had flashed through the sky like a meteorite. She may have traveled for hundreds of miles before finally crashing, as far as she knew. Celestia might have been anywhere or nowhere.

Luna had found herself in an abandoned town. Most of it was broken-down houses of mismatched stone, but there were older, wooden buildings there as well, almost rotted away to nothingness. The ruins were empty but for occasional broken pottery and books that had fallen to dust. The town was surrounded by the desert, and the sands were reclaiming the land. It was a desolate place. There were no plants, no animals, and certainly no ponies. Luna did not explore too much for fear of finding the bones of whoever had lived there before, but standing on the edge of town and staring at the empty wastes all around was just as disheartening.

The sense of disquiet in Luna was growing. She stomped her hooves and screamed for her sister and destroyed some of the ruins around her, but felt no better for it. She was certain she was going to break down in despair, possibly sooner rather than later. She was weak and alone in a horrible, alien place. There was no hope, no hope at all.

Luna whirled around, certain that something was behind her, watching her, but found nothing and no one. The quiet of the desert was getting very loud. Something was terribly wrong, but she didn't know what. She could feel it in her bones and her horn. There was a strangeness throbbing in her mind like a second headache.

Eventually, she realized what it was that she was sensing – or wasn't sensing. She was used to feeling the drift of the sun and the moon; the steps they took over the firmament were like her own heartbeats. Now that feeling was gone. Perhaps things worked differently in this world, perhaps her cosmic awareness simply didn't reach here and perhaps it was completely normal that the sun was hanging dead in the sky – but she didn't think so. She was in a world much like her own, and yet not. Everything was familiar enough that she could tell that it was unnatural for the sun to be so close to the earth, and for the light to shine so evenly. The sun was broken. And that wasn't everything, oh no...

Luna sunk to her knees. The weight of the realization made her ill. The despair she'd been expecting came.

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The sky looked beautiful from above.

The thin blue sheen of the atmosphere was the only thing Celestia could take any heart in as she looked down at the travesty she'd been thrust into. She recognized much of what she saw. This world was a mirror of her own – she could tell that as much from the indefinable magic certainty in her stomach as from the familiar configuration of the continents and the oceans. The land was faded and burnt though, and there was somewhat less of the seas. The caps of snow and ice at the poles and in the mountains were gone, and proper cloud cover only sporadic between large swathes of clear sky. Parts of the world were still green and verdant, but most of it was covered in sickening yellows. Deserts spotted the surface, the greatest of which lied directly at the heart of her precious Equestria.

It was her world, but something had ruined it.

Celestia could see it all clearly from space. She'd been flung far coming out of the portal, and had let the momentum carry her forth so she could look over her domain. The silent emptiness around her was jarringly peaceful. Celestia nursed her wrath for later. She had plenty of it to go around. For now, she soared, examined and considered.

Stars were catching in her mane as she glided through the void, little glassy orbs that should have twinkled merrily in formation instead of floating about in disarray like trash. The constellations were gone, broken up, and the lights had gone out of the stars. It had been a long time since they'd shined down on the land.

It pained Celestia to even look at her sun. It was bloated and monstrous and hung in the sky at least half as low as she had ever dared to let it go at home. It was situated some ways off from the desert-lands in Equestria, but its light did not go to waste. The sunshine curved around the hemispheres, casting a warm golden glow about everything below. It was day on both sides of the planet, Celestia knew.

All day meant no night. The light had extinguished the dark. The sun dominated the sky, and the moon... the moon was gone.

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Equestria had been so beautiful, a small voice at the back of Twilight Sparkle's mind reminded her. Now it wasn't.

She'd been admiring its beauty just a short while ago. She'd gazed at the lakes and rivers, the forests and fields. Now the lakes and rivers had dried up, and the forests had withered and died. All the green was gone, and the empty reaches of desert sprawled as far as the eye could see. The land was dead.

All this, she somehow noticed on her descent. As disoriented and panicked as she was, Twilight tried to be analytical.

She'd been thrown into another world, she remembered that. The world had twisted and spun, and the uncountable streaming colors had grasped her brain and squeezed it, and now she was falling.

She was falling and falling and falling. She was falling because the Tower of the Horizon had disappeared. Canterlot itself was gone. Little Ponyville was gone too, and a great white city stood in its place.

It was hard to breathe with air flowing past her so fast. Spike's screams mixed together with her own, but she couldn't see him – didn't know where he was – and was all the more afraid for it. She'd never been so afraid in her life.

Death was rushing towards her at the base of the mountain.

# Chapter 2

## Lay of the Land

*Think. Think. Think!*

No pony was going to swoop to her rescue here – not Rainbow Dash, not the Princess, not even the Royal Guard. But even with frozen fear in her veins, Twilight knew that this was not the end. She still had her magic, and a few precious seconds of time.

She swiveled around her head to look up and saw the purple hide of her dragon companion flash in the corner of her eye. She hadn't even noticed the pain at the back of her scalp. Spike was hanging onto her mane for his dear life, yelping helplessly in the wind all the while, but that would avail him nothing once they hit the ground. Twilight had to think of something for his sake as well as hers.

She couldn't stop screaming even if she wanted to. The ground was looming, and she could see nothing but the sandy hills below and the sloping mountainside running along her fall.

A dozen different spells flickered through her mind. She could give a pony wings, but that required a clear and focused mind, and more seconds than she had. She could turn the ground below into water, but water could be as hard as rock at sufficient speeds. She could teleport, but the landing would be just as fatal wherever she moved herself.

Everything took too much time, and her time was growing ever shorter.

*Think!* she reminded herself.

The right spell was on her horn before she knew it.

When time was too short, she could lengthen it. Affecting its flow was beyond her, but changing her own perception of it was very possible. The magic burst out of her in a flash; the frantic motion all around them grew languid. Her descent seemed to slow down, but Twilight knew that this was only an illusion. It was still imperative to act fast.

She was suddenly aware of just how thick the air whistling past her felt, how it pushed against her snout and stomach. This gave her another idea.

If water wasn't soft enough to land on, perhaps air was?

There wasn't enough time for a transmutation, but there were others ways to manipulate substances. She reached out her telekinesis as far and wide as she could. She grasped the winds from all around her, and drew them tighter and tighter together. Holding onto it all was difficult – more difficult than anything she'd ever done, it seemed to her, even more difficult than lifting a star-bear – but willing the insubstantial mass to move was worse still. The pressure in her head was horrible, almost painful.

But it worked. The air was all aglow and flew to catch her at her own command. There was so much of it in such a small space that it was almost tangible. It felt a bit like stepping onto an impossibly soft cushion. Trying to balance awkwardly on nothingness almost broke her concentration, but she managed to hold on until she slowed down enough that she was no longer falling but floating.

She dropped to the ground like a sack of flour anyway when she released her hold on the spell. The gusts of wind flying apart blew up vast quantities of sand. The landing itself wasn't exactly gentle. Twilight tried to come down on her hooves, but quickly lost her footing. Another cloud of dust was kicked up when they bounced off from a hillside and rolled down and around and around and eventually slid to a crashing halt.

Every bone in her body ached and she'd swallowed more sand than she'd have liked to; her heart was still thundering in her chest, and she was certain that she'd just earned herself a headache from the strain – but it didn't matter. They were alive. She had done it! Twilight allowed herself a pleased smile.

Spike had managed to hold onto her during all this. Now he let go and rolled off, his chest heaving and his eyes wide open. Twilight was breathing heavily herself. Neither of them was in a hurry to get up. It felt good to lie back for a moment after the ordeal, so they waited for the torrents of sand to settle down.

"Are you all right, Spike?" asked Twilight.



Spike groaned. "There's little birds flying around my head."

"You're all right."

It didn't take long for Twilight to notice the heat. It was hotter than on the hottest summer's day she could remember; even Equestria's frontier lands, which she and her friends had visited on their trip to Appleloosa, were more temperate. The heat was positively oppressive. The air was dry and so warm that it was unpleasant to breathe. She was sweating profusely in mere minutes.

The sun was nowhere in sight, but a blinding glare was in her eyes where ever she looked. Something was amiss. They couldn't afford to rest, or they'd be cooked. Twilight stood up, tried in vain to pat out the sand from her coat, and nudged Spike to his feet as well.

"Oh brother," said Spike, "Don't tell me we were thrown into another universe?"

"I'm afraid so."

Twilight's insides were still churning, and not just from the fall and their narrow escape. The gravity of their situation was starting to sink in.

They climbed one of the taller hills in the area to have a look around. Moving about was difficult – the loose sand shifted under Twilight's hooves, causing her to stagger and stumble. Even worse, her eyes quickly started to water from the bright sunlight. As far as they could tell, no one else was around, but the terrain made it hard to get a good sense of their surroundings. There was no sign of any wildlife or plants, not even cacti. There was nothing but sand.

They found the sun on top of that hill. It peeked out from behind the mountain, looking so much like a golden eye belonging to a giant as big as the sky that it made Twilight flinch. This was not the sun she knew. It was well out of its usual path, and far too huge and far too bright besides. It was nothing but ominous. Twilight had a hard time wrapping her head around the bizarre spread of light. This was magic, she knew. The mountain didn't cast a shadow like it should have. The moment she realized that, she snapped her gaze down to look at the ground. There was no darkness

anywhere. Not even she and Spike had shadows. The sense of foreboding in Twilight was growing.

She craned up her head to examine the mountain in more detail. Shadow or no shadow, it looked queer and alien without the city there. The entrance of the tunnel leading up through the mountain was missing as well. There didn't seem to be any ruins on the ground, which meant that this must have been a world where Canterlot had never been built.

"What is wrong with this place?" asked Spike, "Why's it so hot here? Are we in Equestria?"

"I don't know, Spike," Twilight admitted.

She had to remind herself not to jump to any conclusions. This was a new, foreign universe, and there was no way of knowing how different or similar it was to her own. There could have been hundreds of explanations for why things were as they were... but one invariably kept suggesting itself to her: something terrible had happened to Princess Celestia, and the world had gone wrong because of it. That seemed like a likely doomsday scenario, but it was a possibility she would rather not have contemplated.

Twilight licked her lips. She was starting to long for shade.

"The Princess was taken by the portal too," she said, "I saw it. Princess Luna as well, I think. I don't know where they are now, but they *are* here somewhere."

She'd been too disoriented upon entering this world to be able to tell what happened. She could have sworn she'd seen the colors of Celestia's mane streaking past her, but now she was nowhere to be seen. What could this have meant?

Spike sighed anxiously. "What are we going to do? How are we going to get back home?"

"The Princess will know what to do. We just have to find her." Another thought struck her. "Brainy Bright! He should be in this dimension too! He created the portal, so he can build another one and take us back to our own world."

At the mention of Bright's name, Spike scowled. "He did this on purpose, didn't he? It was some kind of trap, wasn't it? But *why*?"

"He must have been some kind of radical. It was obviously an attempt to get rid of the Princess."

But how could this be? Brainy Bright was a respected scientist and scholar, he was a *genius*. Why would a pony like that commit such a foolish act of treachery?

"Do you think he had something to do with that death threat the Princess received?"

"Hmm. I don't think so. He didn't try to kill her, after all. And surely he would be too smart to warn Celestia and put her on her guard."

"You sound like you want to marry him or something," pouted Spike, "He's a bad guy, remember?" He crossed his arms and closed his eyes in thought. "Tell me something, will you? If Brainy Bright wanted Princess Celestia to get lost in another universe, then why would he ever help us get back home?"

Twilight wished she had an answer to that.

"I saw a city while we were falling," she said, "It looked to be in the area where Ponyville and the Everfree forest should be. We should head there."

Saying it out loud only made her feel worse. Both of her homes were gone.

"Should we wait for night before moving out?" asked Spike.

Twilight bit her lip and glanced back at the sun. That seemed like the obvious course of action, she had serious doubts about the night. It would do them no good to wait for sunset if it turned out the sun never set.

Perhaps it was a bad idea to move at all? They had no paper and couldn't make use of Spike's flame to message Celestia, or Luna. What if they came looking for them? If they returned, what would they do if Twilight and Spike weren't there?

The thought gave her pause, but the fact of the matter was that it was just too hot. Staying here in the heat was out of the question. What if Celestia *didn't* come? If they waited for too long and nopony came, they'd no longer be able to go anywhere. They had to find shelter of some kind, or their narrow escape falling down the mountain would be for nothing. Once they reached civilization, they could make further plans.

"No, Spike," said Twilight loudly. She didn't want him to catch on how unsure she was about this. "We can't afford to wait. The sooner we move out, the better."

So they went.

Ponyville was less than a day's trot away from Canterlot – but that was with a road connecting them. Traveling in the desert was different. It was slow going, marching up one hill and down another. Twilight had to be careful and watch every step, since her hooves kept sinking into the sand. A few times, she stumbled when the ground disappeared from underneath her, sending her tumbling down the hillsides. It wasn't so bad when it happened after they'd passed the hilltop, but falling back the way she came quickly became very frustrating.

At first, Spike kept stealing glances at her, hoping she would pick him up and carry him on her back, but he let off when he realized she was having a much harder time than him. The heat didn't affect him as badly, but Twilight felt it stinging her head and back at all times. It sapped her strength, slowing her down further. The air was so heavy it was almost like a wall – a wall she had to keep pushing against to get further. Sweat kept sloshing out of her. It flowed from her mane and dripped down her snout; wet strands of hair kept getting in her eyes. Her coat was still matted with coarse sand, so moving her legs was getting more and more uncomfortable. It was tempting to clean herself up with a spell or to conjure up a fan, but she felt it best to conserve her strength as well as she could.

"Spike, take a note!"

"With what?" wondered the dragon dryly, "It's a bit difficult to write without a quill, ink or paper."

"A mental note then. The instant we get back home, I want you to gather all the books on wilderness survival and desert crossings we have in the

library! I want to be well prepared if we ever end up in this sort of situation again."

Properly keeping track of time was impossible, but it was slowly becoming apparent that Twilight's earlier assumption had been correct. The sun lay unmoving in its place in the sky and the day dragged on and on. Twilight wondered how long it had been since this land had last seen night.

"It's like what Nightmare Moon wanted to do," she muttered, "Eternal... day."

The journey was much worse than Twilight expected, but thankfully, things got a little easier as they reached flatter ground. They made much better time when they didn't have to move up and down. Though there were still some low dunes, the hills themselves started to shrink and dwindle the further they got. This was consistent with the geography she knew.

What *wasn't* consistent with the geography she knew was that there should have been a mountain in front of them as well – the Lonely Mountain, which she and her friends had once climbed to confront a dragon. It wasn't exactly the biggest mountain in Equestria, but it was big enough that its absence raised some serious warning flags in her mind. How could an entire mountain disappear? Had it ever existed in this world to begin with? Or could it be that they were going the wrong way?

Once the plains opened up before them, they caught a glimpse of white buildings on the horizon. That they were tall was the only thing Twilight could say for sure. It was hard to make out anything more specific because of the shimmer.

"How far do you think it is?" asked Spike.

"It's hard to tell. In deserts, the heat can sometimes create the illusion that distant objects are closer than they really are."

Spike cocked an eyebrow. "You know, that's not very comforting. I was hoping for something like "Not much farther" or "It won't be long now, Spike." Besides, I know what a mirage is, thank you very much."

"Heh. Sorry, Spike."

By this point, the thirst was getting unbearable. Twilight busied herself with trying to work up some spittle in her mouth. She would have killed for something to eat as well. She couldn't stop thinking of her saddlebags. She and her friends had decided to spend the night at Twilight's parents' place instead of using guest rooms at the palace, so that's where she'd left her bags. There was a bottle of water in it, and one of Pinkie Pie's sandwiches that she'd left uneaten. It was too sugary and would only have made her thirstier, but Twilight would probably still have eaten it. Applejack had filled her own bag with apples, nice green and red apples. They were from last year's crop, but still tasty. Why oh why hadn't she taken the bag along to the Symposium? Why hadn't she asked for a few of Applejack's apples and packed them in? Why had she skipped breakfast?

Her dragon companion was faring somewhat better, at least for now. Spike could live off the sand if he needed to – perhaps there were even some gems to be found somewhere – but even he needed to drink. How long could they carry on without any water? Twilight was already feeling light-headed from the dehydration. Surely they could at least make it to the city.

Suddenly, there was a canyon in front of them. Twilight caught sight of it from a distance, but didn't want to believe her eyes. She must have been imagining things. Surely the canyon was only a delusional vision born from a heat-struck mind? Or perhaps a mirage? As they got closer though, her vision only got clearer, and didn't even think about fading away. There it was – a canyon.

"Aw, nerts!" groaned Spike, "How did this thing get here?"

It stretched forth on both sides as far as the eye could see, and it was at least a thousand hooves wide. At its sides, the ground curved sharply downwards where the sand had continuously spilled into the canyon over the years. The sand looked deceptively solid, but Twilight knew that it would give out under her and drag her into the crack if she edged too close. She could only imagine how deep the canyon was.

"This isn't a natural landmark," said Twilight, "It was created by magic, I'm sure of it."

She could smell it. It had been no simple spell that had carved this scar into the land – it had been a discharge of raw magic, wild and furious and powerful. It must have happened hundreds of years ago, but the energies

that had torn open the earth then had lingered, fading at places and growing strong elsewhere. It was a foul place, but part of her was excited about being there. In other circumstances, she might have enjoyed studying the canyon to find out what had happened.

"We can't go around it, can we?" asked Spike.

"Nope. Climb on my back and hold on tight."

Spike looked nervous about the prospect, but did as she said. He didn't much like tagging along when she teleported. The process had been a little unpleasant for 'passengers' when she started out, but she'd gotten much better at it recently. Still, it was a long jump to the other side of the canyon, and Twilight wasn't in top form. Even Spike felt heavier than usual. The headache she had wasn't helping matters any either. She wouldn't have forced herself to do this if there had been any other way to cross.

"You stink," came a muffled assertion from her back. Spike had his nose pinched shut.

"You don't say? Tell me if you see any bathhouses around here and I'll be sure to step by."

Twilight picked out a spot on the opposite side of the abyss and concentrated. Spike sucked in a breath when her horn started to glow – but everything went fine. They blinked to their destination with a light blue flash. Twilight staggered a little – fearing for a moment that she would faint – but managed to stay on her hooves.

"I'm not on fire!" said Spike, and hopped off. Twilight almost felt like she was. The blaze was merciless.

They continued on their way, taking one mechanical step after another. Looking back and seeing how far their hoof- and footprints extended, it was hard to believe that they hadn't yet gotten anywhere. Time passed at a snail's pace, and it seemed to Twilight that they were moving no faster. They'd definitely slowed down since they started out. Without the hills to keep them company, their surroundings were uniform and dull, and the white city in the distance seemed to be getting no closer. It was hard to gauge their progress. For how many hours had they been traveling now?

Twilight was starting to wonder if she'd made the right decision heading out. Seeing Spike panting listlessly at her side, shoulders sagged and his gaze empty, only made her worry more. He might have been a dragon and resistant to high temperatures, but he was still little, and the strain of the march was pushing him to his breaking point. Perhaps they should have stayed back and waited for Celestia after all? The heat was just as bad there, but she could have conjured up some kind of shelter, so they might have been able to hold out. Had she made a mistake? Had she doomed them both?

It was getting hard to focus, as if her mind was stuffed full of cotton. Her vision was getting fuzzier as well. Her wits, like her strength, was pouring out of her like sand from a broken hourglass.

Twilight tried to imagine what was going on with her friends right now. What did they make of Brainy Bright's surprise attack, and how did Canterlot react to the disappearance of the Princess? Was anything being done to retrieve them? If this whole business hadn't happened, they would all most likely be sitting in a cafe somewhere, sipping lemonade and talking and laughing. Or perhaps they'd all be lying in sleeping bags on the floor of her bedroom, whispering about all that they'd seen at the Symposium. What time was it? Did they miss her as much as she missed them?

It was far too early to give up hope of seeing her home ever again, but she worried.

Holes begun to appear in the desert floor, first one, then two, then dozens. They were wide, more than big enough to fall in, but not so frequent that they were getting in Twilight's and Spike's way. The openings were unevenly round and did not go straight down into the earth.

"What are these things?" asked Spike.

Twilight was quite stumped, but then the answer came to her. "They're burrows." She could hardly believe how hoarse her voice sounded.

Not long after that, Spike fell. His legs simply gave out underneath him. He got right back up again, but it was obvious he was too weak to carry on much longer.

"Are you all right?"



"I'm fine," said Spike, "I just tripped. See? I'm fine."

"Do you want me to carry you?"

He chuckled at that. "Yeah right, sister! Do you want me to carry *you*?"

He continued on at twice the speed, kicking up sand from under his heels, but Twilight lagged behind, frowning.

She no longer thought they would be able to make it to the city, at least not right away. The odds weren't good, and Twilight had lost her taste for risk. They needed rest, and they needed it now. As temporary measures went, she might have been able to shelter them from the sun by magic, but it would take a lot of effort to do that for even a few hours, and she could do nothing for water.

These holes might have presented a better option. They could crawl inside the earth and hide away where the sun hopefully didn't reach. Perhaps they would even find water underground? There had to be reservoirs here somewhere, and she might have been able to use magic to find them and to dig through to them. It was a fool's hope, but it didn't hurt to try. A simple scanning spell shouldn't be too taxing.

Twilight looked ahead towards the city. How close was it really, she wondered. Did the buildings seem bigger than earlier? She couldn't say for sure.

But...

There was something else. She could have sworn she was seeing a tiny something on the horizon, a dark figure moving amidst the light.

"Spike! Do you see someone up ahead?"

Spike lifted his hand to his eyes to shield himself from the sunlight – a useless gesture. After much squinting though, he could see it as well.

"You're right! There *is* someone there!" He looked back at Twilight and grinned. "I think it's a pony!"

They started shouting as one. They made more noise than Twilight would have thought possible, but the dark figure in the distance gave no sign of hearing them. Twilight wasn't going to let a potential rescuer get away though. A blast of fireworks thundered into the sky from her horn and blew apart in a shower of purple sparkles. It looked rather beautiful.

"Great going, Twi!" said Spike, "Whoever that is must have noticed that for sure!"

The relief on his face melted away as he looked back at her. His expression showed pure alarm.

"What is it?"

"S-s-s-s-s!" he stuttered.

"Spike?"

"S-S-S-S-S!" He lifted a hand to point.

"Spike," said Twilight in a small voice, "I hope you're not trying to tell me there's a giant *snake* behind me."

"It's a scorpion!"

Twilight forced herself to turn around. What she found behind her back was more horrible than her most horrible expectations, even worse than a snake. The dark gray monstrosity was at least twice her height and three times her length, and that was discounting the hideous-looking, crooked stinger hanging over its back.

The scorpion lurched closer to her – and it was pretty darn close already. Twilight yelped and backed away, but the creature skittered after her, snapping at her with pincers large enough to take off her head.

Fatigued as she was, Twilight stumbled at the worst possible moment. She dropped flat on her back and the scorpion was on her in an instant. Twilight managed to roll to the side just in time to avoid the stinger striking down at her.

Before she could get back up, the scorpion dealt her a glancing blow with one of its pincers, pushing her over again. As it loomed over her, Twilight got an unpleasant close-up of the scorpion's mandibles, dripping with a thick gray goo, and its only two eyes, which were black and menacing but also pitifully small.

Twilight Sparkle was trembling.

*Magic requires a level head, Celestia had told her more than once, A thoughtless unicorn can wreak great havoc, or fail to take action where necessary.*

*Think!* Twilight reminded herself, but nothing came to her.

A moment before the sting came, the scorpion was struck in the head by a burst of green flame. It leaped away without making a sound and started flailing around in mindless terror. Twilight watched in morbid fascination as the creature spun around. It had far more legs than it should have, some of them tiny and atrophied or hanging out of their backs at useless angles. A mutant, perhaps?

A shout from Spike broke her out of her daze. She jumped to her hooves, grabbed Spike's tail between her teeth and broke into a wild gallop to get away from the creature – but others just like it were appearing from the holes all around them.

Of *course* there were some kind of dangerous beasts in the burrows! Why hadn't she realized that sooner? Had the sun befuddled her mind that much?

The scorpions were converging on them, dozens of them. Twilight focused her magic on the two directly ahead of them, and flipped them over with telekinesis. While they were twitching around on their backs, Twilight sped past them. The next ones, she teleported past, only barely managing to stay moving.

But there were too many of them, and Twilight was too tired to outrace them for long, especially on sand. Her lungs were already on fire.

This wasn't something she could run away from, she realized.

What would a brave pony like Rainbow Dash do?

Twilight slid to a halt. This time, she thought of something. *Wreak great havoc.*

She let go of Spike. "Stay close to me," she told him, and started weaving up another spell in her horn.

The air around her started crackling with energy. The nearby sand was shivering and blowing away. Spike held onto her, afraid to even breathe.

The scorpions were stopping. They clearly had some rudimentary intelligence – enough that they could tell the pony exuding streams of light before them could be a danger.

The light surrounded her, protected her like a wall. But the scorpions weren't just going to scurry off.

Princess Celestia had always imposed on Twilight the importance of never cutting loose, but there didn't seem to be much of a choice. It was do or die.

She let loose a blast of magic as powerful as she could manage, holding nothing back in reserve.

The sand vitrified in front of her eyes. A whirlwind of color spread out from around her, caught the horde of scorpions and tossed them away as if they were nothing at all.

And then, amidst her bright castle on the plains of sunshine, darkness caught up with her. It struck her by surprise and enveloped her wholly. She passed out.

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It was still dark when she regained consciousness.

She did not feel well. Her muscles pained, her joints were stiff and the thirst still plagued her. Her headache had only gotten worse and she felt as weak as a newborn filly – weaker, even. Newborn fillies could at least stand up, but she was not at all sure she'd be able to do the same.

She was lying on a rough-hewn blanket with warm sand underneath it. Once her eyes started to adjust, she saw that there were walls of thick cloth surrounding her. She was in a tent, unless she was mistaken. Hints of sunlight glimmered through the fabric in places, but although it was as hot as in a sauna, the conditions in the tent were infinitely preferable to the fiery hell outside.

Spike was next to her on a blanket of his own, snoring gently.

"Spike?" she said, without meaning to.

"He's only asleep."

Twilight flinched. She hadn't realized there was someone in the tent besides them. It took him a second to pick that someone out in the shadows. A lean old earth pony stallion was sitting in the opposite corner of the tent. His coat was pale brown, his mane short and thin and gray. A wide-brimmed hat hung around his neck by a leather cord, and something like a poncho was spread out on the ground under him.

"Oh! Hello!" Twilight struggled to get up into a sitting position. "Did you save us from the scorpions?"

"The beasts were already gone by the time I reached you." There was plenty of gravel in the old stallion's voice, but he spoke quietly so as to not disturb Spike's rest. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Yes, please!"

Twilight eagerly grabbed the water bottle the stallion pushed towards her – with her hooves, since she didn't trust herself to be able to keep it afloat by magic right now. She told herself she wouldn't abuse the other pony's generosity and only take a little sip, but once she started it was hard to stop. Water had never tasted so good before.

"Thank you so much, for everything! I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't found us."

"Basic courtesy."

The stallion's eyes were piercing. They almost seemed to shine in the darkness.

"What's your name, filly?" he asked.

"I'm Twilight Sparkle. The dragon's name is Spike, but I guess you figured out by the fact that I called him Spike and all..."

"Twilight Sparkle," repeated Glint. He pondered over it, somehow judging. "Strange name."

Twilight chuckled nervously. "And you are?"

"The name's Glint Hardhoof."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Hardhoof. Please, could you tell me where we are?"

"We're in my tent, a couple of miles outside the capital."

"But what country?"

"Why, Equestria of course. I figured you were lost, but I didn't think you'd be *that* lost. Where did you come from and where were you headed?"

Twilight didn't think it would be a good idea to reveal that she was a dimensional traveler. That would just have made her look like a lunatic.

"I was headed for the capital," she said, truthfully.

Glint met her with a discomfiting silence.

"There aren't many ponies who travel the desert by their lonesome," he said at last, "especially not unicorns. Beg pardon, but you're blatantly unprepared for such a journey. You couldn't have lasted long out here."

"I am lost, as you said. I hoped to find my companions in the city."

"That's a bad idea. Everfree City isn't safe. I'd advise you not to go there. I'm on my way to Trottingham, and you're welcome to join me if you wish."

It was a gracious offer, and tempting. Trottingham was a familiar name, and she wondered if it was anything like the Trottingham in her own Equestria. Glint's help would be invaluable, but Twilight had to take into account where she was most likely to link up with the others. Surely Princess Celestia would look for her in the biggest city around, especially if it was also the closest one to where they had arrived in this world.

But doubts kept gnawing at her. It struck her as both foolish and dangerous to just bide her time and hold out hope that Celestia would find her and fix everything. But what could she hope to accomplish on her own? Alone but for Spike, she truly was lost. Her trek in the desert had demonstrated just how clueless she was. What could she do? She needed allies, she needed help, and Glint could perhaps be both. Most of all, she needed information.

"What do you mean, Everfree City isn't safe?"

"Strangers aren't looked upon too kindly at the moment. There's been a crackdown lately. Dissidents are getting arrested left and right. Apparently, there was some kind of assassination plot targeting the Queen."

"The... Queen?"

"Queen Celestia."

Of course! This dreadful situation with the sun had her half-convinced that Celestia was somehow dead and gone, or even that this was a world where she'd never existed at all. She should have known better. Even if she was using a different title, Celestia was a constant, as eternal as the sky itself. Just the knowledge that she was there took considerable weight off Twilight's shoulders. Perhaps she could seek her out and ask for her assistance? Twilight resolved to head to the capital after all.

"So Celestia still reigns?" she confirmed, "But then why is this land a desert?"

Glint narrowed his eyes. "I hope you're not playing tricks on me, filly."

"No! Not at all."

Was that a silly question? Was she just asking why the sky was blue or water wet?

"How can you not know this?" asked Glint, "Is this one of these amnesia things?"

"My memory is perfectly all right, I assure you. I'm just, uh, new here!"

Glint fell silent again. He stared at Twilight so intently that, frankly, it was making her nervous.

"The land is a desert because Queen Celestia wills it to be. It's *always* been a desert, ever since the dawn of the eternal day. The Heat and the Light are Celestia's instruments. They're her strings, and we're the puppets. We survive only because she allows it, so we have to obey her."

"I- I don't understand..."

"Of course not. None of us can ever truly comprehend the mind of Daymare Sun."

Twilight's heart skipped a beat. She hoped she'd misheard, she *prayed* she'd misheard.

"Everypony knows of Daymare Sun's regime, because every pony is beholden to it. How is it that you know nothing of it?"

Twilight didn't know how to answer. It didn't even seem to matter. She felt much weaker all of a sudden.

"This can't be," she said, "Celestia would never be like that. Celestia is kind and wise."

"Celestia is, by her own admission, a tyrant."

"What about Princess Luna?"

"Can't say I've ever heard of a Princess Luna."

They were both quiet then. Twilight had to process everything she'd just heard, and Glint didn't feel the need to interrupt her reverie.

She didn't want to believe it. The idea of Celestia being some sort of dictator was so at odds with the Princess she knew that it was hard to even comprehend. But that was just the thing. This *wasn't* the Princess she



knew. It was somepony else, somepony completely different. It was a Celestia that had gone mad and done something horrific. How? Why? Twilight didn't even want to think about it.

Her world had Nightmare Moon and this world has Daymare Sun. Nightmare Moon had failed, but Daymare Sun had succeeded. The day would last forever.

"How long have things been like this?" Twilight asked.

Glint shrugged. "Since long before my grandfather was born, and his grandfather before him. Hundreds of years, untold generations. Who can tell?"

If Twilight couldn't turn to the Princess for help, who *could* she turn to?

Five names came to her mind. But were they still the ponies she knew?

"Do any of these names mean anything to you? Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Applejack?"

It was a fool's hope, but she saw Glint stir in the shadows.

"Yes?"

"I know of an Applejack. Might be I've even met her once or twice. She's an outlaw, pretty famous in some circles. She's one of the leaders of a group of rebels fighting against the state. That assassination attempt I mentioned? I hear it was her people that cooked it up."

Applejack, a revolutionary? It was too much, the idea was just too strange – but the prospect of seeing a familiar face made Twilight perk up anyway.

"Do you know where she could be? Could you point me the way?"

"Why do you need her?"

"Because she's a friend of mine and I have to find her!"

"How do I know I can trust you?"

Twilight's answer died on her tongue. Of course, he couldn't. To Glint, she was just an odd stranger. She couldn't expect him to reveal the hideout of a clandestine organization to her. She hung her head, only to raise it again when Glint spoke.

"Might be I'd be able to arrange a meet with the rebels, but I'd have to come along."

"Why?"

"If I didn't, they might mistake you for someone else."

Twilight shivered. She felt inexplicably chilled.

"Mistake me for someone else? What do you mean?"

"There is another young unicorn in the realm that looks much like you. She is also exceptionally talented at magic, and accompanied by a small dragon. She's the head of the Secret Police, the Queen's right hand and heir, and one of the rebellion's most bitter enemies. Daylight Sparkle."

# Interlude

## The Prisoner and the Slave

Prison was not something Brainy Bright had any experience with. The only crime he could consciously remember committing in his entire life was stealing a toy dragon from his kindergarten classmate, and he hadn't even gotten caught for that. High treason and assault on the person of Princess Celestia herself was a pretty big leap up from that, but he had known from the start that he wouldn't walk away from it. Equestria didn't practice capital punishment, so being jailed for the rest of his life was the most likely outcome for Bright – assuming, of course, that he survived the attempt. While he was plotting, he'd spent long hours pondering about what it might be like, losing his freedom.

This wasn't exactly what he'd expected.

The most galling thing about his imprisonment was how irrelevant it was. Fifty years, give or take some, had been a price Bright was willing to pay, because his cause, while bizarre and incomprehensible to some, had meaning. Some things were worth going to jail for. Being out in the street at the wrong time by sheer chance was not one of them. He had expected to be punished for *something*, not for *nothing*.

Not that it wasn't appropriate though. Bright didn't believe in destiny, or karma. What happened to him had simply been a very fair coincidence. He deserved to be in prison, whether in Equestria or some strange alternate universe. He would accept his fate without complaint, he'd already decided that.

He had been put in some sort of dungeon. It wasn't a terribly frightening dungeon, but more on the utilitarian side. The walls were smooth and the chambers all had rounded corners, which were tell-tale signs of a building crafted by magic. The lighting must have been magic as well, since there were no windows or torches anywhere in sight. They were below-ground. It was warm down there, but not uncomfortably so. The thing that really bothered Bright was the complete lack of rhythm. The lights were always on, so time seemed to be at a standstill. Ponies just slept whenever they

saw fit and even their meals were brought to them seemingly at random. It was hard to tell, but Bright estimated that he'd been there for about three days.

There were forty of them in that dungeon, and a few more came every day. The cell they all shared was an oubliette, which amounted to being thrown inside a giant hole. The walls around them were almost two stories high, too high to climb. There seemed to be no way for any of them to get out on their own. Whenever the guards came to check up on them or bring them food, a unicorn gaoler would use magic to raise up a long, sloping walkway from the floor. The staff of the prison seemed to be composed exclusively of unicorns, while every one of the prisoners was an earth pony. This was no coincidence. Bright was surprised how dispassionate he felt when he made note of it. He still remembered what the two pegasi had called him when they'd arrested him. The words sounded like slurs.

As far as Bright could tell, all the ponies there had been taken in more or less at random. There had been some kind of incident in the city – Everfree City, it was called – and the culprits had gotten away. The authorities had arrested anypony they had the slightest excuse to arrest in the hopes of taking in the runaways while they were making their escape. The problem was that they didn't have the slightest idea who they were looking for. Bright worried that they didn't much care. One of the prisoners was a young colt that didn't even have a cutie mark. How could he be guilty of anything? All of them were being held there without trial, or without any kind of formal charges. In Bright's world, that would have been a gross miscarriage of justice. Here, it seemed to be normal.

"You know what I hate, my friend?" he asked the large red stallion, "Fascism. I really hate fascism."

The large red stallion said nothing. Bright soon regretted his choice of words. It was a little presumptuous to address someone whose name he didn't even know as a friend. His comment hadn't even been especially funny.

Bright bent his neck down and slurped up the last of the gruel in his bowl. The prisoners were kept decently fed, but the sporadic schedule of the meals made him nervous, so he tried to make the most of his portions by drawing them out for hours. It seemed like the clever thing to do.

Realistically speaking, he couldn't be sure when his next meal would come – and pragmatism aside, it tasted awful and he didn't have the stomach for it.

"I wonder what they put in this," he said out loud, "It tastes like brown bread in liquid form."

A shrug was the large red stallion's only reply. In truth, he hadn't uttered a single word in the couple of days since they'd met, but he didn't seem to mind Bright's attempts at conversation either, and it was good to have some companionship. Neither of them mingled much with the others. Bright had learned a few things from listening in on their quiet conversations, but he didn't have a clue about what to do if anypony asked him about his origins. Staying with the mute seemed safer.

"I don't much like brown bread."

The large red stallion had no comment. He'd eaten his own gruel quickly and easily, but there wasn't much of it, hardly enough to keep a big fellow like him from going hungry. Bright wondered whether he shouldn't have offered him some of his own portion. He also wondered whether that sort of sentiment wasn't rather stupid in his current predicament. He wondered about a lot of things.

"I wonder what they're waiting for."

The large red stallion looked at him and cocked an eyebrow.

"Why aren't they interrogating us? Why aren't they investigating anything? They're just letting us stew here, and I don't see what the point of that is."

Bright was operating under the assumption that this was only an arrest cell. It was also possible that they'd all already been sentenced without knowing it and that none of them would ever leave.

His musing was interrupted by a sound very much like a loud, echoing groan. The floor was rising. Forty heads turned to see who was coming.

Two guardsponies were moving down the walkway, accompanying an officer – a fleshy mare with a teal coat whom Bright thought was in entirely too good a mood, as always. A light smile was never far from her lips. She

treated the prisoners with vapid courtesy and behaved more as if she was at a vacation resort rather than a jail. He could well imagine her going home in the evening, perhaps to a husband and children, without taking anything from the prison with her.

"Oh no. They're coming right this way."

The large red stallion hardly seemed to hear him. He was carefully observing the coming unicorns. Suddenly, he scowled and broke off from Bright. He smoothly headed for the far side of the cell without giving him a second glance. Their brief acquaintance vanished in an instant. Bright was confused, until he realized the large red stallion seemed genuinely surprised when the chipper officer ignored him and trotted straight over to Bright.

"Please come with us, earth pony!" said the chipper officer.

Bright frowned, but obeyed. He didn't have a choice. There were few good things to be said about the prison, but one of them was the fact that the guards mostly didn't bother with the captives. They were quick enough to punish anypony that did anything to displease them – and Bright had painfully learned that asking questions displeased them – but they made no extra effort to be cruel. They weren't bloodhounds like the two that had arrested him. If he tried to argue his rights though...

The other prisoners were watching as the guards led Bright away. They were wondering who he was and what he had done. They were wondering why the officer had picked *him*. It couldn't be just chance, could it?

The chipper officer started humming as they walked back up. It was a sore test of Bright's frayed nerves. He glanced around while trying to look like he wasn't glancing around. The guards were looking much more malicious all of a sudden. The gaoler closed up the walkway behind them, and the chipper officer led Bright into a corridor. They walked for several minutes, weaving around in the complex, heading deeper underground. He was taken to an interrogation room.

Bright wasn't certain what kind of terrible inquisitor he'd been expecting, but the pony sitting behind a small desk fell short. This one wasn't dressed in uniform like the others in the prison, but he was wearing a light orange cape, fastened around his neck by a brooch resembling a sunburst. He was

pudgy, with a faint silvery coat so light it looked almost white, but no mane or tail. His cutie mark was a black wheel with eight spokes. Only when Bright had been seated down opposite him did he realize the pale pony was a unicorn as well. The horn on his forehead was only a small stub. Somepony had cut off most of it.

The guards left the room, but the chipper officer remained and took up a position behind Bright. Bright kept his back straight and his ears up and looked directly at the pony opposite him, trying not to stare at his horn. The situation called for a certain wary humility, but he wasn't going to bow and scrape either. That kind of behavior wouldn't keep them from beating him. Weakness and insecurity only ever earned scorn, never respect. This was true even in the academia.

The pale unicorn seemed profoundly uninterested in Bright. There were some papers laid out on the desk in front of him, and he was paying more attention to them than to him. He sat almost motionless, looking calm and bored in equal measure.

"What is your name, earth pony?" he asked in a soft, high-pitched voice.

"I am Brainy Bright." He had decided not to use an alias.

"And where are you from?"

"Canterlot."

This caused the pale unicorn to look up and regard him silently. The heat didn't seem to bother him, while Bright was acutely aware of the trickle of sweat on his own forehead. He had the vague impression that he'd blundered somehow, but there weren't exactly a whole lot of options available to him.

"How long have you been living in Everfree, Brainy Bright?"

"I- I was only visiting."

"Why?"

"Why?" All the stories, lies and excuses he'd previously run through his head in the hopes that they'd get him out of there were utterly gone. Deception had never been his forte. "I just... felt like it."

"Where are you staying? When did you arrive? From whence did you come? Why did you break the curfew?"

The questions came as hard and fast as a series of kicks. Bright was at a loss, unable to conjure up even a single answer. He gritted his teeth together, not daring to breathe.

"Where were you from 17 to 21 o'clock on Tuesday?"

There was nothing for him to say. "I... don't know. I wasn't anywhere."

"Shall we execute him, milord?" asked the chipper officer, "He's definitely one of them. Isn't he?" Bright felt queasy with fear, but the inquisitor silenced the speaker with but a glance.

The pale unicorn was so inanimate that Bright felt like he was talking to a corpse. He seemed weak and fragile somehow, as if a strong wind would break him up like a house of cards. Perhaps he was sick or disabled? His movements were languid, even though he was quite young, not even middle-aged. Did his condition have anything to do with his missing horn? Bright had seen some vague snippets relating to horn removal in historical texts. It had been used as a severe form of punishment, but the practice had been abolished half an eternity ago, at least in the Equestria he knew. There existed no record of what something like that might do to a unicorn – though the obvious guess was that it would remove or seriously hamper their ability to do magic.

Bright had to remind himself to stay focused. This was not the time or place to lose himself in idle musings and pointless theorizing, no matter how comforting they might have been. He swallowed and forced himself to speak.

"Say it plain. This isn't about breaking some curfew. What am I accused of?"



"Treason," said the pale unicorn, "as well as plotting the deposition of Her Holiness Queen Celestia. However, I do not think you are guilty of those particular crimes."

Bright was lucky not to burst into hysterical laughter. He broke eye contact and tried his best not to look as flabbergasted as he felt. The irony was bitter.

"I find your cutie mark interesting, Brainy Bright. What is your calling?"

Bright licked his lips. He wondered if the pale unicorn knew the symbol's meaning. "Magical research," he said, very quietly.

"Is that so? Involvement in the area of magic is rather unusual for a pony in your position, do you realize?"

Bright didn't respond, for fear of saying something that would get him in trouble. This was a subject that often made him testy. The pale unicorn, on his part, was content to let the matter go.

"Would you like to tell me your story?"

"My story?"

"How you came to be here. You were not at all reticent to tell it to the sergeant in charge at the time of your arrest."

"I was, mm, quite drunk. I don't even really remember what I was saying."

Bright couldn't think of anything else to cover up his mistake, but this was a weak excuse. The pale unicorn must have thought so too. Bright caught a glimpse of disdain in his expression before he looked back down at his papers.

"You claimed innocence. You claimed ignorance. You claimed the laws did not apply to you because you were from another world." He paused only long enough to gauge Bright's reaction. "You lavished everypony involved with your tale of how you had come from another universe, and how twisted and wrong everything here is. According to the sergeant, it was impossible to get you to shut up. I believe the word he used was 'raving.'"

"I... must have been very drunk indeed."

"How amusing," said the pale unicorn in a voice that suggested he couldn't possibly have found things any less amusing. "So none of it was true then. You are not an alien pony thrown into this world by a magical accident."

*It wasn't an accident*, Bright almost said, but caught himself at the last moment. "No, of course not. I went to a tavern for some salt water and drank in excess. I was foolish, I stayed too late and wandered out into the streets inebriated during the curfew. That's my story."

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

The question was dangerous. For a moment, Bright hesitated and wondered if it wouldn't really be best to give everything up. He didn't see any real harm in it, except the possibility that they would think him mad, or a liar, or a mad liar. What was the worst that could happen? Bright didn't know. But he knew he didn't trust the inquisitor. The more he found out about the world he'd gotten lost in and the regime that held him, the more chilled he felt. Refusing his captors may well have had dire consequences – but it still felt like the safer choice.

"That's all I have to say."

Bright expected some kind of threats at least, an ultimatum, a beating, anything. He wasn't foolish enough to think this would be the end of it. The pale unicorn had neither an angry scowl nor a disappointed sigh to offer him. He looked entirely unaffected by Bright's refusal. He slowly rose to his hooves and paused to ponder.

"Do you know who I am?" He didn't seem to be asking to boast.

"No," said Bright hesitantly, "I don't."

And suddenly, the pale unicorn's mouth twisted into a sickly toothless smile. "You do not seem to know much anything. I did not think there were any in our realm who had not heard of me. I am called Gelding. I am the Prime Minister of Equestria." The smile faded away like water seeping into the ground. "And you are a liar, Brainy Bright."

His eyes flickered over to the chipper officer.

"Separate this one from the rest. Put him in an out-of-the-way cell and keep the filly's henchponies away from him for the time being. It would be best if she did not learn of him at all. Also get word to Growing Violet and Doorstopper to inform me as soon as she returns to the city."

"Yes, milord!" said the chipper officer, "It will be done."

Gelding stared down at Bright with his dead eyes. Bright tensed up, but tried to look back with as much defiance as he could muster. He wondered who the filly was they were talking about. More to the point, he wondered just how screwed he was.

"And one more thing," said Gelding, "Don't feed him until he's ready to tell me everything."

# Chapter 4

## Apple Underground

"Did you say 'the Griffon Kingdom?'" asked Twilight in astonishment.

"That I did," said Glint.

It was another reminder not to take anything for granted. In Twilight's world, the Griffon Kingdom had fallen hundreds of years ago. Descendants of the original griffon refugees who had escaped the destruction of their homeland were still living in Equestria and other countries, but their culture was virtually extinguished. The Kingdom's existence would have been a staggering change, if this world hadn't already been so different. Twilight didn't know how similar it was to the civilization that had existed on her own world, but she would still have loved to visit it and study it. Of course, the nation wasn't exactly hale and hearty either since Daymare Sun had moved the sun over the Talon mountain range to scorch her old enemies a few years ago.

"Where was the sun before that?" asked Twilight.

"Right here in the crownlands. Above Everfree City."

Spike shuddered. "That sounds horrible! How could ponies live like that?"

"I doubt we could. Thing is, it's not as hot in the cities as out in the desert. The Queen wants ponies to gather up where she can keep watch of us, so she lowers the temperature in some areas. That's why Everfree City is so big. Over a million ponies live there."

"Is that why you stay on the move?" asked Twilight, "You don't want to be under her control?"

"That's one reason."

The answer seemed a little evasive to Twilight, but that was all right. She had tried to find out as much about Equestria and the Queen from Glint as she could, and Glint had done his best to tell her, even though he wasn't a

talkative pony by nature. Some of the questions she and Spike had bombarded him with were so naïve and ridiculous that their cover story of being new in the area must have sounded as fake as it truly was, but Glint had the courtesy to turn a blind eye to their fumbling.

They were only a short distance away from Trottingham now.

Twilight had never been there in her own world, but she'd heard a little about the place. Ponies from Trottingham had a reputation of being welcoming and hospitable, since the town was located at a major crossroads and always full of visitors. It was supposed to be a picturesque and lively place. Twilight had always imagined it as basically a larger version of Ponyville – but not *much* larger.

She had made a point of not expecting anything like that here, but even so, it shocked her to see Trottingham in the distance. It looked a bit like a giant fortress, or perhaps a very squat and ugly mountain. Once they got closer though, it became obvious that its walls had not been built for defense. Up close, it looked more ramshackle than threatening. The entire town had been hidden underneath a patchwork dome of rough stone slabs and ancient-looking lumber planks. It rose high above the ground.

"It seems like a... nice place," lied Twilight, and let out an awkward chuckle.

"I don't know," said Spike, cocking his head, "It looks kind of hovel-ish to me."

Glint grunted. "It doesn't need to look pretty. A good, solid roof over your head – that's what's important."

The journey had been difficult. They had steered away from the open desert and onto a road early on, and Twilight had been as thankful for the smooth white stone pathway underneath her hooves as she had ever been for anything, but the going was still tough. They stopped to rest often, but Twilight never stopped feeling tired. It was impossible to tell how long their journey took; it was all a single endless sunny day that passed in a daze. As she walked, she was uncomfortably aware of the sun behind her every step of the way. It was hard to shake the feeling that she was being watched, that the sun was glaring down at her.

Glint had carried ungodly amounts of water with him, but not enough for two ponies and a baby dragon to comfortably get by with, so he was merciless with his rationing. He had a lot of other supplies and equipment with him as well, stuffed into two enormous saddlebags. He carried most of them himself, only passing some lighter things on to Twilight. She was impressed that a pony of his age could still have so much strength. The folds of loose skin on him indicated that he'd recently lost some weight, but he still looked hardy, not to mention very tall. He would no doubt have marched twice as fast if Twilight and Spike hadn't been there to slow him down. His cutie mark was a horseshoe, though Glint claimed it symbolized his lucky nature rather than his hard hooves.

"So Applejack is here?" Twilight confirmed, "In this town?"

"I don't know where Applejack is," said Glint with a shrug, "but this is the best place to find her."

Twilight chewed on her lip. "Can you tell me more about her?"

There was a glimmer in Glint's eye, something he left unsaid. Twilight had told him Applejack was her friend, so why did it seem like she didn't really know her? Twilight must have looked so insanely suspicious that she wasn't even sure why he continued to help her.

"Let me tell you a story, filly. Before Applejack took charge of the Apple Underground, they were led for twenty years by another pony. There was nothing he wanted more than to do away with Daymare Sun. He'd seen earth ponies build houses and then sent out to waste away under the sun. He'd seen earth ponies plant and harvest and then left to starve. He'd seen earth ponies take up arms and fight their own brethren because they dared to wonder why things are as they are. He'd seen all that and more. He'd even come face to face with the Queen herself, and she scared him so much like you wouldn't believe. He wanted to do something. But he didn't have it in him to take any real action. He was afraid to take risks, because he couldn't stand the thought of losing any of his compatriots. As he grew older, he became feeble and craven, and too stuck in his ways. He refused to involve pegasi and unicorns in the rebellion because he was afraid of them. In the end, he never accomplished much anything.

"The other ponies in the Underground respected the old pony too much to argue with the way he ran things. Maybe they didn't even dare to dream

that they could do more. Applejack was the only one who had the guts to speak up and say what was wrong and what needed to be done. She was very young back then. In truth, she should have been in school instead of hiding among criminals and plotting. The things she said made sense though. It just happens that Applejack's the great-granddaughter of Apple Baron, who started this rebellion in the first place when his apple trees withered and died. There was a lot of him in Applejack, hmmhm. She eventually rose up to become the leader of the rebellion. They've done some great things since then. Applejack took the rebellion out of the shadows. More and more ponies have been joining their cause, even pegasi and unicorns. She allied with Zebrican freedom fighters, and organized the first ever jailbreak from the Queen's dungeons. She's personally led attacks against government bureaus and barracks.

"Applejack's a fighter. Mind you, I mean that literally. She has a mean buck, and can brawl with the best of them. She's bold, but she's also smart enough to know when to break off and gallop away. She's evaded the Secret Police countless times. Of course, she can still be stubborn as a mule sometimes. She's a pony that just refuses to give up. She's a hard worker and a good leader. She's fair and straight with everypony. In short, she's the leader the Underground deserves."

Twilight took a moment to digest what she'd heard. For a while, the only sound around them was the clacking of their hooves. For the first time, Twilight had the feeling that Glint was giving her anything less than the honest truth. He spoke of Applejack almost reverently, and she couldn't help but notice that he didn't say a word about the failed assassination attempt in the city he'd mentioned to her earlier. It sounded almost like, well, propaganda. There was another thing as well...

"And the old pony leader?" she asked, "What happened to him?"

Glint pretended not to hear her. "We're almost there," he said.

Before Twilight knew it, he'd slipped off his poncho and wrapped it around her. It was as large as a blanket, but very light and airy.

"Um, what are you doing?"

"Best if nopony recognizes you, I think." He took off his hat as well and placed it on her head, right on her horn. It slid down so she could hardly

see a thing. "Where we're going, a unicorn would draw too much attention anyway."

That was true enough, supposed Twilight. Glint hardly sweated at all, but his things still smelled funny to her, very musky and masculine, very different from the smells she was used to.

"Looking good, Twi!" laughed Spike. He paused for a moment and considered. "Hey, what about me? Won't people notice me in a crowd? What's the situation with dragons anyway?"

"Equestria is on fairly good terms with the Dragon Matriarch, but I've never known any dragons to be out and about in this land on their own. Your kind is always paired up with unicorns of the Secret Police. You're right, you would stand out. I was hoping you could do something about him, Miss Sparkle."

"A spell, you mean?"

While she was pondering for ideas, Spike already came up with something. "Hey, you could turn me into a pony!"

"Are you sure, Spike?"

"Come on, it's the perfect way to make me unnoticeable! And I'm kind of curious what it's like."

Twilight glanced at Glint. "An earth pony, right?"

"That'd be best, I think."

Twilight closed her eyes. She reached out and found Spike's essence and set to work imagining a new shell for it. Spike had been the one she'd practiced bodily transformations with when they came up in her curriculum, so he knew to stay still. A little zap of magic and it was done. When she opened her eyes again, Spike was a runty purple colt. He looked a little similar to her, though his mane and tail were green and spiky.

"Whoa, this is weird!" he said, twisting his head around to look over his new form. "I'm so *long*. All this hair is so itchy, and why's it suddenly so hot here? You know, you could have made me a little older." He jerked and



looked at Twilight. "Do I look handsome?" he asked with such a serious expression that it almost made Twilight laugh.

"If you think you're going to woo Rarity like this, forget it. It'll wear off eventually."

"I know, I know!" He bent backwards to take a look at his flank. "Aw. No cutie mark?"

"Heh. You're too young. Give it time."

It took effort on her part to keep the spell going, but only a little. The memory of it was like a post-it note in her mind, reminding her to concentrate, but she'd long since learned to hold a grip on her temporary magics. Another unicorn would have been able to tell that Spike was transformed, but if there were going somewhere unicorns weren't likely to be, that wouldn't be a problem.

"I could just as well cast a spell on myself as well," Twilight told Glint.

"You unicorns always want to over-complicate things, don't you? You've got a perfectly good disguise already."

"Well, let's go then!" said Spike, "On to Trottingham!"

He set out and promptly fell on his face.

"Oh yeah. Four legs."

Twilight watched Spike's struggle to get up on his new hooves with a mixture of amusement and excitement. He reminded her a little of a newborn foal, except Spike was a lot more talkative.

"Why would anybody need four legs? Two's the perfect number, I could understand three as well, but four? And they're way too high!"

He adapted quickly enough. Watching him push himself into a standing position with a victorious grin took Twilight's breath away, though she couldn't exactly say why.

They continued on into Trottingham. Glint's hat kept sliding down over Twilight's eyes.

The gate through which they passed was more akin to a modest door. It was big enough to allow a carriage to pass through, but no bigger. Just stepping into Trottingham reinvigorated Twilight. It had been a long way and she had no idea where she would go from there – but if everything worked out, she'd see one of her friends soon. Applejack may think her a stranger, true, but just seeing her would be something. It would be a reminder of home.

Even though the air in Trottingham was heavy and dry, the relief from the sun the dome offered was most welcome. The temperature was downright pleasant compared to the outside. It was, however, brighter than Twilight had expected, since there were cracks and openings in the dome. Whether they were there by design or as a result of wear and tear, she could not say, but they allowed light to flood inside and illuminate the buildings. Still, it was visibly not as bright on the inside, somewhat similar to daytime during a solar eclipse. It seemed that there was a limit to the sun's curious omnipresence.

Twilight had also thought there would be a lot of empty space inside the town. In fact, the buildings went all the way up. There were glasshouses of all sizes scattered throughout the city, and it made her smile to see the green of plants in them. She spotted a few reservoirs of water as well, probably there in case of fire breaking out. The dome was supported by several gigantic limestone pillars. Large houses were attached to each one, connected by a criss-cross of walkways and staircases. A few pegasi were flapping about up above. It looked exciting. Twilight was so focused on taking everything around her in that she hardly heard Glint explaining about the underground river that kept the ponies here supplied with water. She had judged too quickly, she decided. The town didn't look so bad on the inside.

And then she looked down.

She'd been so caught up with what was above her head that she hadn't even noticed the things right in front of her. The buildings on the ground were packed tight and dingy. Some of them were made of stone, others of lumber, and yet others were little more than large tents. Many were in a

state of disrepair. Some of the ponies who lived there had tried to brighten their homes with coats of paint, but the faded colors did little to disguise the rotting wood and collapsed corners. The streets were mere dirt roads, and a vaguely unpleasant smell permeated everything. There were really two towns in Trottingham, one on top of the other. The one down below was a slum, that was plain to see.

Glint didn't waste any time in leading them away from open ground, off the main street and into the narrow and winding side alleys between the taller buildings. Twilight quickly lost her bearings as she and Spike trailed after him. After five minutes of twists and turns in Trottingham's labyrinthine streets, she no longer had any idea which way they were coming from and or they were headed. The area seemed like a good hiding place to her. Since Applejack was a wanted fugitive, she imagined her to have a hideout somewhere in the town.

There were not a lot of ponies out and about. Most business and social interaction took place indoors, but there were some who did not have a choice about being outside. When Twilight spotted anypony, they were usually laborers – craftsmen replacing broken panes on one of the glasshouses, dirty miners climbing out from an underground shaft, street sweepers working to keep the sand from piling up. All of them were earth ponies.

Their destination, a large indoor marketplace, was a little livelier. There were a few dozen ponies doing business – but the entire hall looked like it had space for half a hundred vendors and five times as many customers. All the empty space gave the place a desolate appearance. The wares – what little there was – were of low quality and priced steeply.

"You ought to wait here," said Glint, "I've got some business to take care of."

"Business?" asked Spike, "What business?"

"Trying to find somepony who knows Applejack's whereabouts," explained Glint quietly.

They watched him trot off and enter one of the stalls near the middle of the hall. He had a few words with the vendor, after which they both stalked off to go somewhere else. Being separated from their guide, even temporarily,

made Twilight a little anxious. She bit her lip and looked around, but nopony seemed to be paying them the slightest bit of attention. Rationally, she knew that her surroundings were relatively normal, but everything felt weird and alien nevertheless, and the ponies here were beyond mere strangers.

Twilight warily sat down and leaned against a wall. Her legs were achey and stiff from the long journey, so she took every bit of rest she could. Spike awkwardly plopped down at her side.

"What do you think of Glint?" asked Spike. The old pony had always been within earshot out in the desert, so it had been difficult to have a frank talk. "Can we trust him?"

"Glint has been very open with us."

"He's been open all right. That's what worries me. He's been a little *too* open towards somepony he has every right to be suspicious of."

"He also saved our lives, and was kind enough to share his food and water. I think he deserves the benefit of a doubt, Spike."

"I'm just saying, we don't really know whose side he's on."

"You heard the way he was talking earlier. It sounded genuine to me. He's on the side of the rebellion. Actually... I sort of got the impression that he's trying to recruit me."

"Good call, Twilight! He saw you take care of those freaky scorpion things in the desert so he knows you're powerful. He might really be trying to get you to join up. If we go by what he said, then Applejack seems to be her usual awesome self here – but who knows what she's really like?"

"You should always expect the best of your friends, and never the worst," Twilight reminded him.

Spike cocked an eyebrow. "I don't know about that. We're in another universe, and it's a whole new ballpark. Even our friends might not be good people here."

He wasn't wrong, but Twilight still found his attitude a little too cynical. "You're not just saying that because Daylight Sparkle is an amoral agent of a tyrannical government who hunts down political dissidents and freethinkers and makes them disappear, are you?"

"Er, sort of. It was to be expected, really. These alternate universes always have evil doubles of the heroes in my comic books. It's pretty much par for the course. I just hope this isn't a full-blown mirror universe where everything is reversed!"

Twilight rolled her eyes.

"Wait a minute," continued Spike, "Glint said officers of the Secret Police have dragon companions! Does that mean there's an evil double of me running around too?"

He paused. If Twilight knew him at all, he was imagining how he would look like with a goatee.

"It wouldn't suit you," she said, "Stick with a mustache."

Twilight wished she hadn't brought up Daylight Sparkle. Her equal number had never been far from her mind on the way to Trottingham, and once she started thinking about her, it was hard to stop. Having a different name should have made it easier to think of Daylight as a completely different individual, but Twilight could never get it out of her mind, what a version of her was doing. It was guilt by association. A pony could conceivably lead a very different life if the circumstances were different enough, if their choices and consequences played out another way – Twilight understood that. But how could she ever be so... so *evil*? How could she serve such a morally bankrupt world order? The figure that rose up in her imagination was invariably brutal, unfeeling and above all, stupid. How could any person of intelligence not recognize how *wrong* this all was?

How things were in the Equestria she'd found herself in weighed heavily on her mind. A large part of that weight was anger and pity and disbelief, but another part – a tiny part – was guilt. She was still one of the wielders of the Elements of Harmony, even if she didn't have her element on hand. Was that fact meaningless in this universe, or did it mean more than ever before? Twilight could not conceive of anything so lacking in balance, so in need of harmony, as this world. She and her friends had defeated

Nightmare Moon and saved a world, and yet here was another one, suffering under the hoof of Daymare Sun. Did she have a responsibility to do something? It was a disturbing thought, an unshakable thought, and ultimately, a futile one. She knew it wasn't in her power to do anything. Still, she had decided to talk to Celestia about it once they found each other again. Celestia would have an answer for her.

Glint's return broke Twilight out of her reverie. He was alone, and his expression was unreadable.

"Well?" wondered Twilight.

"Got what we need," said Glint, "Follow me."

Twilight and Spike painfully struggled on their hooves and followed Glint back into the labyrinth. They walked longer than before, circling away towards the edge of town, twisting and turning until Twilight started to get impatient. It sounded childish, but she wanted to be there already. And she was tired.

"Where, exactly, are we going?" she asked Glint.

"To a meet with the rebels." He hesitated, then continued. "They'll probably make it difficult. Doubt they'll allow you to know the path to their secret hideout. Just don't struggle."

Don't struggle? Was he expecting a struggle?

Some of the alleys were so narrow they had to walk in single file. These parts were so empty they might as well have been in a ghost town. At some point, they had simply stopped coming across other ponies, and yet Twilight kept glancing behind her, expecting to find somepony following them. It was dusky in those tight spaces, though not quite dark. This was a pleasant change, but also a little sinister, and made Trottingham seem all the seedier.

At last, they reached someplace more open again. Glint came to a halt at an intersection of several alleyways, but Twilight didn't think this was their final destination. There were no doors or entrances anywhere, nowhere to go but down another alley.

"Now what?"

"They're here," said Glint. He nodded, pointing to something behind Twilight.

There was a pony there, blocking off the way they had come from. The pony was wearing a light brownish cloak with a hood that covered their face, but Twilight could tell it wasn't a pegasus or a unicorn.

When she swiveled around to face Glint again, another pony had appeared. This one was very big, almost a giant, but wearing a cloak similar to the first one's. Within moments, Twilight noticed two more reaching the intersection. The fact that she couldn't see their faces disturbed her. Glint seemed unconcerned, but Twilight's insides were tightening with fear.

The ponies were coming closer. Twilight took a step back, but there was nowhere to retreat to.

"Twilight?" asked Spike nervously.

"Um, hi!" said Twilight, "I'm looking for Applejack. Would you happen to know where I might be able to find her?"

None of them answered her. Twilight swallowed, and peered towards Glint for guidance.

"Now remember, Twilight, I'm on your side. Just relax, and we'll take you to Applejack."

Was this really a good idea? She knew for a fact that some of her friends, like Rainbow Dash – or Applejack, for that matter – would have tried to fight them off. Should she? Was she going to trust Glint, or not?

Twilight decided to trust him. She bent closer to Spike. "Do as they say," she whispered to him.

One of the rebel ponies had some kind of black cloth in his mouth. Twilight recognized it as a bag just a moment before he leapt closer to her and slipped it over her head. It was as if she'd been struck blind. She couldn't see a thing. A yelp from Spike told her they'd done the same thing to him.

She dearly hoped she hadn't just made a mistake.

For a moment, she feared they would tie her up as well, but they didn't. There was muttering she couldn't quite make out. She made out Glint's voice – and then she was heaved off the ground and thrown over somepony's back.

"Hey, watch it!" she heard Spike say. She hoped he wouldn't try anything. A burst of dragonflame was the last thing they needed right now. She *really* hoped she hadn't made a mistake.

The pony carrying Twilight started moving. He – Twilight assumed it was a stallion – trotted stiffly, and for a moment, it seemed to her that she felt him shivering, as strange as that sounded. They walked for a few minutes and took a few turns. Eventually, Twilight heard the sound of rusted hinges turning. They entered a building. She assumed that was meant they were there, but she was wrong. She couldn't have been any more wrong.

They passed through a few more doors, eventually reaching a staircase. After taking a few turns downwards, they continued on their way vertically. They traveled in a straight line for a while, then headed turned and headed downwards on a sloping walkway. On and on and on, they went, at times down and then on even ground, sometimes even up again.

It was impossible to tell how far they descended, but it quickly became obvious that they were headed deep underground. And even with her eyes covered, Twilight could tell that this was no paltry dungeon they had down here. The temperature decreased as they got further away from the sunshine, until it was almost chilly. The rebels were probably taking an extra long route to confuse her, but the complex must have been extensive even so.

Trottingham wasn't two towns in one, but three. The third was a secret settlement right below everypony's hooves. Twilight thought of the underground river somewhere down below, and the mines built to reach it – mines built by earth ponies. She thought of how deserted Trottingham had seemed. Perhaps the heat wasn't the only reason for that? Twilight would have been willing to bet that a lot of Trottingham's earth ponies actually lived down here. It was an incredible ruse.



Eventually, Twilight was dumped on a stone floor and the bag on her head was removed. By then, the pony who had carried her had already high-tailed it out of there. Spike was there by her side, already relieved of his own bag. Twilight stood up and looked around. The room they were in was bare and empty, but it didn't look like a prison cell either. A burning oil lantern was hanging from the ceiling. There were a total of five ponies present aside from her and Spike. Applejack was nowhere to be seen.

It was Glint who had taken off the bag from her head. He was already wearing his hat, and used the opportunity to take back his poncho and fold it together. That done, he trotted off and laid down in a corner, taking a drink of something that might have been ice tea. He looked improbably relaxed considering the circumstances. Twilight wasn't sure whether that was a good or bad thing.

An earth pony mare with a grass-green coat and long, golden locks was pacing around the room. Her cutie mark was a watering can. A large, long-wilted flower in her mane bobbed up and down as she muttered to herself.

"What am I going to tell Applejack?" she was saying, "This is *awful*, simply *awful*! Or is it the best thing ever? Oh, why me?"

A sleek and beautiful black and white pegasus mare that surely had zebra blood in her immediate family was standing watch to the side. She stood stone-still and never let her eyes leave Twilight. Her cutie mark was a tangle of black stripes that resembled a throwing glaive.

There was even a unicorn there, a white colt with a blond mane only a little older than the Cutie Mark Crusaders. The symbol on his flank was a shooting star. He was smiling brightly, and winked at Twilight when he saw her looking at him.

The last pony in the room was a feminine-looking stallion with a tan coat and a lush brown mane. His cutie mark consisted of three blue horseshoes. He kept his gaze on the floor, but even so, Twilight recognized him right away.

"Caramel?" she blurted out, "Is that you?"

Caramel flinched when she spoke to him. "Ah, do I know you, miss?"

Twilight hesitated. "Heh heh, no. No, I guess not..."

Speaking up seemed to remind the grass-green mare of her presence. She whirled around to face her.

"All right, Daylight Sparkle! We'll have none of your tricks here! You are now officially a prisoner and hostage of the Apple Underground!"

Spike blustered. "Ugh, you've got it all wrong, lady!"

"Yes, there's been a bit of a misunderstanding..." said Twilight warily.

Glint loudly cleared his throat. "I already told you, Emerald Hope, that's not Daylight Sparkle."

"Could you please explain to me how that's *not* Daylight Sparkle?" asked Emerald Hope.

"I've met Daylight Sparkle," said Glint, "This isn't her. Her cutie mark's all wrong."

"Well, technically, you've only seen Daylight Sparkle," offered out Caramel uncertainly, "You haven't met her. That's not quite the same."

"Do you think I'm a idiot?" asked Glint harshly, causing Caramel to draw back.

"If you're not Daylight Sparkle," Emerald Hope asked Twilight, "then who are you?"

Twilight felt supremely silly. Indeed, she didn't think she could possibly feel any sillier.

"I'm, er, Twilight Sparkle."

It took a moment for her words to sink in with Emerald Hope. She proceeded to give Glint a withering glare. Glint just shrugged. Twilight suddenly found the unicorn colt standing right in front of her, holding out his hoof to her with a winning smirk on his face.

"It's such a pleasure to make the acquaintance, milady. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Brightsmile."

His words were mature, but his voice was a surprisingly squeaky reminder of his youth. When Twilight raised her hoof to his, he leaned down and kissed it. The way he wiggled his eyebrows when he looked up at her struck her as a bit forward.

"Hello," she said, with hesitation.

"I'm actually a hostage here myself!" continued Brightsmile, "What are the odds, huh? Hey, if I said you had a great body-"

At this point, Emerald Hope unceremoniously pushed him out of her way.

"This is *crazy*!" she said, Why oh why would you bring her here, Glint?"

"This Underground is supposed to accept anypony who seeks refuge here, isn't it?"

"You can't *possibly* be serious about that! Since when are you such a fan of unicorns?"

"Never mind about that, will you? She's not Daylight Sparkle, but she might be just as powerful. If you'd seen what I have, you'd know that she could be a great ally to us. She defeated a whole horde of scorpion muties out by the Scar all on her own. Filly's got a serious gift for magic."

Emerald Hope's eye twitched. "That doesn't make me feel better at all!"

She turned towards Twilight and stared at her long and hard, as if she expected to pierce veil of time itself and gleam her entire history up until that point. She looked more afraid than suspicious. Was it because of her own neurotic nature, or was seeing the face of Daylight Sparkle up close just that frightening? Twilight tried to smile at her, but that only made the other pony narrow her eyes and scowl harder.

"So you're here to join us or something, is that it?" asked Emerald Hope.

"Um, no, not exactly," admitted Twilight. She sneaked a glance at Glint, but couldn't make out a reaction. "I'm actually just here looking for Applejack. Is she around here somewhere?"

"Hmh, well, you won't find her here!"

"Why, where is she?" asked Twilight.

"She hasn't gotten back to us since the assassination attempt on the Queen." Emerald Hope's eyes bulged. "Wait, *why am I telling you this?*"

Twilight looked from one pony to the next. "You mean... something might have happened to her?"

"No, no, of course not! Applejack can take care of herself better than anypony!"

"Most of the other ponies in her group have already made it to safehouses," said Glint, "Applejack likes to take the longer routes to make sure she shakes off pursuers. I'm sure she'll be back soon."

"Um, shouldn't we be careful about telling her stuff like that?" asked Caramel.

"Yes," said the black and white pegasus.

"Yeah!" exclaimed Emerald Hope, "Yeah, we should! Even if she's not Daylight Sparkle herself, she could still be one of Sparkle's henchponies. In fact, she probably is! And who knows what kind of *insidious* motive she has?"

"I came across her out in the open desert," said Glint, "It was sheer chance we met."

"Perhaps you only *think* it was chance, hmm? Have you considered that possibility? That this is all a plot, carefully orchestrated to get an *infiltrator* into our hideout? Applejack left me in charge when she headed to Everfree, and I'll be damned if the Underground is exposed and destroyed on my watch! Goodness gracious, she might even be an *assassin* sent after sent after Applejack herself!"

"Use your head, Emerald. If she was a member of the Secret Police, there would have been a dozen better ways to find us. Not to mention, she'd have come to us in a proper disguise. Why would they send somepony looking like that? It's a straight-up guarantee that we'd be suspicious. That makes no sense, no ma'am. The Secret Police isn't so dumb."

Emerald Hope was frantically chewing on her lower lip as she tried to deal with these contradictions. It seemed to Twilight that she was at least considering Glint's words. Finally, she turned to the others in the room with a pleading look.

"Thoughts, everypony?"

The pegasus was the first to speak. There was no trace of the peculiar Zebrican rhyming accent in her voice, but she sounded foreign nevertheless. "We mustn't take any chances," she said, "If you get me ten hooflengths of bamboo, a spoon and a bucket of glue, I could have the truth out of her... dead or alive."

The awkward silence that filled the room told Twilight she wasn't the only one who thought that sounded a little disconcerting. The pegasus looked confused when Brightsmile burst into laughter.

"Oh Chequy, you're such a kidder!"

"That was a joke?" muttered Spike incredulously.

"Okay then!" said Emerald Hope quickly, "Noted! Now, what do *you* think, Caramel?"

Caramel looked surprised at even being asked. "Um. I'm not really sure it's a good idea for us to decide anything on our own. We should wait for Applejack to get back."

Emerald Hope enthusiastically nodded along to his words. "Brightsmile?"

"Oh, I'm sure such a lovely lady has nothing to hide. I would certainly be willing to put all my faith in her, if you know what I mean. By the way, can I just say that I really like your hair, Miss Sparkle? It's very stylish."

Twilight hadn't gotten much chance for personal grooming recently and was all but certain that her hair looked much like a mummified bird's nest at the moment. She was starting to suspect the young pony had undue intentions towards her. Brightsmile wasn't done yet, however.

"I'm not so sure about the other one though," he said, turning up his nose towards Spike and sniffing, "There's something odd about him I can't place."

Emerald Hope pounced on it right away. "What? You mean like a *spell* or something?"

"Hey, could be!"

Brightsmile conjured up an expression of intense concentration. The members of the rebellion were paying attention to Spike for the first time now. Twilight caught sight of Glint and saw the old pony slamming a hoof into his forehead.

"Now that you mention it, I think you might be right, Miss Hope! There is a definitive magical feel about him. It's almost as if, hmm, wait. Wait, wait, wait. Wait."

Suddenly, his eyes turned as big as dinner plates.

"I think he's a dragon!"

It was as if an explosion had gone off in the room.

Emerald Hope gasped so loud that Spike stumbled backwards in shock and rolled over. Caramel looked close to fainting, while Glint simply sighed. Chequy reared, and that was when Twilight first noticed the sharp little blades tied to her forelegs with leather straps. She hung low and folded out her wings, ready to jump, but the next moment, Brightsmile had sidled up so close to her that he was practically underneath her.

"Ooooh, protect me, Chequy!"

"Please don't touch me down there..."

Emerald Hope had to take several deep breaths until she could continue speaking.

"Aha!" she said, "Aha! This proves you're an enemy agent! Why else would you try to bring a *dragon* among our ranks covertly?"

Twilight sunk down to the floor and let her ears droop. "This isn't what it looks like! I only cast an appearance-changing spell on him because Glint said he would draw attention around town!"

All eyes turned to Glint.

"What were you *thinking*?" demanded Emerald Hope, "Why would you bring a *weapon of mass destruction* right to our doorstep? Do you not understand how dangerous this is?"

"There's no need to get all bothered," said Glint, but he couldn't stop himself from looking abashed. He turned away, his brow furrowed, and there was a defensive note in his voice when he continued. "I knew you people would react like this when there's really no reason for it. The dragon's a good kid. I don't think he's been trained like the others. He's nothing to be afraid of, I promise you. Just try to look beyond it, will you?"

"I can't believe this," moaned Emerald Hope.

"It's not like you to make such a gamble," said Caramel pensively.

"Shaddap, Caramel," said Glint.

"What shall we do about the creature?" asked Chequy. Her voice was calm, but there was a burning intensity in her hawkish eyes.

"Hey, I resent that!" exclaimed Spike. He set down his hooves to get up, causing everypony but Twilight and Glint to take a step back, "Would you all please stop talking about me as if I'm not right here?"

"Shuuut uuup, Spiiike!" whispered Twilight through her teeth. She took up a position between Spike and pegasus, just to be on the safe side. "You don't have to worry," she said "I mean, he's only a *baby* dragon."

She laughed nervously, but the tension in the air refused to go anywhere. No pony seemed to think this was a laughing matter. Twilight didn't understand the state of panic they were all in. Caramel was visibly quivering, and Emerald Hope looked at her as if she was crazy.

"I can turn him back if you want?" suggested Twilight.

"No!" burst out Emerald Hope, and then instantly changed her mind. "Okay, do it."

Twilight didn't strictly need to do anything flashy to return Spike's original form to him, but she thought the rebel ponies would be more comfortable if they could see the magic at work. She lowered her horn towards Spike and let it glow on him. It took a single thought, and the shell she'd created disappeared. A collective gasp went through the room when the colt turned into a baby dragon in a flash.

Spike plopped down on the ground, then calmly stood up and dusted himself off. "Hi there. I'm Spike."

"He's so small," said Caramel.

"He's small *now*," said Emerald Hope, "The other ones in the Secret Police are small too, but... well, you know what they can do."

Spike rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "Deal with it, will you?" he said.

Twilight bit her lip. The fear they were all showing Spike was making him a bit too bold.

"You really don't have to worry," she repeated, "We don't mean you any harm."

It didn't look like anypony was going to argue with her on that, at least for the moment, but she wasn't sure whether any of them really believed it either.

"So now what?" asked Glint loudly, "What are you going to do, Emerald?"

"What?" asked Emerald Hope.

"Applejack left you in charge, so make up your mind," said Glint, "What do you want done with them? Should we give them a room or a cell? Or should we dump them out in the open desert like I found her? You don't mean to execute them, do you?"

"No, no, not *that*, but..." She cringed. "Ohhh, why me?"



She was running her front hooves over the sides of her head in a circular motion, trying to massage her temples. Doing so, she pulled loose the wilted flower in her mane, which fell to the floor and lost most of its remaining petals. Emerald Hope looked sad to see it come to pieces. It was a sunflower, as it happened.

"I may not be the smartest pony around," said Glint, "but I think I do know other ponies a bit. I can tell that Twilight's the okay sort. Just give her a chance. There's no harm in letting her speak to Applejack. If you don't trust her, then at least trust me."

Emerald Hope sighed and looked at Glint unhappily. "I think..." she started.

But before she could finish her thought, somepony kicked open the door.

"Heya!" said Applejack.

Twilight's heart jumped. For a moment, everypony seemed to forget about her. Chequy was the only one who kept an eye on Twilight and Spike, but even she seemed brighter somehow, less composed. Glint remained sitting in his corner, but the others flocked around their leader, all announcing how glad they were that she was back. Emerald Hope looked especially excited. An invisible weight seemed to have disappeared from her shoulders; she stood straighter and even smiled.

"I had a heck of a time getting out of Everfree City," explained Applejack, "The whole place is on high alert, and the unicorns are dragging citizens off the street left and right, hoping they'll nail one of us. They followed me for days before I managed to shake them off. Thank grace we didn't make it to the citadel by the time they got wise."

"What went wrong?" asked Chequy.

"We can talk about that later."

Emerald Hope was frowning again. "Applejack, listen. Big Mac still hasn't made it back..."

"Shush, Emerald. I already know. I'm still hoping he managed to hide away somewhere."

The twangy accent in her voice was familiar, but not much else. This was not the Applejack Twilight knew. This Applejack kept her blond mane cut in a short bobcut instead of tied up in a long tailstyle. She was still sturdy and muscled, but also had more than one scar on her body. Her distinctive hat was missing, and even her cutie mark was different. It was not three gleaming red apples, but a sharp stick with a three-pronged white cover – a parasol. This Applejack's special talent wasn't growing apples, it was standing against the sun.

"So, where is this dead ringer of Daylight Sparkle everypony keeps telling me about?" she asked.

Twilight's breath caught in her throat when their gazes met. She didn't know what to say. Applejack stepped closer and did a full circle around Twilight, curiously regarding her from every angle. Even she jerked slightly when she saw Spike, but Twilight was the center of her attention.

The scowl on her face was more perfunctory than unfriendly. Her mane was matted with sweat and sand, probably from several days of galloping in the desert. She looked horribly disheveled, but if she was tired at all, she hid it well.

Finally, she stepped back and declared her judgment.

"Naah, it ain't her."

They accepted her word as fact right away. It was Glint himself who asked her how she knew.

"'Cause I saw Daylight Sparkle in Cow's Crossing not three turns ago. Only barely managed to lose her. I reckon she's somepony I would recognize by now, after all our run-ins. I have to admit though, they look darn similar. Almost identical." She faced Twilight, and asked her in a much rougher voice: "Now, who are you and what do you want with me? Careful what you say; I'll know if you lie."

Twilight had been waiting for her to ask.

"My name is *Twilight* Sparkle. I'm aware that you don't technically know me, but I came to you for help about, um, a thing." She glanced around in the

room. "I was actually hoping we could discuss things privately, away from the others?"

"Heh, fat chance of that. You can just go on and say what you want to say. This crew here's my most trusted lieutenants in Trottingham, and, well, Glint. But I'm sure you won't mind him, since you seem to be such good buddies and all."

"Well, the thing is... How do I put this?" She cringed and laid it all out without drawing breath. "I'm actually a traveler from another universe and I came to you because you're one of my closest friends in my own world and I hoped you could help me find a way back home."

There was a pause of absolute quiet – and then everypony in the room broke into laughter. Chequy snorted, Glint and Caramel chuckled, Brightsmile guffawed, Emerald Hope cackled, and Applejack herself was almost rolling on the floor, with tears of mirth in her eyes. Even Spike couldn't stop himself.

Twilight stomped her hooves in frustration. "I'm serious, you guys! Spike!"

"Sorry, Twi!" said the dragon, "But you have to admit, it sounds kind of ridiculous when you just say it out loud like that!"

Twilight pressed on. "I realize how this sounds, but I'm not crazy, I swear! I really am from another planet, another Equestria! They're both similar to yours, and yet very different in some crucial aspects."

"Different how?" asked Applejack. Her face was scrunched up from trying not to grin.

"Well, for starters, my world isn't a desolate wasteland, and our Celestia isn't a tyrant."

That wiped the smile from Applejack's face.

"In my world, it was Princess Luna who was corrupted a thousand years ago and turned into Nightmare Moon. She tried to bring about an eternal night, but Celestia fought her and put a stop to her plans. The world was never ruined. Nightmare Moon was banished to the moon for a millennium.

When she broke out, we two and our other friends defeated her for good and restored Luna."

"The moon?" cut in Brightsmile, "What's that? And who's Luna?"

"I think I've heard of the moon before," said Caramel hesitantly, "My grandmother used to tell me stories. The moon was where the night happened."

"My people still pass on the legends of antiquity," said Chequy quietly, "but... I never paid much attention to old stories. I remember hearing about the moon though, the dark twin of the sun."

Twilight nodded. "Just as Celestia commands the sun, her sister Luna commands the moon. The natural order is an equal duality between the two, between day and night as well. You've all heard stories, haven't you? About how things were before?"

They had.

"You see, Applejack? I'm not Daylight Sparkle, but at the same time, I am. We are the same person, born in different universes. That's why we look the same, and that's why her cutie mark isn't the same as mine. She has grown to doing things I would *never* approve of."

"And me?" asked Applejack, "You say you know me? So what am I like, in your world?"

"I... don't know what to tell you. I don't know *you*, so it's hard to compare you two, you know? You look different, but I see a lot of her in you, I think. You would like her if you met her. Does that make sense? Glint told me about Apple Baron, and how he had to stop growing apples because of the climate. Well, in my world, the Apple clan has orchards all over Equestria. You're renown for it!"

Applejack looked quite serious now, but Twilight still didn't think she believed her.

"So in that world of yours," said Applejack, "are my parents still alive?"

Twilight hadn't expected that. "No," she said, "No, they're not. I'm sorry. But the family you do have is wonderful! You all live in your parents' orchard together, you, your grandmother, your big brother and your little sister..."

Suddenly, Applejack's eyes were blazing fury. She whirled around to face Glint.

"Glint Hardhoof, you didn't!"

Glint looked confused for a moment. "Applejack, on my word, I never told her about Apple Bloom."

And with that, Applejack was starting to believe. The anger disappeared and her mouth fell open. When she looked back at Twilight, there was a whole new sense of wonder in her eyes.

"So she exists in this world as well?" said Twilight, "I'm glad to hear that. She's a sweet filly."

"Apple Bloom, she..." started Applejack, and then fell silent. "No pony is supposed to know about her. No pony except some of my comrades. Apple Baron's line lost their trees, that's true, but some of my relatives are still growing apples, farther away from the crownlands. Apple Bloom and Granny are living with one of my cousins, so no pony can use them against me. I don't want them involved in this."

"I promise I won't tell anypony," said Twilight

"Something strange," said Glint, "She didn't know a thing about Equestria when I met her. I had to explain everything from A to B. She wasn't faking, I can tell you that much. I don't know if she's from another world or whatever, but I really don't think she's from these parts."

Twilight wasn't the only one intently staring at Applejack. All of the others were watching her as well, waiting to hear what she had to say. Applejack was silent for a while before continuing.

"Your story is.. interesting and all, Twilight, but assuming for a moment you're telling the truth, I'm not really sure what you expect from me, sugar."

What options did Twilight have? Tell Applejack that she herself had no idea what to do? That she sought her out more out of sentimentality than any real reason? But then again, perhaps there was a way for her to help.

"Spike and I weren't the only ones thrown into this world. There were three other ponies aside from me, but we got separated during the crossing. One of them was the magical theorist who created the dimensional travel spell system in the first place, Brainy Bright. If you helped me find him, he might be able to build another portal and get us back to our own world."

Twilight wasn't at all sure she should tell them who exactly her companions were. The ponies of the Apple Underground only knew Celestia as an age-old enemy, and Luna didn't mean anything to them at all. Not being straight with them grated on Twilight's conscience, but she didn't know how they would react if they found out. It was best to hold back that particular bit of information, at least for the moment.

But Applejack's decision came swiftly and mercilessly anyway.

"I can't help you."

Twilight's heart sank. Applejack read her disappointment from her expression and sighed.

"Look, I understand that you're in a serious pickle here, but there's nothing I can do. Do you even have any inkling where this Brainy Bright might be? Trying to find one pony in the whole wide world is the next best thing to impossible. We're fighting a war here, and most everypony in the Underground is wanted by the law. I can't risk sending my people on some wild goose chase for somepony that hasn't yet conclusively proven she *isn't* crazy." She smiled apologetically. "You're welcome to stay with us though, if you don't have anyplace to go! You don't have to fight for us or nothing. We take in anypony."

No. Twilight couldn't let this be the end of it.

She thought about everything Glint had told her about this world, about the centuries of abuse the land and its inhabitants had gone through. She thought about Applejack's struggle, and all the others who must have tried to fight back before her. She thought about home, her friends, her Princess, and her star-shaped tiara. And she knew what she had to do.

"What if I told you I knew a way to defeat Daymare Sun?"

This caused some murmurs in the room, but Applejack looked skeptical.

"And what would that be?" she asked.

"The Elements of Harmony! Magical artifacts infused with the essences of Honesty, Kindness, Loyalty, Generosity, Laughter and Magic. That's how we defeated Nightmare Moon in our world. We can do the same here, Applejack. You and I. If we find the rest of our friends, and the physical vessels that hold the Elements, then we can purge Celestia of the corruption inside her and return this world to normal!"

"Normal?" repeated Applejack, "You mean..."

"The end of the eternal day. No more constant light, no more constant heat. Imagine it, Applejack! Imagine an end to the oppression. In my world, all the pony races are equal and free, and we live in peace with our neighbors. Celestia, *Princess* Celestia, is meant to be a kind and benevolent ruler! She's not just a monarch, she's a mother to us all. If things hadn't gone wrong, if something hadn't happened to your Celestia, she would be like ours as well, I know it! But with the Elements, we could fix everything!"

They were all silent now, deep in thought. No pony was laughing anymore. Twilight waited patiently as the rebels chewed over everything she had said and tried to look beyond the inherent insanity of it all. It was a long shot, certainly. She had no way of knowing whether the events a thousand years ago had played out anything like in her own world; she didn't know whether the Elements had been destroyed or whether they'd been forged at all. But it was the only chance she saw. She glanced at Spike and saw that the dragon had his fingers crossed. Glint looked particularly excited, but Emerald Hope was the first to speak.

"All the seeds I've gathered," she said, almost reverently, "I could finally plant them! And they would *grow*!"

Caramel sighed. "I really don't mean to be so blunt, but we gave it our best shot at Everfree, and we still failed. I want to believe we're making a difference, but at this rate, it'll never come to anything. In a hundred years, we'll all be dead and Daymare Sun will still be Queen. So, what I mean to say is..."

"This could be our secret weapon," finished Chequy for him, her face grim, "It could turn the tide. Magic, but not unicorn magic."

Brightsmile was grinning from ear to ear again. "Aren't you curious what nighttime is like?"

"You can't pass something like this up," said Glint, "No matter how small the odds are, you've got to try. There's no harm in trying. Good grace, Applejack, what if she's telling it true?"

Applejack desperately wanted to believe – Twilight could see that from her eyes. But it was also apparent that she was deeply conflicted. She looked Glint in the eye.

"She's not exactly asking for nothing," she said, "There's a lot to do, and no real idea of how to do it. Going out to chase for some mythical artifacts would be a huge risk."

Glint looked good for his age, but the years seemed to melt away from his back as he got to his hooves and stood up to his full height, which was tall indeed. At that moment, he seemed like a much younger pony.

"Everything the Underground does is a big risk," he replied, "but think of the possible gains. This is exactly the chance you've been waiting for."

The corners of Applejack's mouth twitched, and a moment later, she was chuckling.

"Boy, look at us! This feels familiar somehow, but shouldn't it go the other way around, with me proposing some wild plan and you cautioning me about it?"

"Heh. Well, I guess we've both learned a thing or two."

Applejack looked back at Twilight.

"Okay. Supposing everything you've said is true and those Elements of Harmony are really out there – do you have where we might find them?"

"Not really," said Twilight honestly.



"And those friends of ours? How do you know they even exist in this world, or that they'd be willing to help us?"

Twilight smiled weakly. "I don't."

"Taking you by your word and going on this quest has got to be the craziest, most foolhardy idea in history." But she was smiling as well.

"You'll do it though, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I reckon I will."

She raised her hoof, and Twilight knocked her own against it.

"First things first," said Twilight, "Do you know any of these ponies – Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Rarity, Pinkie Pie?"

Applejack looked surprised for a moment, and then nodded.

"Which one?" Twilight asked her.

"Rarity. Or Lady Rarity if you want to be particular. She's a member of the unicorn nobility and – get this – she's not an evil bastard or a dumb pleasure-seeker. She- ah, she's been a good ally to the Underground."

Their situation wasn't hopeless at all, oh no, far from it. After all, there was a special bond connecting Twilight and their friends. It was time to see how deep that bond really went. Twilight wanted to know whether to believe in destiny.

"But, um, if you're thinking about seeking her out, that could prove a *mite* tricky."

"What? Why?"

"Well, it's like this. Rarity lives in Everfree City."

# Chapter 5

## A Twinkle in the Mind's Eye

By the time Celestia got back to Canterlot Mountain, nopony was there. Four others had crossed over with her and she had lost all of them. Of Brainy Bright, there was no sign at all, but she did catch a whiff of Luna's scent in the sky, and found tracks leading into the open desert that belonged to Twilight Sparkle and Spike. There were subtler traces as well – memories of magic gleaming invisibly around her in which she recognized her student's work.

Celestia set down amongst the hills briefly to have a look around. Her pastel mane waved and shimmered, even though the air around her was dead still. The wind was forgotten. It was quiet. She could sense nothing alive anywhere near her – not on the ground or the mountain, not under the earth and not up in the sky. There wasn't even a tiny worm to be found, not even anything left of a worm. There was only sand. She felt like she was in the graveyard of nature.

She had made a mistake.

Upon being thrust into this world, Celestia had floated onwards outside the atmosphere and explored. She had examined the planet from the above and tried to make sense of the sun. As repulsive as it was, it almost seemed to be calling out to her. She mind drowned in thoughts of flames when she looked at it. Still, her flight into orbit could have waited. She had wasted days when she should have turned around immediately and rushed back to find the others. She had made a mistake, and now found herself with no excuse for her foolishness.

Following the tracks was the only option at the moment, but Celestia worried more about her sister than Twilight Sparkle. Luna should have been the one more prepared for any dangers this world might present, true, but what effect would the absence of the moon have on her? It would not be pleasant, neither physically nor psychologically. Celestia hoped to gather everypony up soon so they could start thinking about how to get back to their own world.

She gave her wings a mighty flap, rose back in the air and headed after Twilight. In minutes, she came across a great canyon running several kilometers in length and infused with elemental power. The magic there was not recent – calling it ancient would have made her feel old – but nevertheless raw and pungent. It almost made her gag. The energies that had seeped into the ground there felt evil and terrible, and yet somehow familiar.

There was something underneath the earth. Celestia hadn't sensed anything alive at the mountain, but there was something here... not worms, but something else.

It didn't matter.

Celestia found the tracks again on the other side of the chasm. Soon after, she found another site of a magical eruption. This one was still fresh. There was a crater of vitrified sand there, flat and wide, from which an explosion of light and kinetic energy had burst outward from. What could Twilight have come across here that would have forced her to do something this drastic? What kind of dangers did this dimension hold?

Celestia could not find the tracks again. She soared around the edge of the crater, but found only broken glass and windswept sand that had obscured any sign of movement. Still, there couldn't be any doubt about Twilight's destination anyway. She and Spike had been on their way to the city nearby. Being the closest settlement around, it was the obvious place to head for.

It didn't take her long to get there herself. The city was huge, bigger than anything in Celestia's own Equestria. It was well-planned though. Most of the streets were grid-like and neat. She could see ponies on the move inside. Many of the buildings reached high, but there was an expected lack of towers, even in the huge palace that lay at the city center. Everything was built from a chalk white rock Celestia didn't recognize. There was an obvious distinction between large apartment complexes and elaborate, baroque mansions. The architecture of the latter reminded Celestia of Canterlot, though it was certainly more severe and less curvy. There were also many greenhouses of various sizes strewn about. Many of the bigger ones seemed to be for private use. A massive wall surrounded the city, and numerous tunnels for railway tracks led through it.

Obviously, Celestia was going to have to disguise herself. She picked the eastern gate, since that seemed closest in direction to Canterlot Mountain, and approached the city as a young mare with a snow-white coat and flowery pink locks. A certain tinge of spite made her keep her own cutie mark, the image the sun she called her own, but she made certain to hide away her alicorn features. She also made herself appear sweaty and dusty, and conjured up saddlebags and empty water canteens – everything needed to appear as if she'd just come wandering from the desert. She chose the body of a unicorn more out of habit than any other reason. This was the simplest disguise in Celestia's repertoire, and she used it often enough when she wanted to keep an eye on goings-on in and around Canterlot. She had to admit, she liked this form. It was very similar to herself in her youth. An ageless being felt no vanity about how young she looked, but there was a certain nostalgia in it, and she so enjoyed the feeling of freedom it gave her to be just another unrecognized snout in the crowd.

By entering the city on foot, Celestia did exactly she would rather have avoided: she stood out. The city gates were under heavy guard, and it turned out that nopony was allowed to leave the city. Entering was not forbidden, but it was certainly odd.

"You traveled in the desert by *yourself*?"

There were several armored soldiers there, but the pony in charge was a black and blue unicorn mare dressed in a white robe and hat. It was her who handled the questioning.

"*You* traveled in the desert by yourself?"

While she spoke, she was also probing Celestia magically. If Celestia had been any other pony, and if her magic was just any other magic, then the inquisitor would no doubt have seen through her disguise.

"Yes, ma'am," said Celestia meekly.

There was no need to say anything else. The unicorn stepped very close to Celestia – all authority – and glowered down at her with dark and cold eyes. Celestia matched her gaze. The guards had nothing to go on, nothing to justify any suspicion. They had to let her pass.

"Enjoy your time in Everfree City," said the unicorn, "Do not try to escape. It is forbidden by express command of the Queen, owing to the emergency situation currently in effect."

"Emergency situation?" repeated Celestia, but the unicorn did not answer. She turned around and stomped off.

On the side of the guardhouse was a large sign, lettered in golden block capitals:

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

WAR IS PEACE

MAGIC IS FRIENDSHIP

Celestia read it over one more time while the gate was being opened. It still did not make sense. She turned towards one of the guards, an earth pony, and smiled.

"The situation can't be that unusual, can it? I'm sure you have young and strapping unicorn ladies coming through on their lonesome here all the time."

The earth pony was slow to answer. "No, Madam. Not really."

Celestia considered asking about Twilight Sparkle directly, but decided to move on, at least at the moment. There was no need to rush ahead of herself and do something she might later regret. She had time to do some investigating first.

Once she was inside the tunnel leading through the city wall and the doors shut behind her, Celestia let her saddlebags melt into nothingness. She was now just another citizen, hopefully. The other end of the tunnel wasn't closed. As soon as she stepped out into the light, she noted a difference in temperature. It was somewhat cooler within the city walls. It might still have been a warm summer's day, but the sunshine was not nearly as intense.

Celestia found her cutie mark everywhere in the city. The sunburst symbol adorned half the street corners and the front doors of all barracks and government buildings. Armored soldiers – unicorn, pegasus and earth pony

– wore it proudly on their chests. Hundreds of flags hung listlessly on hundreds of flagpoles, each of them showing what must have been the Equestrian coat of arms – a giant sun surrounded by a ring of fire, on a field of pure white. The sigils came in many different colors, but most often, they were bright and gleaming gold. They were on every side, where ever Celestia looked, and they all seemed to confirm her worst suspicions.

She wondered if it hadn't been another to mistake to use the sun as her cutie mark instead of the little blue stars or something else entirely. It turned out not to be a problem. Her flank drew a few glances, true, but these were almost always appreciative or even jealous. The ponies themselves looked perfectly ordinary to her eyes, but there was a distinct difference in how members the different pony races carried themselves.

The question now was what the best way to locate Twilight was. Should she start checking for guesthouses, public locations? Should she try asking ponies? It did not seem likely that Twilight would have any money to pay for lodgings. Celestia was reticent about doing something like, oh, turning to the authorities, not until she'd had a chance to look things over in Everfree.

The first thing she tried to do was find newspaper to learn more about the current situation in the city, but it seemed that the last several editions of the local papers had been blanketed by royal decree. It was apparently temporarily illegal to report the news, but there was always another way to find things out: gossip and rumor.

There was, of course, the distinct danger of distortion and exaggeration, but Celestia often found that commoners knew far more than anypony gave them credit for, or than they were supposed to. This Equestria had many of the trappings of a police state, and its citizens quite likely wary of being overheard saying something that could be construed as treasonous, but that didn't mean they didn't express themselves. It was as easy to pick up on the moods and concerns of a crowd as it was to read a morning paper, if one knew what one was doing. Celestia did indeed know what she was doing. She weaved through the shops, the marketplaces, the greenhouse parks and the streets – she looked and *listened*.

"Thank grace the curfew is over and done with. The new opening times I had to set for my shop were killing business. I'm so glad I get to sleep in again."

"I know what they *said*, but a friend of a friend told me Applejack is still out there, and she heard it from one of the soldiers that was sent to catch her."

"...and you know what the best part is? I've heard the foal might have been Duke Blueblood's!"

"I've been saying for years that we could use another war. I don't know why it's taken us so long to move against the Griffon Kingdom. They've been making a mockery of Equestria for centuries just by existing."

"He's not a unicorn anymore, so what is he? It's like he's not even a pony at all. He's just a dead... thing."

"She broke into Earl Catnap's treasury and took everything that wasn't bolted down. The guards only noticed what was going on when she left them her dust to eat..."

"I've never seen anything like it. The city guards were out of their minds. No pony expected them to attack Everfree City directly."

"I don't know how we'll get by next month. I've already sold everything I could possibly sell. I told myself I'd never enlist, but what other choice is there?"

"...regiments marching past their village..."

"No pony's seen her for a week. I knew she should have kept her damn fool mouth shut about the Queen."

"But why would any pony want to kill Celestia?"

"I'm so glad Lord Chocolate Sun's ball is still taking place. Every pony who is some pony will be there."

"The griffons don't stand a chance. We outnumber them five to one. As soon as their capital falls, the other cities will follow like a row of dominoes. This war will be over in a couple of months."

"They'll never catch the Blue Bolt. She's too fast."

"They took him! They took him! I tried to tell them he had nothing to do with it – he was with me – but they still took him!"

"I'm telling you, I saw it happen! I actually saw Applejack!"

"There's no way they can beat us in the air. We'll match the griffons feather by feather."

"No pony knew anything until a message came down from the Queen herself. But how could she have known there were assassins in the city?"

"She came into our store and simply took what she wanted, When I tried to put a stop to it, she threatened to kill me! I don't care whether that bitch is on the Council or not, this is an outrage! A pegasus can't boss around a unicorn like that!"

"What'll happen once we've taken the Griffon Kingdom? I don't want the sun hanging over us again, I don't!"

"Lady Rarity is your best bet. Just go to her and tell her everything. She might be able to help."

"I just can't shake this feeling that I'll never see him again. He'll be buried in an unmarked grave in the Griffon Kingdom..."

"What are you, stupid? There are no wild dragons in Equestria. You mustn't believe every rumor you hear."

"...Daymare Sun..."

Celestia gasped. She immediately raised her hoof to her mouth, fearful that the ponies speaking had noticed that she was listening in on their conversation. Both of them were looking at her. Celestia quickly turned around and cantered away, keeping her pace inauspicious and her expression neutral. Meanwhile, her mind was racing.

Daymare Sun.

She hadn't misheard. The two ponies had been talking about strange graffiti appearing around the city recently. It hadn't been the first time, and the city guard always made sure to have it cleaned away as fast as



possible. It couldn't just be a coincidence. What other conclusion could there be but the obvious one?

It made sense though. The piece fit in perfectly with the rest of the picture. At once, this Equestria's plight seemed even worse than before. Celestia was quite powerful by herself, but Daymare Sun's power was no doubt greater still. If they fought for control of the sun – thinking of it purely theoretically – Celestia was certain she would not come out as the victor. Not by herself, at least... If she and Luna faced the Queen together, though, what then? Perhaps it was futile even to consider this. There were too many other variables to consider. She needed time to think.

A coming war with the Griffon Kingdom was something she had heard mentioned again and again. Celestia headed out to look for some shop where she could find a map of Equestria and surrounding lands. She needed to get the full picture of what was going on in this world, and that included the geopolitical situation. She didn't have the money to buy the map, so she settled for committing it to memory.

As it had once in Celestia's own world, the Griffon Kingdom lay to the northeast of the Principality of Equestria. The border between them, however, was further back, coinciding roughly with the Talon mountain range. Surrounding nations were greatly reduced in territory – or simply gone, swallowed whole by their neighbor. Equestria itself was almost twice its original size, and that didn't include the occasional "protectorate" it had annexed over the years. Only the dragon lands were of comparable size, but vast as they were, but it was likely that they were also in large part uninhabited. It seemed clear that ponies were the dominant species on the planet.

What worried Celestia most of all was the fact that the sun seemed to be positioned right above the capitol city of the griffons. The Queen could wipe out the whole nation if she wanted to, but she must *not* have wanted to, or she would have done it already. The plan seemed to be invasion and occupation.

Celestia scanned the pony-griffon border carefully. The mountains were a respectable natural defense, but they were not impenetrable. A route near the coast called the Valley of the Wind was an obvious route to take if the ponies were going to bring infantry to bear, but it would no doubt be heavily

defended. Relying on pegasus troops or perhaps a surprise attack by magic were also options, but there was a lot of risk involved with either strategy. Celestia wondered if Equestria had any strength at sea.

There was much more she yet needed to learn. It didn't take her long to figure out a way to do that. Barracks and guardposts were plentiful in the city. It seemed that the Queen was nothing if not dutiful when it came to "policing" her ponies. Celestia sought out the biggest of them, a district headquarters. From there, she looked for the nearest tavern, where off-duty soldiers were sure to be hanging around. What she found was the Prancing Pony, which was in truth more of an evening club – so to say – than a pub. It was a place for officers, not common enlisted steeds, and that suited Celestia just fine.

Lavish double doors led into the shadowed insides of the club from the street. The gilded metal engravings of ponies prancing and dancing around in happiness that decorated the frame seemed to have a terrible irony to them. On either side of the entrance was a plaque stating 'We Do Not Serve Earth Ponies.' This regime certainly liked to belabor the obvious.

Celestia stepped in and made her way through the entrance hall, making sure to look suitably lost and confused, as well as impressed with the fine interiors. The main hall of the club was quite roomy, and the ceiling reached too high to be visible in the gloom. Low walls segmented the room and kept the tables strewn about apart. It was quite dark in the club, owing to the lack of windows, but the circular bar area in the middle was brightened by magic, and some tables were lit by candles or hornglow. It was hard to say at a glance how many ponies were there, but the place didn't seem too crowded. Most of the guests seemed to be unicorns, and quite a few of them wore uniforms.

Celestia slowly circled around and put herself up for display, then sat down at the bar. It didn't take long for somepony to take the bait.

"Do you want me to buy you a drink?"

Celestia was in luck. The unicorn stallion that had approached her was a guardpony, a lieutenant to boot. He smelled of liquor and salt.

"Oh, would you? That's so kind of you!"

She ordered a glass of white wine. Once the pony tending the bar put it down in front of her, she leaned forward and took a minuscule sip. When she sat up straight again, she had to push her mane back over her shoulder, and smiled at her benefactor as she did so. She expected she looked like a proper vision of loveliness.

The guardpony had taken the seat next to her. His coat was light beige, his mane a candy-cane mix of red and white. He was of middling height, but his posture and uniform nevertheless made him look quite statuesque. The golden plate he was wearing was very similar to the armor of Celestia's own Royal Guard, though this seemed to have a few extra enchantments. It protected its wearer from the heat, for one. His helmet, the stallion had left with a group of friends sitting at a nearby table.

"What's your name?" asked the guardpony.

"I'm Twinkle," said Celestia, "What about you?"

"Scoop. Power Scoop."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Lieutenant Scoop!"

"You know, I'm a Prancing Pony regular and I'm 99% sure I've never seen you here before."

"Oh no, you wouldn't have! My family only moved to Everfree City a few days ago. This is all still so new to me."

"Where are you from?"

"I doubt you'd know the place. It's a bit of a backwater. It took us a week to get to the capital by train. I'm so hopelessly out of date with everything that's been going on."

"Uh, wouldn't it have been more convenient to use a pegasus carriage?"

"That's what I thought, but Mother didn't want to leave the servants alone with our things, especially the money coffers. I'm sure you understand."

"Ah, of course. It's never wise to trust earth ponies too much."

Common wisdom held that lying at length became more and more difficult. Celestia, on her part, found that every new lie came easier than the one before it. It wasn't hard to see how this world fit together, and the nature of ponies was such that what they believed and what they expected to hear could always be predicted.

"Your cutie mark is amazing," said Power Scoop, "You were very lucky to get it."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more, Lieutenant. It's such an honor. May I ask what yours is?"

The stallion's smile curdled. "It's a... ladle. How banal is that? Cooking is a job fit for dirt-eaters. There is no prestige in it. Being a soldier is a much more, ah, noble profession, don't you think?"

Celestia nodded. She wondered if that was simply his personal opinion, or an indication of a more general cultural leaning. Soldiers did seem to have a fairly high social status.

"It feels like I've missed out on so much while I was traveling! I was a little scared about all this recent chaos when I got here."

"No need for concern, Miss Twinkle. The earth ponies' plot fell through before it began. Agents of the Secret Police were onto them before they even made it into the palace."

Why was it even called that when it was clearly not secret?

"I do hope all of the rebel scum is behind bars now?"

"Certainly! Not one of them made it out of the city. We also arrested a whole bunch of collaborators who tried to harbor them. It should only be a matter of time until we know the whereabouts of their hideout and take care of the other ones as well. You know, come to think of it, I'm not supposed to tell other ponies about this, I don't think."

"Oh? I'm sorry, I wouldn't want to get you in trouble. Let's talk about something else then. What do you think of this war that's coming?"

"As far as I know, the invasion was already supposed to have begun, but there's a hold-up of some kind. Maybe it's because of the rebels, I don't know."

"Are there a lot of ponies involved?"

Scoop closed his eyes and drummed his forehoof against the side of his skull, making a show of trying to remember. "Over half the earth pony infantry and almost all of the pegasus air force, plus specialist unicorn support attachments. They even pulled in some reserves from the crownlands. That's over a hundred thousand ponies all in all, so yeah, quite a lot. It's the biggest campaign in living memory."

"Oh, wow! How much of Equestria's forces is that?"

"Two thirds maybe? I don't really know the exact numbers of our occupation armies in the south. They recruit some of the local sub-pony species as grunts."

"I admit I'm not well-versed on this subject, but isn't this all a little excessive? I've always heard it said that the pegasi will match the griffons feather for feather. I mean, what can they really do against us?"

"I think the Council is worried about their aeromancers. Apparently, some of these guys can control the airflow or something like that. Besides, the griffons are a martial culture. They'll be fighting down to the last soldier, and the Griffon King has had years to dig in."

"You're so smart, Lieutenant! Who is this Griffon King anyway?"

Scoop shrugged. "I don't really know. Some griffon, no doubt. You know, I'm not sure I'm supposed to be talking about this either."

Celestia paused, then smiled. "What, in case I'm a griffon spy?" she asked with a tiny hint of teasing mockery in her voice.

Scoop forced a laugh. "No, no, of course not. It really is a silly regulation. It's not like any of this is much of a secret anyway."

Celestia took a sip of wine, without letting her eyes leave Scoop's.

"You know, I've heard that Everfree City has wonderful balls."

Power Scoop did a double take at that.

"I've never really had the occasion to go to one before," continued Celestia, "Like I said, I used to live in a backwater. There were few others of my own standing there and none of them were my age. It was mostly just earth pony farmers. I never got the chance to go out and, you know, strut my stuff a bit. Now Mother got me an invitation to Lord Chocolate Sun's ball."

Scoop raised his eyebrows. Celestia hoped the idea that a fairly insignificant noble would be able to arrange an invitation to what seemed to be a very prestigious gathering wasn't too much of a stretch.

"Will you be there, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"Oh, um, I'm afraid not. I'll be on duty at the time. It's a pity, I've enjoyed it on previous years."

"Aww," said Celestia with a smile, "Well, I'm really looking forward to it, but I'd hate to make a fool of myself." She frowned. "You don't... you don't think Queen Celestia will be there, do you? Does she usually mingle with the nobles?"

"No, no, she doesn't. I don't believe she's left the palace in a few years now. Ordinary ponies only get to see her by special invitation."

"Oh. I have to admit, I've been wishing I could meet her since I was a little filly, even if it's just once."

"I've met her," said Scoop, and he couldn't wait to tell her about it.

"Really?"

"Oh yes. The Prime Minister summoned me to give testimony at the palace a few years ago, when he was still in charge of the Secret Police. Some ponies under my command were a little rough with a suspected rebel, and he happened to die before he could be interrogated. They wanted to stick the blame on me. I know, stupid, right? But they couldn't prove I had anything to do with that nonsense."

Scoop's smirk suddenly seemed a little stiffer. His eyes flickered around the room nervously.

"When it was all over and done, I was leaving and then – in the hallway – I met *her*."

"So what's she like?" asked Celestia, almost whispering, to give the question a suitable measure of awe.

Scoop's face scrunched up. "Huh. Well, she's very... um... I don't think I truly knew what the 'divine right to rule' meant until I came face to face with her. You wouldn't believe what a majestic figure she made, truly. I mean, she's as much beyond us as we are beyond the dirt-eaters. She looked me directly in the eye, you know, and somehow, it felt like she *knew*... everything about me. She had this serene smile on her face, so I would hardly have thought I was looking at a tyrant. I kind of got the impression that she wanted me to come closer to her. I tried to do that, but the heat was too great and I had to back away. Then, before I knew it, she was gone. I'll never forget how she looked until the day I die though. She is glorious, oh yes, and so, so beautiful."

Then he shivered, and fell silent. Celestia took another sip of wine and tried to imagine how the Queen looked like. It now struck her as odd that in the millennium she had spent without her sister, it had never occurred to her – not even once – how things would have gone if the monster had taken her instead of Luna, what *she* might have become. What did that say about her?

"Shouldn't you be careful about calling her a tyrant?" she asked after a while.

"Why?" asked Power Scoop, raising an eyebrow, "That's what she likes to be called. Hmmm."

"What is it?"

"You're pretty."

Celestia giggled. "Thank you. Hey, you mentioned the Prime Minister, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"What's *he* like?"

Scoop did a bad job at hiding a roll of his eyes. Celestia's questions were starting to tire him.

"That guy? Hmh, you know what?" He leaned closer to Celestia. "He's not all he'd made out to be. I find him creepy, nothing more. He's lost his horn, he's lost Celestia's Gift. That makes him no better than an earth pony as far as I'm concerned. I don't know why the Queen has kept him around for such a long time. It would have been merciful to put the damn gimp down a couple of centuries ago. I guess she's not very merciful, heh."

Now that was an interesting bit of information. Celestia had to find out more about this Prime Minister. Power Scoop did not seem to think highly of the pony – and yet he lowered his voice when speaking ill of him.

"But you say he's not the head of the Secret Police any longer?"

"Hah hah, true. Celestia gave the position to her new favorite. Not only that, she also named the filly her *heir*. Not really sure what the point of that's supposed to be, but who am I to second-guess the Queen? I think the filly's name was... Sparkle something."

Celestia took a deep breath. "Twilight Sparkle?"

"Yes, I think that was it."

There was nothing so good and pure and innocent in the world that it couldn't be corrupted. Nothing and nopony. The thought sounded poisonously cynical in her head, but she could not shake off the grimness that was gripping her, not then and there.

"So how about we two see each other again some time?" asked Scoop, "Privately, I mean." His smile was ugly. "Oh, do you want another drink?"

Celestia looked away, which left the impression that she was blushing. Clearly, she was flustered and had to compose herself. After letting him stew for a moment, she turned back, stared him in the eye and gave him a perfect shy smile.



"Ah, I'll- I'll be going to the little fillies' room in five minutes."

The implication was obvious. Power Scoop looked like he couldn't believe his luck. A big enough ego, though, helped him believe.

"See you there, babe!" he exclaimed and stood up.

Celestia took another sip of wine and watched from the corner of her eye as Scoop returned to his friends, smirking wildly, and told them something that led to general snorts of laughter and several pats on his back. He downed a half-empty tankard of beer, wiped his mouth and galloped for the female restroom. The corners of Celestia's mouth twitched.

It took her a few minutes to finish off her glass. She stepped away from the bar, ignored the leering from Scoop's buddies and left the building. Then she trotted off.

At some point along the way – she wasn't sure exactly when – Celestia had reached a decision. Daymare Sun was going down. She knew this.

There would be no great change to her immediate intentions. She still had to find her pupil, her sister and the treacherous magicianist to ensure their safety, and they still had to secure some way back to their own universe. While dealing with all this, however, Celestia also had to figure out a plan for deposing an all-powerful monarch and crushing her rotten dominion down into nothingness. It would, perhaps, be quite difficult. There was much more she yet needed to learn before she could make a move. Furthermore, certain ethical issues would come about from affecting the causality of another dimension, but that was negligible.

She could not leave this be; she couldn't simply go back to her own throne in her own Equestria and *forget*. In her heart of hearts, Celestia knew that if she didn't even try to bring Daymare Sun down and correct the horror she'd wrought, its memory would never stop gnawing at her, not until her sun burned out at the end of eternity. Did she not already have enough regrets for her hundred lifetimes? Celestia could not bear to make such a mistake.

She might have been compelled to stay if it was Nightmare Moon or Discord or anything else holding the world under his or her thrall – but it wasn't. It was Celestia herself, or as good as. It was guilt by association. The Queen didn't even have the excuse of a greater good, but dared to

openly call herself a tyrant! It was unforgivable. The weight of responsibility resting on Celestia's shoulders left her little choice about what to do.

She was going to have to find a way to kill herself.

# Chapter 6

## Lady of Liberty

The plan was Applejack's. How could it have not been hers? Twilight tried to flatter herself with the thought that she too might have had the guts to come up with something *almost* as audacious, if the stars happened to align just right, but she wasn't so sure she'd dare enact it as well. The role Applejack herself had to play was especially dangerous.

Though, in truth, it was less of a plan and more of an idea.

"What if something goes wrong?"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "If something goes wrong, then get the heck out of there, and don't forget to take me with you! I'm counting on you to keep your head on your shoulders and break off the whole shebang if necessary."

They were almost at the gates of Everfree City now. Applejack had insisted that they not approach the city from the Trottingham road, so they'd circled around to the eastern gate. It was a safety measure supposed to make the Apple Underground harder to find, if something indeed went wrong.

"What if word about this gets out to the general public though? Won't that be really bad for the resistance?"

"Ehhh. According to the Queen's propaganda machine, they've captured or killed me a dozen times over. Ponies don't know what to believe anymore. It just makes our work easier."

All the traveling Twilight had done over the last week or so had been the hardest workout she'd ever had. Her muscles had settled into a steady numb ache that made it difficult to fall asleep whenever they stopped to rest. Applejack, on her part, didn't look much worse for wear, even though she'd been practically dragging Twilight along for the last stretch of road. Apparently, Applejack simply did not get tired.

"I'm still not sure how exactly I'm supposed to act."

"How would I know? I haven't exactly had occasion to sit down for tea and crumpets with her, you know. Just act bossy and things will work out."

Nopony was in sight. Applejack dropped her saddlebags in the sand, took a final swig of water from her canteen and shared it with Twilight as well. Twilight used her magic to clean herself up from the sweat and dust of travel. It was important that she looked proper, respectable, authoritative. She had to be careful with her flank; one of Applejack's rebels had painted it over. In place of her star and sparkles was now a star casting a shadow – Daylight Sparkle's cutie mark.

Meanwhile, Spike was still practicing his angry face.

"How are we supposed to get out of there again?"

"Secret passage."

"What?"

"Yup. Secret passage. There's a perfectly good one going from the city out to the open desert. I know what you're thinking, but I don't have a clue where it is. We'll have to find Rarity for that."

They were as ready as they would ever be.

"Are you really sure about this?"

"Hey, I'd be glad to skip this part if you don't mind just zapping us inside with your magic."

"I already told you, no sensible unicorn would teleport into an unfamiliar environment! Many famous wizards like Bumblebee and Star Wobble the Mustachioed have written about the dreadful consequences this can have!"

"I get it, I get it! Now would you get on with it?"

Twilight took a deep breath and set about casting a spell of conjuration. She created a bundle of rope as thin as spider-silk and wrapped it around Applejack, tightly binding her legs and snout. Applejack closed her eyes and let herself go limp. Twilight caught her and lifted her up in the air with

her telekinesis. She then headed for the guardhouse at the gate in long, casual steps, dragging her new old friend along with her.

Twilight felt like she was walking off the frying pan and into the fire. She also felt this was rather silly. No metaphor was adequate to describe her anxiety. Surely there was no way this deception would actually work? She wanted to close her eyes; her natural instinct was to turn around and gallop away. The closer she got to guards, the more certain she felt that they would see right through her, and so every step wound her up tighter. She felt like she had hooves of clay.

Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, the guards did not see through her. The earth pony soldiers immediately fell on their knees and bowed down all the way to the ground. The black and blue unicorn mare in charge – whom Twilight recognized as an agent of the Secret Police based on Applejack's descriptions – got away with just lowering her head. All of them thought they knew exactly who she was.

"Lady Commander Sparkle!" exclaimed the black and blue mare, "We didn't expect you back so soon!"

If Daylight Sparkle had happened to return to Everfree City ahead of them, then their plan might have ended in failure before it could even begin, but Twilight couldn't bring herself to feel much relief. This was still a huge gamble. Twilight came to a halt directly before the gate, Spike close to her side. The dragon was grimacing and glaring daggers at each of the guards in turn. That, as well as the low-pitched grumbly noise he was making, was his idea of being evil, but the guards didn't even seem to notice him. All of their attention was focused on Twilight, which only made her more nervous.

In lieu of saying anything, she floated her "captive" closer. There were gasps of surprise, and the black and blue mare's eyes widened when she recognized Applejack.

"Is that- is that who I think it is?"

"Um, yes?"

"Oh, this is big! It's just the coup you needed, isn't it, milady? The Queen will be so pleased with you! My congratulations!" Without pausing, and

without turning to look at them, she gave the earth pony guards an order.  
"Leave us!"

Twilight licked her lips and watched the soldiers shuffle away into the guardhouse. She didn't see why they couldn't go in there themselves if there was a need for a private conversation. It would have been nice to get out of the heat.

"What's going on?" she asked hesitantly.

The black and blue mare swooped forward and stood very close to Twilight, almost nose to nose. She looked very serious.

"Milady, may I ask where the rest of your party is?"

Twilight swallowed. "Ah, yes! My party! They're still out there, hard at work with hunting down the rest of those scoundrels! As for me, I felt I had to bring in the catch right away."

"Was Growing Violet with you?"

Twilight's mind was racing. It did several laps in the eternity it took her to open her mouth.

"That's a definite possibility!"

"Then it was lucky that you came back alone. I have some disturbing news for you. Our sources close to the Prime Minister have found out that Growing Violet is his mole!" She paused expectantly.

"Oh... *dear*," pressed out Twilight, who had no earthly idea what they were even talking about, "What a shame."

"I think Gelding's time is finally up. His influence is waning and all his trump cards depleted. I had heard that the old fool was trying to capture Applejack himself to regain Her Majesty's favor."

"Well, that was certainly... foolish of him. Muahaha!"

One of the black and blue mare's eyebrows was slowly making its way up over her forehead.

"Is... everything all right, milady?"

She was still an agent of the Secret Police, and she wasn't stupid. Twilight felt a subtle touch of magic breezing over her. She was being scanned. There was no disguise to reveal, but relying on the sheer outlandishness of the truth was no way to go. Twilight had to be much, much more convincing. She had to be a bad guy.

"What do you think you're doing, huh?" she barked, "Of course I'm all right, I'm Daylight Sparkle!"

The black and blue mare's eyes widened. In fact, she looked a little bit hurt. She bent her neck quickly enough, however.

"It's standard procedure, milady. Please forgive me."

In her submission, Twilight saw something like an opportunity. She tried to grin viciously while also trying to stay distant and aloof, resulting in an expression that expressed approximately nothing.

"Is there... anything else you'd like to bring to my attention, Agent?"

"Well, the monthly report from the Board of Education has arrived. You might also be interested to know that Agent Striker's left for the Dragon Swamp to deal with that pegasus thief. The only urgent matter is the captives we picked off from the streets during the curfew. We've held off from interrogating them yet, just as you ordered."

Twilight chose her next words carefully. She wanted no doubt or uncertainty in her voice now.

"Have any of the prisoners been identified as rebels yet?"

"No, milady. As I said, they haven't been processed yet."

Twilight couldn't help but glance over at the floating Applejack, unsure of whether this was a good thing or not. By the time they had left Trottingham, Big Macintosh had still not returned. Although news that he'd been captured would have been unpleasant to hear, anything indicating that he was still alive was welcome at this point.

"All right then!" said Twilight, "I'll go on ahead and take this pony to be... processed."

The black and blue mare nodded and smiled. "I look forward to the execution."

She called back the guards and told them to open the gate, even though Twilight was certain that either one of them could have opened it quicker and more easily with their magic. It seemed that ordering earth ponies to do things was an ingrained habit.

The black and blue mare bid Twilight farewell as she was about to enter the tunnel, but she chose not to answer. She walked forward stiffly, not daring to look behind her until she heard the gate slam shut. They were by themselves, and the tunnel was shrouded in semi-darkness, which was probably as good a cover as they were going to get. Twilight lowered Applejack to the ground and released her from her bonds.

"Could this pony have *been* any more rude?" grumbled Spike, "It's like I was invisible or something."

"You might as well *been*," said Applejack, standing up and doing stretches to get her circulation going, "That's how most unicorns are. Cows, deer, buffalo, zebras, even dragons – none of them are considered real people. Even their most valuable allies are nothing more than weapons to them. Ah, cripes, you better stop me now before I get worked up over this!"

"Well, you two are certainly very casual about things!" huffed Twilight.

Spike shrugged. "What? I thought everything worked out pretty well!"

Twilight was about to get sarcastic when she realized that he was probably right. Espionage was certainly not her forte, but somehow, she'd managed to muddle her way through the situation and get them inside. This was the end of her role for now; Applejack meant for them to make their way through the city covertly. They were only going deeper into the lion's den – but the hardest part, at least, was over. They'd taken a huge step closer to Rarity, and there was something else to look forward to as well.

After all, Princess Celestia was somewhere in the city.



The semicircle of sunlight up ahead burned bright, and Twilight was surprised at how difficult it was to force herself to move ahead, back underneath the clear sky. She would never have thought that she could be so averse to being out in the sun. Yet, once she stepped through the inner gate, shoulders slumped and head lowered, she found that the temperature wasn't as bad as she'd been expecting.

"Well," said Spike, "This is pretty nice. Or maybe I've just gotten used to medium fried."

"Glint said it wouldn't be as hot here," recalled Twilight, "I wonder if there's some sort of enchantment around the city, perhaps a shield spell? The sunlight is still just as bright, so there doesn't seem to be any luminal filtration. Perhaps the Queen can just manipulate temperature at will?"

"Don't know, don't care," said Applejack with a shrug, "I'd rather be in the heat, myself."

The tunnel led to a small plaza where several streets intersected. The open view immediately made Twilight uncomfortable. Fortunately, while there were ponies out and about, none of them was close enough to recognize her or Applejack. The city gate wasn't seeing a lot of activity, and the blinding sunlight actually worked to their advantage at a distance.

Twilight cleared her throat. "All right then," she said, "the first thing we should- hey, wait!"

Applejack had already stomped off ahead of her. She did stop for the briefest of moment's when she heard Twilight's voice, to look over her shoulder with a raised eyebrow and call out.

"Come on now! Time's a-wasting."

"O-okay!"

Ignoring the creaking and groaning of her bones, Twilight cantered after Applejack. They headed left alongside the wall. Once they reached the nearest buildings, they casually changed course and slipped into the alleyways, out of everypony's sight.

Sneaking through the city was not difficult. The only thing Twilight had to do was stay close behind Applejack as she navigated the streets. Applejack always knew how to evade the ponies they came across, where to speed up and where to turn around. More than once, they had to rush across busy streets and time their movements just right so that nopony noticed them. They had to take careful steps so their hooves wouldn't make too much noise on the pavement.

They wandered around for what seemed like – what must have been – hours. Everfree was enormous, and getting around it by hoof was a real hassle. As routes went, theirs wasn't exactly the most direct. It seemed to Twilight that they were doubling back more often than going forward. Whenever they spotted soldiers patrolling or standing guard near crowds, easily recognizable by their golden armor, they usually had to make a big circle. Occasionally, they did have chances for breaks, when they had to stay back and hide away somewhere, but Twilight simply didn't have the strength to keep going for long, especially with Spike on her back.

Applejack noticed her panting, of course.

"Hang in there, partner," she said, "It'll only be a short while."

But it *wasn't* just a short while.

At least that meant they had time to see the sights.

Everfree City was a far cry from Trottingham's squalor. Everything in it was neat and orderly and pretty as well. The architecture was a curious mix of modern and classical, simple and grandiose, pragmatic and ornamental – but all of it was built on a scale that Twilight had never seen before. Many of Manehattan's skyscrapers might have been taller, but none of them covered as much ground. Ponies didn't build structures this big in Twilight's Equestria. There were other oddities as well: some buildings didn't even seem to be constructed of brick or slabs, but carved like statues.

Everything in the city – absolutely everything – was built of the same white rock, and the streets were paved with the same material. All the white gave the whole city an eerie radiance, as if Twilight had stepped into some kind of strange hyper-reality. As beautiful as it all looked, the brightness also highlighted the imperfections. Every little crack in the pavement and pile of bird droppings stood out.

Occasionally, Twilight caught glimpses of the Royal Palace at the heart of the city from between the other buildings. What she saw was white domes like giant hills of marble. The palace was flat and wide rather than tall and compact, and did not at all seem like the residence of an evil overlord. Twilight had imagined something completely different, some sort of dark and gloomy tower, with spikes extending skyward and firepits and skull-faced gargoyles. The reality was something she could actually picture Celestia living in, and that in itself made her much more uncomfortable than the ominous heraldry featuring her Princess's cutie mark. It wasn't just the palace either...

Eventually, the three found themselves in a residential district in the southern side of town, facing an apartment complex. The building was twenty floors high and shaped almost exactly like a cube. Twilight had never seen a more boring-looking place in her life. Even the white of its walls looked a bit duller than that of surrounding buildings, almost slightly grayish.

"Rarity lives *here*?" asked Twilight.

"Naah. One of our safehouses is in this building. I just wanted to check by here before heading to Rarity's. It'll only be a minute, and you can have a rest here."

Twilight frowned. "You could have mentioned that, you know."

They poked their heads through one of the doorways into a cramped corridor that slowly lit up with daylight as they stepped inside and then fell into darkness when they closed it behind themselves. Weak electric lights flickered on as they headed further inside. Applejack led them into a small elevator that creaked and groaned as it brought them up to the thirteenth floor. They exited into another corridor and passed by a dozen apartment doors packed very close together and Twilight had to wonder what the point of this detour was.

The hideout itself was decidedly unimpressive. Twilight couldn't see a thing until Applejack opened a sunshade on the tiny window and let in some light. The apartment consisted of a single room with a small kitchen corner and a bed that slid out of a wall. There was a couch, and Twilight didn't waste any time in throwing herself on it with a colossal sigh. It was old, sunk-in and uncomfortable, but it felt good to get off her hooves for a bit.

Spike rolled off her and started examining a map of the city hanging on the wall.

Twilight was vaguely aware of Applejack starting to ruffle through some papers on a drawer.

"Rats," said Applejack quietly.

"Where?" asked Twilight, "Er, I mean, what's wrong?"

"I was hoping Big Mac had been through here and left a message or something. He's been off the grid for way too long now."

Seeing Applejack hunched up in the half-darkness made Twilight sit up straight. For a moment, she even thought Applejack might have been crying, but when the earth pony looked up at her, she could see that her eyes were dry and clear, just a little bit tired.

Twilight truly wished she could have said more than merely the expected.

"I'm sure he's okay."

It felt like a platitude, but Applejack seemed to take some comfort in the words.

"Yeah. My big brother won't be easy to get rid of, let me tell you that! He's actually been captured by the Secret Police once before. Damn fool has a martyr complex, always puts himself in danger for the sake of everypony else. It was... pretty bad for him, but he persevered where a lot of others might have cracked. Somehow, we managed to get him out, I just... I just don't know whether we could pull off the same miracle twice, if they've taken him again."

"We won't have to," said Twilight with a slight smile, "We'll just pull off a whole new miracle by defeating Queen Celestia and then freeing all the prisoners."

Applejack didn't say anything to that, but Twilight could see that she was imagining it.

"Speaking of which," said Spike, "Have you got any stationary, Applejack? We have a letter to write."

"Oh!" exclaimed Twilight, "Right!"

Applejack wordlessly opened a shelf, stuffed some parchment, a pot of ink and a quill into her mouth and gave them to Spike, who handed them on to Twilight with a sour expression after sitting down next to her. He took pride in his role as royal scribe, but Twilight couldn't exactly dictate what she was about to write. She dipped her quill in ink with her horn and tried to ignore Applejack staring at her.

*Dear Princess Celestia*, she wrote. Her usual nomenclature was more important than ever right now. With two Celestias, who could tell what might happen if her wording was inexact?

*Applejack and I have reached Everfree City and will be heading to find Rarity soon. Where could we meet up? Please respond as quickly as you can.*

*Your faithful student,*

*Twilight Sparkle*

"Sooo what are you writing?" asked Applejack.

Twilight hurriedly rolled up the parchment and thrust it into Spike's lap. The dragon sent it off with a flash of his flame, but not before giving Twilight a long glare probably meant to make her feel guilty. He didn't approve of keeping the truth from Applejack.

"I just told her we'd reached the city," said Twilight, "and asked where she could meet us."

"You didn't tell her about this hideout, did you?"

"Of course not!"

"Uh huh. So who exactly is this friend anyway? Another student of that Princess of yours?"

Twilight opened her mouth and then closed it again. She didn't really know what to say. Celestia had mentioned in her letter that she was traveling incognito, but they had never worked out a proper story. She didn't know what she'd have done if Spike hadn't come to the rescue.

"She's Twilight's aunt," he said, "and she's a really nice pony. Just wait, you'll definitely like her once you meet her! On top of that, she's super-talented with magic, way better than Twilight!"

"Oh thanks a lot, Spike!" muttered Twilight, even though he was, of course, right.

"I see," said Applejack curtly before turning back to her desk. Spike had just about enough time to look at Twilight and shrug before she turned around again. "You know, I don't think I caught her name?"

Twilight cleared her throat. "A-actually, isn't it about time you told me a little more about Rarity? How did you two meet?"

Applejack pursed her lips. It took her a while to answer.

"I'm not so sure she'd want me to tell you the exact details, but okay. I reckon I've known her for about a year by now. I've only talked to her face to face a few times though. The first time I met her was out in the open desert. She'd contacted me to set up the meet herself, so right off the bat, I was pretty darn suspicious. We've got to be careful about who to trust if we're going to survive, right? Once I actually saw her though, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that she was for real. Girl looked absolutely ridiculous out there with her oversized parasol and dainty little boots. She seemed to think there was too much sand out in the desert. There was no way she had any real experience with stuff like that. So I had her pegged as a pampered noble who'd never left the comfort of her home – and I wasn't wrong, not really. That just made her reasons for seeking out even more surprising though.

"Basically, she offered us a... business arrangement. Business is what Rarity's all about. Her special talent's finding precious gems and she's pretty savvy, so she's made a fortune in the mining industry. She's turned her family into one of the richest noble houses in Equestria. Quite a few of her mines are right here in and around Everfree, actually. So anyway, she offered to do something for us if we did something for her. It was a heck of

a deal, so I agreed. Everything worked out real well, so we just sort of never stopped working together. The Apple Underground gets resources, funds and intelligence at a bargain."

If Twilight was listening with interest, then Spike was completely enraptured. He cut Twilight off before she could say anything herself.

"I heard one of your ponies call her something in Trottingham," he said.

Applejack chuckled. "What, the Lady of Liberty?"

"That was it!"

"Yup, she has her own fancy nickname and everything. Though I guess you could say she deserves it. Rarity... isn't like most other unicorns. Even before our agreement, she lived a dangerous life. She's been running an underground railroad to get oppressed ponies out of Everfree City for I don't know how many years. If somepony ends up on the Secret Police's hit list, or even if they're just sick of the life here but aren't allowed to move away, she can get them out to relative safety and freedom. Many of the ponies she rescues end up joining the Apple Underground. Saving lives's the kind of thing that makes you real popular, so as you can imagine, she has something of a reputation with earth ponies."

"Do you like her?" asked Twilight.

Applejack seemed taken aback by the question.

"Sure I like her! Well, I appreciate what she's done for us. You've no idea how grateful I am about her support. Plus, I'm real glad that unicorns like her are joining our cause, you know? Listen, I don't *dislike* her, okay?" She shook her head and refocused on Twilight. "Don't get the wrong idea, it's not like we're friends or anything. Circumstances being what they are, we don't get to hang around and chat much, and at the end of the day, we're just not very similar."

"Well, you know, Applejack, friendship isn't limited by anything like race or upbringing or taste. Ponies can be friends with all sorts of other ponies, including those that are very-"

There was a knock on the door.

Applejack was up on her hooves in a flash. When Spike opened his mouth to say something, she shushed him. For a moment, they all stood frozen in place. Who would have chanced to visit them, and how did they know to come at just the right time? Had they been discovered somehow? Surely, the authorities wouldn't knock if they came in force...

They didn't have a whole lot of options. Applejack warily made her way over to the door and opened it. Twilight held her breath and then promptly released it when she caught sight of a young unicorn mare about her own age, with airy light pink curls and a white coat. Twilight thought there was something terribly familiar about her, especially the serene expression and measured gaze. When the mare looked at Twilight and smiled, she realized it – and almost gasped out the stranger's identity right then and there. She couldn't, however, keep herself from pushing past Applejack and pressing herself close to her mentor. Celestia returned the nuzzle.

"Twilight Sparkle!" she said. Even her voice sounded different, less mature, more appropriate for her delicate frame.

"Hello, um, auntie! It's so good to see you!"

Celestia didn't miss a beat. "You don't know how worried I've been for you, my dear niece!"

Twilight detached herself from Celestia and looked her up and down once more. Hugging her felt strange when she wasn't towering over Twilight and didn't have a flowing mane to brush against her head and neck. In hindsight, it should have been obvious that it would be within the Princess's power to hide herself by magic even amongst other unicorns.

"I don't understand though. How did you find us?"

"A spell, Twilight. It seemed like the simplest option to me. There are ways to trace a dragon's flame-mail. You must remind me to teach one of them to you once we return home."

Twilight nodded eagerly. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Applejack looking on with a scowl.



"Well, go on then, come inside!" said Applejack, "Two unicorns in a tenement like this is going to look mighty suspicious! So will a pony looking too happy, come to think of it."

Twilight hopped inside ahead of Celestia, probably unable to stop grinning even if she wanted to. The room seemed to brighten as the Princess entered, though that might well have just been Twilight's imagination. Celestia greeted Spike with a pat to his head.

"Ahem," said Spike, pointing a hand towards the Princess, "Applejack, this is..."

"Twinkle," supplied Celestia. She also properly stood to face Applejack, smiling a relaxed smile. "I've heard a lot about you in the short while I've been here, Applejack. You are at the head of something heroic and admirable. I have a great deal of respect for everything you've done for your fellow ponies, and for Equestria."

She then did something Twilight would never have expected: bent her forelegs in an unpracticed but heartfelt half-bow. Even though Applejack's face bloomed in a blush, she made a noise that was half-neigh and half-harrumph.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Twinkle, but I haven't done a single thing 'for Equestria' in my whole entire life. It's Equestria I'm fighting against."

This seemed to catch Celestia off guard, but she quickly returned to smiling.

"Of course. My perspective must seem odd to you, but I consider Queen Celestia the real enemy of Equestria."

"Uh huh. Well, I hope nopony followed you to this place. It'd be a shame if one of our safehouses was compromised..."

"Oh, you don't have to worry. I can be very inconspicuous when I want to."

Twilight plopped down back next to Spike on the couch.

"May I ask what you've been doing the last few days, auntie?"

"I've done little else but study. I've explored the city and the culture of tyranny that built it, I've read up on the histories and politics of his world, I've talked to ponies to find out about this land and its leaders. In other words, I've been preparing for our attack. I have a few ideas of my own, but I applaud your initiative in seeking out the Elements of Harmony. The Elements could very well make the crucial difference in this war. It is wonderful to know that you have the moral fortitude to stand up for this world on your own. You do me proud."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at that. Not only had she never expected to hear dear, sweet Princess Celestia speak of waging war, it was surprising that she would say that the Elements of Harmony could "make the difference." As far as Twilight knew, they were the *only* way to save this world. What other method could there be for bloodlessly deposing Daymare Sun?

"You haven't heard anything about, er, your sister? Or Brainy Bright?"

"I'm afraid not. But don't worry, we will find them eventually – or perhaps they will find us."

They had gone over all the important bits in their brief letters, but there was a lot more Twilight would have liked to talk to the Princess about. Applejack's presence made that impossible.

She couldn't keep this a secret forever. She wasn't going to! This was just not the right time. Applejack was a reasonable pony, but she hated the Queen as much as anyone. If Twilight had been in her horseshoes, she would most definitely have been put off by knowing about the Princess being there. Celestia herself thought hiding her identity was a good idea for the time being as well.

"This is all well and good," said Spike, "but isn't it about time we go and find Rarity yet?"

He was looking at Twilight, but it was Applejack who answered.

"If you guys feel up to it, we can head off now."

"As a matter of fact, I had the occasion to scout out Lady Rarity's estate a while earlier," said Celestia, "I can take us there right away."

"That would be great, P- auntie!" exclaimed Twilight, "I really wasn't looking forward to another long walk!"

"Wait, what?" asked Applejack.

Celestia's horn had already started emitting a golden glow. In a moment, the glow had grown to encompass the whole room. When it abated, Twilight was surprised to find herself surrounded by greenery.

"Oh my!"

"What in tarnation?"

Celestia's technique was expectedly superb. Twilight didn't feel a trace of disorientation or physical pain from the jump.

"This is Lady Rarity's greenhouse garden," said Celestia, "She keeps it open to the public, unlike other nobles. We can get inside her manor from here."

"I- I didn't give you permission to do that!" grumbled Applejack.

"Oh? I'm sorry." She never lost her calm smile, not even when she bowed her head as a gesture of reconciliation. "We should move before somepony comes."

It wasn't as hot and humid as it would have been in a proper greenhouse. This place was more like indoor park. The plants there weren't exotic flowers or vegetables; most of them were ordinary trees and bushes Twilight could easily come across stepping out of her house in Ponyville. There were also ragged patches of grass, and it was clear that the plants there weren't watered as well as they should have been. Yet, this little oasis was considered the height of luxury. It smelled of nature and life, and Twilight wished she could spend a bit more time there.

They could see Rarity's home through the trees. The greenhouse was built directly into its side. The building was impressive enough, but not much different from any of the other mansions Twilight had spotted in the city.

Celestia confidently led them to a large set of double doors that could have passed for the front entrance of a lesser noble's abode.

"Shall I open it?" she asked, but didn't wait for a reply.

She raised a hoof and softly stomped it against the door. The lock clicked and the doorway opened. Twilight thought entering this way would leave a terrible impression, but followed the others inside anyway.

Just the entrance hall was as grand and beautiful as almost any room in Canterlot's royal palace. A vast staircase leading forward and then splitting in two filled much of the room. It was almost as light inside as outside. The floor was reflective, and the walls glittered. Everything that wasn't white was toned in shades of purple – those were still Rarity's colors, it seemed. A humongous crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Could two places be any more different than this mansion and the apartment building they'd all just come from?

"Would you like some refreshments?" asked a raspy voice from behind them.

Twilight whirled around and found... a diamond dog, wearing a tux. In his hands, he held a silver serving tray with several glasses of clear, pure water in them. His beady little eyes were fixed right on her, and his mouth was twisted into something quite like a snarl.

Spike scooted between Twilight and the dog, spreading his arms in a defensive posture, but Applejack in turn took up position before him.

"Hold on now!" she told the dog, "It's me! You do recognize me, don't you?"

"Of course. You're the rebel, Applejack, whom I have never met before. What *are* you doing here, outlaw?"

Applejack glanced back at Twilight. "It's okay, everything is fine and dandy. This isn't Daylight Sparkle. She's just wearing a disguise, so you can put away that knife."

Twilight hadn't even noticed that the dog was holding a knife in one of his hands, hidden underneath the tray. After a moment, he slipped it into a scabbard inside his vest. Applejack gave him an appreciative nod.

"We've come to see Rarity," she said, "Is she here?"

"Milady is home. Whom should I announce?"

"Yeah, you can just skip that part. Just tell us where your boss is and we'll go to her."

"Lady Rarity is in the third floor office. I believe you know the way, ponies."

They made their way upstairs in hurried steps. Being familiar with the area, it was Applejack leading the charge, while Celestia was content to stay in the back. Twilight barely had time to notice the opulent furnishings in the rush. Once they got to the office, she pushed ahead in her excitement and stormed through the door. Perhaps that wasn't the smartest thing to do...

Lady Rarity was there, seated behind an ancient-looking wooden desk with stacks of documents in front of her. She had a much fuller figure than the pony Twilight knew, but she looked no less beautiful. Her mane was still elegantly coiffed in the familiar style, but she used slightly different shades of color in her make-up. Her white coat had a healthy shine to it, and she was wearing horn-rimmed glasses as she worked. Unlike Applejack, her cutie mark was the same: three finely-cut diamonds.

Rarity's jaw dropped when she looked up and saw who'd busted in. Spike victoriously called her name. That was when Twilight realized how this must have looked like: a captured Applejack giving up her accomplice to the Commander of the Secret Police.

Rarity sunk out of her chair with a gasp and disappeared behind her desk. When she popped up again, her horn was glowing and she's pulled out a spiked mace from somewhere.

"Come on then!" she shrieked from behind the table, waving the mace around with her telekinesis, "Have at thee!"

"Whoa, nelly!" exclaimed Applejack, "Settle down, this is not what it looks like! There's a perfectly reasonable explanation for this, believe it or not!"

"I'm not Daylight Sparkle!" called out Twilight, "I'm not Daylight Sparkle!"

She was frantically rubbing off her fake cutie mark, revealing her own star and sparkles.

Rarity looked around between them, uncomprehending. Gradually, she relaxed and lowered her weapon. Applejack breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ahem," said Rarity.

Looking vaguely embarrassed all the while, she set down the mace on a shelf and returned to her seat as if nothing at all had happened.

"Applejack, what is the meaning of this?"

"I'm just the escort here," said Applejack, "This pony's the one with the story to tell."

"Hello!" said Twilight, "I guess I should start by introducing us. See, this here's Spike-"

"Hi, I'm Spike!" burst out Spike, wearing the goofiest possible grin and waving.

"Settle down, I just told her that! Anyway, that over there is Twinkle, and I'm *Twilight* Sparkle. This is all kind of complicated, so I'll just be direct. We're travelers from another dimension brought into this world by an accident, and we've come to enlist you and Applejack on a mission to defeat Queen Celestia."

Rarity laughed. It started off as an inelegant chortle and then evolved into a hearty, sonorous full laughter. She spent quite a while at it.

"Er, Rarity?" said Applejack once she stopped, "We're being completely and utterly serious here."

"Oh," said Rarity, looking completely and utterly lost. That didn't stop her from smiling politely. "Gosh, where are my manners? Please, do sit down, all of you."

Twilight and Applejack took their seats on cushy armchairs in front of Rarity's desk. Spike remained standing, while Celestia hung back for some reason, choosing instead to sit down on the floor close to the door. Rarity steepled her hooves and stared at them in silence. Her brow was furrowed. Eventually, she spoke up.

"All right, darling. I can buy the part about you being from another dimension. It's either that or you're an identical twin of Daylight Sparkle – or something! That part is implausible, but believable. But goodness gracious, how do you expect me to believe that you're going to defeat the Queen, just like that? Applejack, you know how I feel about that: it can't be done."

"It can be done," said Applejack.

"I don't want to sound mean, but recent events would suggest otherwise," deadpanned Rarity, "Then again, you never got close enough to try, did you?"

"There is a weapon that could do it," said Twilight.

She explained briefly about the Elements of Harmony, their little group of friends in her own world and everything that needed to be done. As Rarity listened, her expression shifted from bewilderment to worry to uncertainty – uncertainty not just about whether it could be done, but perhaps also about whether it *couldn't* be done.

"This is the longest of long shots, you do realize?"

"It's not nearly as hopeless as it looks!" said Twilight, glancing back at Princess Celestia, "With you, we already have half the gang together. If you think about it, the odds of either of you even existing in this world despite centuries of differences between the timelines are infinitesimal. We *will* find the others as well, and once we have the Elements, taking care of Daymare Sun will be a piece of cake!"

"And what about her armies?" asked Rarity, "Her hidden fortresses? The fanatics who'd be willing to die for her? Will they all just disappear with her? I can't help but think your view of this all is a little simplistic."

"If that's true, then you're over-thinking it," said Applejack, "You've worked hard to make a better world, and a world without Celestia will undoubtedly be a better place. I know you think she's untouchable, but that's exactly the kind of hopelessness she'd tried to breed into pony-folk so we'd never have the guts to try anything. Rarity, I think it's time for you to take direct action for once."

"Ahh, hmm, but do I necessarily have to come along with you to? Applejack, you know I'm willing to stand by your side, but I am not going to be much use in the field."

"Yes," said Twilight immediately, "It's absolutely vital that you come with us."

Rarity groaned at length, but ultimately put up her hooves in defeat, a weak smile on her face.

"Very well then. I'll come with you and see where this journey takes us. Maybe it'll even prove to be an interesting experience before the Queen kills us all. Do you mean for us to go off right now?"

"We should leave as soon as you can get your affairs in order, yes," said Applejack, "but there's no rush. There's actually something I want to ask you. Has Big Macintosh been through here lately, Rarity? Have you heard anything about him?"

Rarity frowned. "I'm afraid not, Applejack. Sonnette and Cloud Kicker did come by here and used my secret passage to escape the city, but I haven't seen any trace of Big Macintosh. Is he...?"

"We don't know."

"Ah. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Hmm, can I ask you something as well?" asked Twilight.

"Certainly – Twilight, was it?"

"What do you think of the fashion industry?"

"Why, I have nothing but respect for the artistry involved in making fine clothes."

"You've never... thought to try it out yourself?"

Rarity laughed. "Darling, where ever would I find the time for that?"

"What about painting? Writing? Composing music?"



"I'm afraid not."

"Sculpting? Interior decorating? Interpretative dance?"

"Neigh, if you'll pardon the pun."

Twilight could only gape. The idea of a Rarity that wasn't an artist was, frankly, strange and unfathomable to her. True, Rarity had always been something of a business-pony as well, and she did well for herself in that regard because of her natural cleverness, but certain questionable business practices kept her from truly excelling financially. She would never be the richest pony in Ponyville while she still gave her friends and neighbors free samples and discarded nearly finished designs due to flaws only she could see.

"So how did all this start? How did you become the Lady of Liberty?"

Rarity stood up and firmly pressed her forehooves on her desk. There was an almost visible glitter in her eyes.

"Why, I have known ever since I was a little filly that I had no greater purpose in this world than *to do good!* My heart has always bled for the weak and downtrodden; I've only ever waited for the chance to do my part in resisting the Queen's regime! Being the Lady of Liberty is my *destiny!*"

She plopped back down on her armchair and chuckled.

"Is that what you expected me to say? Well, actually, the truth is a bit more prosaic than that. You could say I stumbled into it by chance. There was a time when I didn't much care for anypony, let alone the plights of my inferiors. I was too rich to worry about such things! Then one day, one of my servants was accused of treason and I happened to know for a *fact* that she was innocent. She pleaded with me to help, so I got her out of the city and helped her set up a false identity. She told one of her relatives what I'd done for her, and then she came to me and told me about her coltfriend, who'd been blacklisted from working in the city for incurring the wrath of a noble. I helped him as well. Even though I strictly told them not to mention my involvement to anypony, ponies kept coming to me for assistance. I couldn't very well say no, could I? Every one of them told me their stories, and bit by bit, I became more aware of the injustices of this world. It became rather difficult to just stand by and do nothing."

"So that's why you made a deal with the Apple Underground?"

"Aheh... You could say that."

"I have to say, I admire you. I'm sure not many unicorns would have done the same thing in your stead – risking everything for a good cause even though your lives are privileged, I mean."

Rarity's smile right then looked rather painted on. "Privilege is rather relative, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Unicorns do form most of the upper strata of pony society, that is true, but we do pay a certain price for those privileges. We have no more freedom than earth ponies or pegasi, and in some respects, we have even less. I'm referring to the education system in particular. Earth ponies and pegasi get their lessons about what their 'proper place' is, but the schooling of unicorns is much more dogmatic. And that's not nearly the worst of it. You see, when a young unicorn earns his or her cutie mark, they are examined by the State. If they show the promise of great magical power, a prodigious mind or a valuable special talent, they are drafted and assigned to the Secret Police, the Officer Corps or perhaps a special division of the Army, where they undergo special training. I don't mean to mince words on this matter – they are forcibly removed from their homes and brainwashed." Her smile, bitter as it was, twisted into a frown. "When a colt or filly is selected to join the Secret Police, you can be the richest, most influential pony in Equestria, but you still won't be able to get them back. So yes, I'm afraid our privileges are quite useless in some regards."

"I'm... sorry to hear that," said Twilight.

She brushed her tail back and forth with her forehooves, unsure of whether to say anything more. Rarity did not sound as if she was merely voicing her righteous indignation. She sounded genuinely pained.

"Did they take Sweetie Belle?" asked Twilight quietly.

"Sweetie Belle?" repeated Rarity with a note of confusion in her voice.

"Your sister? You... *do* have a sister, don't you?"

Rarity shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't have any siblings, Twilight, brothers or sisters. And no, I don't mean that figuratively. I'm an only child."

"But then..."

"Be *that* as it may, don't think I only help the Underground with my wealth. I like to think I'm quite useful to them otherwise as well. Have you heard about the prison break they pulled off? It's the only recorded escape from the Secret Police's panopticon in Equestrian history. Well, *I* was the one who planned it – yes, me, none other! Did you know that?"

"I didn't," said Twilight slowly, "I thought Applejack was behind that, actually."

"That's just the cover story," said Applejack, "We can't exactly tell ponies the truth, can we?"

"Yes, luckily, I'm not a glory hound like Applejack here."

Applejack rolled her eyes, a smile on her lips. "Hardy har, Rarity."

"So wait, Rarity's operation was the one that got out your brother, Applejack?"

"Told you I felt grateful for her."

Twilight still didn't know what Rarity got out of their deal, but everything else came together nicely. Diamond dogs and the Lady of Liberty, an underground railroad and a fortune in mining...

"You use your company's mineshafts for the smuggling, right?"

"That's exactly right. Considering my role in Everfree City's economy, me and my associates can get away with doing just about anything down below. By constantly digging and re-digging the secret tunnels in different locations, the chance of our little operation being discovered is remote indeed. It's lucky for me this area is so rich in precious gems."

Twilight sat back, quietly impressed. This sort of cunning was something she might have expected from Rarity. Not only that, she was still the giving soul Twilight knew. Helping all those ponies was very generous of her,

wasn't it? All things considered, it was amazing how familiar she seemed! Applejack and Rarity were both everything Twilight could have hoped for. She was confident the others wouldn't disappoint her either.

She had to believe that she herself was the only weak link – the only bad seed – among her friends in this universe.

"So yeah," said Applejack, "Let's get down to business, why don't we? The three ponies we still need to find are... what were their names again?"

"Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie," said Twilight, "Do you know any of them, Rarity?"

"I've never heard of the other two, but yes, I am familiar with Rainbow Dash."

Twilight felt a stab of elation. Everything was going perfectly.

"Well?" she asked insistently.

Rarity fidgeted around in her seat. "Very well, I'll tell you about her, but I do hope you realize this matter requires your strictest confidence. For you see, Rainbow Dash is none other than the Blue Bolt!"

Applejack whistled. "You mean this Rainbow Dash pony is *the* Blue Bolt? Galloping galoshes, I sure didn't expect that."

Twilight looked around between each of her companions. "I don't understand. Who's the Blue Bolt?"

"She's a thief," said Applejack.

"A most *amusing* thief," added Rarity, "Though actually, the State has officially classified her as a terrorist now."

"She operates all over Equestria, but Everfree City's her favorite hunting ground. She always goes after nobles, the richer the better, and the police force has failed to catch her for years now. They say she's the fastest flier in Equestria. The catch is that she gives away everything she steals to poor earth ponies or anypony else that needs it."

"Oh, you mean like the tale of Robin Hoof?"

"Yeah, exactly. She's even robbed government bureaus and granaries to distribute food to the needy. Sometimes, she gives supplies directly to the Apple Underground, though I've never met her personally. She's nothing less than a folk hero."

"Sort of like me," said Rarity with a sly smile, "but with less style and more hooves-on action. The brawn to my brain, if you will."

"Where could we find her?" asked Twilight.

"Her homebase, if you could call it that, is in the Dragon Swamp."

Applejack grunted. "That's pretty far."

"Well, we don't have to go there by hoof, do we?" Rarity's eye twitched. "Applejack, please tell me we're not going there by hoof."

A memory was dawning in Twilight's consciousness.

"Wait a minute."

She turned to Applejack and Spike.

"The guard at the gate! She mentioned a pegasus thief!" A very nasty feeling was spreading through her gut. "She said an Agent had been dispatched to the Dragon Swamp to deal with her."

"Goodness," said Rarity breathlessly.

"Oh crud, this is bad," growled Applejack, "She might just take off, fly so fast and so far that we'll never find her. And that's if she's lucky! I'm willing to bet she's never faced off against one of the Secret Police before. If they take her unawares, she could be in deadly danger."

"Twilight, do you remember the name of the Agent in question?" asked Rarity.

"It was... Striker. Yes. Agent Striker."

Rarity gasped and raised a hoof to her mouth. "Agent Striker is one of the Elite. He has a dragon."

The moment of silence that followed was almost physically painful. It was as if they had just gotten news of somepony's death. Perhaps they had.

Twilight glanced over her shoulder at Princess Celestia and found her strangely distant, lost in thought.

"We might already be too late," drawled out Applejack.

"No," said Twilight, "No! We don't know that yet!"

"Well then!" said Rarity, "It looks like we don't have a moment to lose, doesn't it?" She raised her voice and shouted "Fido!"

Another diamond dog butler – this one a particularly large specimen – lumbered through the doorway in a few seconds.

"Wake up Soarin! Get my personal chariot underground to the tunnel-mouth! We have a rescue mission to perform!"

Fido barked an affirmative and left as quickly as he'd arrived.

"My personal chariot driver is one of the best in the business! We can make it to the Dragon Swamp within a turn by flight."

Rarity's confident smile made Twilight feel like they'd saved Rainbow Dash already. They all stood up, ready to follow Rarity down to the mines where their secret tunnel awaited them.

"He'll have to carry four of us, and a dragon," said Applejack, "That's a lot for any pegasus. Considering how much weight you've gained, you better not pack too much luggage. That means you'll have to leave home your cabinet of spare clothing."

Rarity gave an ridiculously protracted sigh. "Hilarious as ever, Applejack."

"There will only be three of you. I cannot join you."

Twilight whirled around to face Princess Celestia, who'd taken a few steps closer to the group.

"What?" asked Twilight, ears drooping, "But why?"

"I can't be there, Twilight. You know why."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Applejack, "I thought you were supposed to be some kind of master wizard. We could use some of that out there, you know! Are you a coward?"

Celestia's eyes met Applejack's. She looked regretful, but also completely unapologetic.

"Well?" said Applejack.

Twilight raised her hoof. "Please, Applejack," she said, "It's complicated, but auntie's right about this."

"She is?" wondered Spike, eyes nervously flickering to the Princess.

She was. Twilight could see the rationale. Princess Celestia could come with them, and quite possibly make short work of the dragon – but what effect would that have in the long run? Their quest to find the Elements of Harmony was as much about the ponies as the Elements. Could they really form meaningful bonds if they ended up being mere onlookers in their own adventure? Could they truly demonstrate the qualities that defined them? Somehow, Twilight did not think so. No, they had to earn their own victories by working together. Celestia had no choice but to step back and let them find their own way – just as she'd done once before, when she'd arranged the defeat of Nightmare Moon. That was also why she'd stayed in the background while Twilight had made Rarity's acquaintance. She wanted their friendship to form on their own terms.

"I will meet up with you again once you've gathered up the others," said Celestia, "There are other things I can busy myself with in the meantime." She turned to look at Rarity. "Lady Rarity, I assume you've received an invitation to Lord Chocolate Sun's ball?"

Rarity fluttered her eyelashes in surprise. "Indeed I have. Now that you mention it, I suppose I won't be able to make it, since it takes place in four turns and I doubt we'll make it back by then. Oh, well, I can still go to the *second*-biggest gathering of pretentious jerks when the time comes."

"I hope this doesn't sound brazen, but may I take the invitation and go in your stead?"

"I... well, I have absolutely no problem with that, but why? I would assume..."

"Let me just get this straight, missy," said Applejack, "While we're going off to try and save somepony's life, you're staying here so you visit a *ball*?"

Applejack's accusation only made Celestia smile. One small smile said so much and yet so little. It was a rejection, an apology and a mystery. During an instant, the facade of Twinkle broke. Celestia looked her real age.

It really was just an instant.

"While I do love formal gatherings, that is not exactly what I'm interested in. Lord Chocolate Sun is known to have a collection of antique literature and documents, is he not?"

Rarity nodded. "Yes, his library is rather famous. Not that he ever reads any of it, mind you, he's barely literate. He just enjoys the reputation it earns him."

"I would rather not risk breaking into the Royal Library, and a private collection is much more likely to contain items of interest, so this should suit my purposes just fine."

"What do you mean?" asked Twilight.

"In an undertaking as momentous as ours, preparation is the key to everything. I must get to that library. Recall that we still don't know anything about the physical vessels of the Elements. I am confident that they exist, but where could they be? If there is any hint to be found about their location, I must find it. There are other things I wish to look into as well. For one, wouldn't it be grand if I found a prophecy predicting the downfall of Daymare Sun?"

"A prophecy?" repeated Applejack, voice dripping with doubt.

"I know it sounds like fantasy," said Rarity, "but there are records of genuine prophecies, I believe."



"A prophecy predicted the return of Nightmare Moon in our world," said Twilight, "You'll be looking for something similar, right?"

"Very good, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight could almost see her hidden wings unfolding.

"Trust in me as you always do. I wouldn't let you go if I didn't think you could do it. I have faith in you and all your friends. Go, find Rainbow Dash!"

# Chapter 7

## The Forgotten Princess

### Turn 10

Every evening when Luna woke up, the first thing she thought of was her millennium-long imprisonment, the first thing she remembered was Nightmare Moon's laughter and the first thing she felt was regret. Every morning after a hard night's work when she lay down to go to sleep, it was exactly the same. Every quiet moment, every minute she spent on her own, every hour where she had the slightest bit of time to think, her demons returned to haunt her.

Luna had a lot of time to herself, but the dim state between sleep and waking was the worst, because it was such a vivid reminder of what it had been like on the moon. She had never been truly awake, nor had she been fully conscious either. Somehow, she'd even had some awareness of what was going on down below in Equestria, when she wanted to. From time to time, she'd heard her sister's voice singing in the distance, but whether it was real or just a dream or a jumbled memory from childhood, she could not say. Mostly, the only thing she was aware of was being cold and lonely and in pain, yet she couldn't be sure she hadn't felt that way simply because there was something inside her that made her cold and lonely and pained.

The whispers never stopped for the whole thousand years. There were two beings thinking with her mind, but both of them had only a single voice – her own. Since it was all her, it was so difficult to keep it all straight, to tell what was real, to decide what she really wanted to do. Pondering over this in retrospective, Luna sometimes caught herself thinking a bad thought and got so frightened that *it* was back that she wanted to kill herself. She'd never mentioned this to anypony.

Luna still couldn't be sure whether she'd even existed as a physical entity, or whether it had only been an idea of her dumped in some metaphysical

hole inside of that stupid rock that hung in the night sky. She couldn't ever ask Celestia; these were not things to be discussed openly.

Even now, so far away from home, with much bigger and more immediate concerns hanging over her head, she couldn't forget the woes of her past, not for one second.

Luna stayed in her cot for hours after waking up, not even bothering to disentangle the blanket from her wings or to pick up the pillow from where she had flung it in her sleep. The bed was made for a child and thus dreadfully small for somepony as big as Luna, but that didn't bother her. The bedclothes were rough and not very soft, quite unlike what she had in her royal chambers back home, but Luna had slept in it several times before remembering to mind.

Getting up seemed utterly pointless, but when she considered all the things she had to do, she knew that this couldn't be true. She had to find Celestia, for one, and make sure she was alright. Luna wasn't sure she could do much for her sister, but she had to try to comfort her if possible. Celestia was terribly sensitive to hatred and disharmony, and no doubt very distraught about the attack and this whole dreadful alternate universe. Then there was the matter of figuring out a way to get back home. Equestria – the real Equestria – could not be faring well without its ruler. It would be lucky if the government managed to keep widespread chaos from breaking out among the citizenry. Even worse, with both the Princesses gone, there was nopony there that knew how to move the sun and the moon. The time of the day would be locked in place until their return: day on one side of the planet and night on the other. Things would be okay for the time being, but this state of things would get very problematic in the long run. Last but not least, Luna had to **find and annihilate Brainy Bright!**

Yet, whatever ardor these thoughts built up in her died quickly.

Where could she even begin to look for Celestia? The only way she could think of was flying from town to town and asking around for her, but if she explained that she was looking for the beautiful, white, horned and winged ruler of Equestria, the pony she'd be pointed to would not be the one she wanted to find. Getting a hold of Brainy Bright and securing a way home was no easier. Everything seemed so difficult. Luna felt tired, even though she had done nothing to tire herself. A strange lethargy had overtaken her

since coming to this place, and it was getting worse and worse. Her insides felt hollow, like a part of her was dead and gone. She had always been nocturnal by nature; perhaps that was why she could hardly bring herself to get out of bed here.

What was the point of anything, really? There was no day or night in this world, only the sun. None of the things that defined Luna's being existed here any longer. She was nothing more than a sad, strange relic. Of course, saying she was out of place wasn't quite right either, seeing as how she had

always failed to find her place even in her own world. There was a part of her that recognized how ridiculous the extent of her self-pity was, but the dark mood Luna was in was a pit she couldn't easily crawl out of.

She did, however, eventually manage to crawl out of bed. The room was too small to stretch herself out fully, so she settled for turning her head until her vertebrae popped. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and shuffled into the living room. To her relief and dismay, it seemed that the others were already out in the fields – though "already" was perhaps the wrong expression, considering how arbitrary daily cycles were here. Luna couldn't even venture a guess as to how long she'd slept. It was an unusual feeling for somepony who was used to always knowing the exact time through one of her extra senses.

There was a sparse meal set on the table, consisting of a wooden cup of milk and a plate of small spherical rolls of bread. Next to the plate, Luna found a penciled note in the rough handwriting of somepony writing with their mouth.

*You should really eat something,* it said.

Luna stared at the food ambivalently, before deciding to nibble one of the rolls of bread. It tasted quite good – kind of fruity – but she couldn't bring herself to do more than finish off the one she'd started. Eating was such a hassle.

After standing around awkwardly for a couple of minutes, Luna was just about ready to go back to bed – but there was another note on the outside of the bedroom door.

*Don't take this the wrong way, but maybe you should go out for a bit?*

Underneath the note was a happy smiley snout drawn in bright blue crayon.

Luna sighed and turned around. She didn't want to impugn on the wishes of her hosts, so she made herself leave the cottage. The door creaked and quivered as she opened it. One of the hinges was loose; Luna noted that for later.

The sunlight outside was as powerful as ever, though Luna wasn't much bothered by it. She was more resilient to high and low temperatures than the strongest earth pony; what would have been painful for most any other living being was not even an inconvenience to her. Her eyesight was basically unaffected by the bright light as well, but even so, she couldn't bring herself to look directly at the sun. It disturbed her. She had noticed one curiosity though: of all the things in this world, only Luna still cast a shadow while outside in direct sunlight. It was darker than black and made her stand out almost as much as her mane and tail.

Luna was not at all sure what she should do. In the short while that she'd arrived in Hillside, she'd quickly become something of a curiosity and a source of endless rumor, so she was honestly surprised not to see any ponies around. Luna was, after all, a vision of a night-sky apparently not seen by anypony in centuries; she had a horn and wings and a shadow, and was – according to some – extremely beautiful as well. She was thus half-annoyed and half-relieved that nopony was there to gawk at her, though it was natural enough if she thought about. In a small farming community like this, ponies were most likely to be either working or sleeping at any time, which left little time for waiting behind a closed door for a mysterious guest to wake up.

Luna wasn't certain whether to call Hillside a town or a village. It would perhaps have been most accurate to say that it was a collection of villages so close together they had melted into one. There was no elder or mayor, just a long swathe of windowless, ramshackle houses built on hilltops and hillsides. Each hill had its own name, and between them were the fields and wells – the two things most necessary for life to continue in Hillside. Ecologically speaking, the place was lovely. There was grass growing in the area, as well as some pine-trees, though not quite enough to make a

forest. It didn't even matter that most of the plants were yellow and sagging.

Reluctantly, Luna set out to see if she could find anypony. She cantered down the side of Piney Hill and up the slopes of Ponyhill, then followed the small valley between the Littlehills to Middlehill. (With so many hills to name, they couldn't all be winners.) Taking into account the short detours she had to make to avoid stomping through the fields, it was perhaps an hour's worth of wandering all together. She didn't come across a single pone on the way until she finally reached Middlehill.

Her steps wavered when she heard voices up ahead – unexpectedly loud voices. Luna slowed down and crept closer, finding an entire crowd in the small square on the summit. Several cloth bags were strewn around between them, and a number of large chests had been dragged out of the nearby houses. After a moment of confusion, Luna realized what was going on: it was soldiers requisitioning supplies. There was about half a dozen of them, standing amidst the villagers in gleaming gold armor. Luna had been told of them visiting Hillside recently, but she hadn't yet seen any.

After a moment spent frozen in hesitation – during which she was lucky that everypony's attention was too caught up in the proceedings to fall on her – Luna stepped further back and set about casting a spell of invisibility over herself. The dark glimmer of her horn caught the eye of one of the villagers, but by the time she turned to look her way, Luna had already disappeared. She felt too tired to get into lengthy explanations on who she was and where she came from. Dealing with all this... it was such a bother. She could only barely bring herself to walk forward amongst the crowd to look over what was going on.

It was the villagers themselves doing the repacking of their bread, grass and vegetables, with the soldiers overseeing them. A bored-looking unicorn officer was killing time standing in the sidelines, leaving an earth pony sergeant in charge of the work and dealing with the questions of the ponyfolk.

"When are you leaving this area?"

"Yeah, when are you leaving?"

"When?"

They seemed to feel safer asking such questions in a group, but the sergeant seemed understanding enough.

"There's been a delay," she said, "but we'll be ready to move across the border, I promise. We're very grateful for the assistance you provide."

"So long as you understand that we don't have much to spare for you!" said one of the villagers, an elderly mare, "The harvests have been getting worse and worse since Queen Celestia moved the Sun so close!"

"Is it going back to Everfree City once you've taken care of the griffons?" asked another one, a younger male pony.

"I wouldn't presume to make guesses about Her Holiness's decisions," said the sergeant smoothly.

The griping didn't end there. Luna could understand the villagers' ire, but wasn't inclined against the soldiers either. From what she had heard, Equestria was at war, and requisitioning foodstuffs from civilians was sometimes just a necessity when times were tough. In ages past, she herself had been forced into the position of keeping armies fed in such a manner. Seeing as this unit only asked for a portion from each household instead of simply taking everything, they were more benevolent than others might have been.

Once all the supplies were redistributed, the soldiers heaved their newly filled bags on their backs and set out. The sergeant had a one final thing to say to the villagers.

"Remember to be on the watch for griffon spies and saboteurs! Report any griffons you see in this area to the military immediately, and do not try to interact with them! Under no conditions are you to harbor any of them! Do you understand?"

The villagers exchanged worried glances, but had no reply otherwise. The sergeant gave them a nod and cantered off after her commanding officer. Luna watched her and the others head down the hillside for a moment, and then – to her surprise – went after them. At long last, she felt something clear and positive: curiosity. She wanted to know what the Equestrian military was really like, and so decided to follow the soldiers back to their camp. Luna had heard some disturbing, frightful things about Queen

Celestia. The truth was that she didn't want to believe them, so she hoped to find out more. There might have been, she thought, some other explanation for why things in this world were as they were.

The group headed northeast, crossing hill after hill on their way. Occasionally, they came across other collection teams picking up supplies from some of the other villages of Hillside, but there were still few villagers on the move. Luna's hooves didn't bend a single blade of grass as she walked, let alone make any noise. She didn't have to worry about being noticed, so she easily kept up with the other ponies' quick military march. It didn't take them long to reach the edge of the settlement. Once they got over one final ridge, Luna finally laid eyes on where the military had set up camp – an abandoned city.

Hillside was apparently located in territory annexed from the Griffon Kingdom many years ago. The ghostly city nearby had once been a griffon settlement. Although pony settlers had cannibalized it for raw materials and other valuable leftovers, griffon architecture wasn't really suited for permanent habitation by landlocked earth ponies, which most of the settlers just happened to be. Although it was still decent for giving an army unit on the move shade from the sunshine, the city was little more than a burned out ruin nowadays. Most of its plentiful towers had long since collapsed, brought down by the ravages of time, and perhaps also damage from the first pony-griffon war. The sad picture was completed by the giant sun illuminating the wreckage. It was close, just beyond the mountains that loomed on the horizon beyond the ruins.

The unicorn officer kept apart from the others on their way, but the sergeant made small talk with the others and asked questions of them. This all faded when they reached the abandoned city. Despite the hundreds of soldiers milling about the streets, the whole camp was unnaturally quiet. Luna wasn't sure whether that was because of the solemnity of the environment or something else entirely.

The band took their supplies to a quartermaster, based in an empty and cavernous hall that was largely intact. They also met their commanding officer there – a grizzled, middle-aged unicorn mare with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. The colonel's coat was a cloudy gray and her mane a silver-striped off-white. Half of her snout was a mess of talon-scars and she wore an eyepatch over one eye. The wounds looked relatively recent.



"Well, soldiers?" she asked the new arrivals sharply, "Did you see any *griffons*?"

It was the sergeant who answered. "No, sir. No griffons anywhere."

"That's where you're wrong!" barked the colonel, "Griffons can be just about anywhere! By Celestia, we can't let our guard down for one moment if we're to beat them! Do you think I got like this because I fell into a rosebush?" She raised her forehoof and pointed it at her face.

"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"What did the villagers have to say? Come on now!"

"They've seen no trace of the enemy."

"They are lying, of course," said the colonel, "We have reports of griffon scouts coming down in this area. I just know they're hiding somewhere around here!"

The sergeant wisely kept her mouth shut at that. Luna, on her part, turned around to leave in search of somepony more interesting. This whole scene was an embarrassment. Before stepping out the door, she took one last look at the colonel, who was now pacing around the hall with a manic intensity. Her eyes were gleaming with unshed tears and madness.

"I'll need to go there myself in a turn or two to find out the truth! Yes, there will have to be an inspection..."

Luna shook her head and stepped outside. This mare was obviously in no condition to be in command of anything right now. Still, there would probably be no great harm if she brought her troops to knock on some doors in Hillside. After all, it wasn't as if there were really griffon spies hidden there...

She went on to trot around the cityscape, covertly looking in on what the soldiers were up to. Being invisible granted her a pleasant sense of freedom, though this freedom came at a price. She felt like a coward, and a bit of a voyeur as well. This was not behavior befitting a Princess.

From what Luna gathered, there were about a thousand earth ponies in the ruined city – a battalion – as well as some hundred pegasi. The earth ponies were under the command of unicorn officers. Many of them were busy with drills and sparring, or with fixing up this or that for their temporary lodgings, or with standing guard on the perimeter, but just as many were resting and waiting. As expected, the upcoming battle dominated all conversation, but the general mood was neither as somber nor as jittery as Luna would have expected. The troops seemed to await the coming battle with resignation. No pony seemed worried that the griffons would strike first.

Luna soon came across a group of officers discussing the state of things over a meal. Their outlook was generally optimistic.

"If it hadn't been for that mishap in Stalliongrad, we'd have won this war already. At this point, we're just wasting time."

"I'm not so sure about that. It'll probably take us some time to take the Valley of the Wind and get our main force into griffon territory."

"Do you think that terrorist incursion into Everfree might have been part of the reason for why top brass delayed the attack?"

"Perhaps. I don't see why the Council would be so worried though. The rebels were routed, weren't they? They were never even a threat."

"I have to admit, speaking purely from a strategic perspective, I don't feel comfortable leaving the City so defenseless while most of the army is concentrated here. It would take us weeks to get back there, and the occupation army in Zebrica is out of the game entirely."

"The garrison at Everfree is more than enough to handle Applejack's rag-tag bunch of misfits. She'll never have the numbers to threaten the City openly. The Secret Police will handle them. Meanwhile, we have the griffons shaking in their feathers, so they won't strike out beyond their borders. Who does that leave? No one. Gentleponies, we have no enemies left."

"I can't believe you're worried about that. The *Queen* is in Everfree City."

One veteran earth pony warrior, sitting underneath a tarp overhang with a bunch of younger recruits, was giving instructions on enemy tactics.

"You'll hear officers telling you that griffons are cowards. They'll be talking right out of their flanks! Griffons are not cowards. In nine cases out of ten, a griffon will face you head on in an honest battle. They're too honorable to ambush you or gang up on you. They call it "chivalry." That's their weakness right there, you hear me? Never get into a one-on-one fight if you can help it. When you see an opportunity to hit them while they're unawares, take it. When one of them picks you out, retreat. Mingle with your comrades, rely on numbers to overwhelm them. That's how you'll survive."

As cynical and dirty as this sounded, it was probably good, pragmatic advice. Luna couldn't blame them for thinking this way. Others, however, had very different ideas and were even looking forward to the battle. On a lookout post on top of one of the standing towers, three pegasi in chainmail armor were having a discussion of their own. Since no stairs led there at all, Luna had to hover up so the beating of her wings wouldn't give her away.

"Sir Darlton Feathershine the Rampant. That's who I want to fight. He's supposed to be a real beast, so wild that others won't even hunt with him. Huge as a bear, too! They won't soon forget my name if I manage to kill him. I've heard he's been spotted at the griffons' defensive line near here, so I think I have a shot."

"Feathershine is good, but the real prizes are back at the Capitolium Leo. I'm setting my sights on one of the King's Claws, the bodyguards of the royal line. If I'm lucky, I might even nab Frederica Greenhill. The Avenger, they call her. Though, I'm worried the capital will already have been picked apart by the time we get there."

"I thought Dame Greenhill had passed away? She must be close to a hundred by now."

"The way I hear it, she swore an oath to die in battle before old age claims her. She'll take to the field sooner or later. If only those bloody giftless earth ponies could finally get a move on..."

"Your goals are lofty, my fellows – but I'm aiming higher still. I'm going to bring down an aeromancer, just you wait."

Overall, there was griping about the army group whose late arrival was responsible for the delay in the invasion plans, musing about sneaking to Hillside for some off-duty entertainment, grouching over the rationing. It was all very normal, very expected, and yet Luna couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. From time to time, she could sense the indistinct stink of rotting meat in the stale air, but the feeling disappeared as soon as she tried to home in on it. She couldn't even trust herself to be sure whether she merely imagined it or not. On top of that, even though she knew she was invisible, she couldn't get over the notion that somepony or something was watching her.

Throughout all this, Luna still couldn't figure out the big mystery... **Why** was Equestria going to war? Why all this was necessary? Ponies were pure and noble and good in general, and not given to warring unless it was to defend themselves. They usually only did bad things because of bad influence, because they were led astray. The Celestia Luna knew would never have condoned violence without a very good reason. What was she supposed to make of it all? Was she among the armies of evil or the forces of righteousness? She wished her sister had been there to help her and to take away the responsibility of having to decide for herself what to do. Luna was too tired to think properly.

In the end, Luna even saw a griffon – a dead one. She caught the scent of its blood from up the street. When she went to investigate, she found a small crowd gathered around a limping pegasus with a broken wing. The pegasus was very small for an adult stallion, and his bulging eyes would have been almost funny if it hadn't been for the streaks of dried blood in his coat. The griffon corpse he was dragging behind himself was covered in dark red, and every single limb seemed to be bent at an odd angle.

"Why did you bring it back to camp?" somepony asked him.

"Trophy," grunted the pegasus, "For my wall."

Luna shuddered.

## **Turn 11**

By the time Luna returned to the cottage a couple of hours later, Sandy and Sweet Potato were already back home as well. Despite knowing she was welcome there, Luna slinked inside with the greatest sense of

embarrassment, which was then mostly dispelled when little Wingspan came galloping up to her like an excited puppy.

"Hello!" he said.

"Good, um, good day!" said Luna earnestly.

"You gonna do another trick, Miss Woonna?"

"No, not right now. Maybe later..."

Wingspan nodded, grabbed her by the hoof and dragged her over to the hearth, where his parents were making dinner, lunch, breakfast – whatever. It looked to be some sort of tree root soup.

"Welcome back!" said Sandy, "We're so glad you're okay!"

"Oh yes," agreed Sweet Potato, "We got a little worried about chasing you out of the house just as the soldiers came around for another visit. None of them saw you, did they?"

"No," said Luna, "Why shouldn't they see me?"

They couple glanced at each other. "We just thought it might be... trouble," said Sandy.

Luna had hidden herself from the soldiers almost off-handedly, but now she tried to imagine what kind of "trouble" she might have gotten into with them. She could at least hope that none of them would have tried to make a trophy out of her.

Sandy and Sweet Potato had been kind enough to give Luna a place to stay since she'd found her way to Hillside a short while ago. She'd been in a rather sorry state back then, so she was thankful for their assistance, even though she didn't strictly speaking need the shelter or the food. Luna had told the family – in rough terms – who she was and where she was from, though she didn't for a moment think that they fully believed her. They did, however, accept her even though she looked unlike anything they had ever seen.

Sweet Potato was fairly small of frame for an earth pony, though still all wiry muscle under his yellow coat. He had spiky ginger hair and – unsurprisingly – a potato for a cutie mark, though it was a potato plant, not the produce itself. Sandy was a maroon pegasus with a black-ish mane and tail and a quill cutie mark. One of her wings was slightly bent, indicating an old injury. Their young colt took after his mother in looks as well as race. He was still very young and didn't yet seem to understand the differences between his parents.

"The soup's almost ready if you want it!" said Sweet Potato.

"You didn't eat anything earlier, so you must be very hungry," added Sandy, "I'll get out a bowl for you."

"Um, thanks."

Luna would have preferred to go back to sleep, but didn't feel the need to argue. It was courteous to stay for the meal. In the same vein, although she didn't need nearly as much sustenance as a normal pony, she still forced herself to eat so the others wouldn't feel uncomfortable about what she was.

"By the way, I noticed that the hinge on the door is a little shaky!" said Luna, "I could fix that up for you, if you want."

Sandy and Sweet Potato glanced at each other again, as they often did. They were so in tune with each other seemed to understand each other perfectly through the shortest moments of eye contact. Every time they did it, Luna felt like she was getting left out of entire unvoiced conversations.

"Feel free if you'd like," said Sandy with a smile.

Luna could hardly take a step back towards the entrance when she already found Wingspan at her side.

"You're going to do a magic trick, aren't you?"

"I will perform a spell, yes, but it really won't be very impressive this time."

She couldn't help but try to give him a little show of sorts. She let a bit of mist stream forth as she started exuding black light from her horn. Pointing

the horn at the hinge, she started working her magic, reverting the effects of years of mechanical stress. For good measure, she fixed the other one as well. Though his parents looked fairly ambivalent about the display, Wingspan watched Luna in fascination. He had never seen unicorn magic before meeting her.

"That was very nice of you, Luna," said Sweet Potato once she was done.

"No problem!" replied Luna with a vague smile.

It was her way of giving something back to the family. With her magical expertise, repairing this and that around the household was easy as pie. All the same though, she couldn't suppress the guilty little feeling that told her that this was pointless and that there were much bigger issues she should have concerned herself with.

After that, they ate. Luna gobbled up her bowl of soup dutifully and remained sitting at the table. The soup tasted a lot like... well, tree roots – rather bland, in other words. Wingspan wasn't fond of it, but his mother talked him into finishing it, after which he retreated into his play-corner for some quality time with his toys. Luna waited until his parents were done as well.

"I'm curious about some things," she said.

Both Sandy and Sweet Potato smiled identical smiles. Luna had been curious about a lot of things. She'd been quizzing them about most anything that came to mind since she'd moved in. They had taught her a lot of things about the world she now found herself in.

"What do you want to know?"

"What, exactly, does 'giftless' mean?" asked Luna.

The couple shared yet another glance, their smiles gone now. Asking the question, or just saying the word, seemed to impact their good mood somewhat. In this case, the glance was an indication for Sweet Potato to speak.

"Well, according to all the histories, all ponies used to be just ponies. When Celestia descended from the heavens and brought harmony to Equestria,

she gave her subjects two gifts: horns and wings like her own. One third of ponykind became unicorns and another third pegasi. But the Queen didn't have any gifts left for those that remained, so they had to stay just ponies forever after. That's why we're the giftless."

"The Queen also declared that since earth ponies are the only ones that can grow crops anywhere but the very hottest deserts, they were obligated to produce food for ponykind and handle the more menial jobs while the other races dealt with more important matters using their gifts."

"That- that doesn't even make sense!" burst out Luna, "How are earth ponies giftless if they have abilities unicorns and pegasi don't? Doesn't anypony realize how contradictory this is? Just because earth ponies' talents aren't visible-"

She shut up abruptly, turning a little red under Sandy's and Sweet Potato's gazes. They certainly didn't need her to tell them how unfair the system was. Sweet Potato was the one that had lived with this discrimination his entire life.

"Wait, you're saying you've been taught that Celestia created unicorns and pegasi?" wondered Luna, "That is such a... such a... such a load of **dung**!"

"How do you know?" asked Sandy and Sweet at the same time.

It was a good question. She didn't really know, or at least, she couldn't explain how she felt safe in the knowledge that things had happened the same way in this universe as they had in her own.

"Everything in Equestria is kept separate between earth ponies and the other two races," said Sandy, "Schools and hospitals, obviously, and public facilities too. In the case of living areas, it's more the result of economic differences. Relationships are restricted as well."

"Relationships are restricted?" repeated Luna, "You mean... there are anti-miscegenation laws?"

"Miscege-what?"

"I mean, it's illegal for ponies of two different races to marry?"



"Well, it's not illegal... It's just not supposed to happen. That goes for all three races, but earth ponies especially."

"If a foal born to a pegasus and earth pony couple or a unicorn and earth pony couple has wings or a horn, they're said to have stolen Celestia's Gift. Things can be very difficult for ponies born from such unions."

Both of them looked over to Wingspan as one. The colt was lounging on the floor and drawing on a piece of paper with dark blue crayon. Luna could guess what he was drawing. Since her arrival, he'd churned out one heart-warmingly grotesque rendition of her after another. He seemed to think she was "cool."

"Do the other ponies here have a problem with you two... you know?" asked Luna.

"Some do. Sandy gets some nasty glances from time to time..."

"That's not because I'm a pegasus; they just think I'm useless."

"...but we get along with most folks just fine. Wingspan plays with the other colts and fillies like any other kid. They're just used to us by now, I suppose."

"Out here in the borderlands, these kinds of stigmas aren't *too* big of a deal. There's one other pegasus in Hillside, and I hear her family's lived here since the beginning. Young stallions try to court her often enough, but she's not very sociable and mostly stays to herself. That kind of stuff would not be acceptable in the city."

"Well," said Luna, "what would happen if two ponies in a city decided to pursue that kind of relationship? Or what if you moved to some bigger place?"

"I'm not really sure, to be honest," said Sandy with a nervous laugh, while Sweet Potato shrugged. Neither of them looked comfortable with the thought.

"How did you two end up together then, if this is such a big deal?" asked Luna, "How did you even meet? You're not from around here, are you Sandy?" She paused. "I hope it's okay for me to ask."

Sandy laughed, but there was a certain awkward fakeness to it. She had a brief look at her husband before answering. "Of course it's okay! It's kind of a long story though, and not nearly as exciting as you'd expect from a tale of forbidden love. I won't bore you with the details."

That sounded rather evasive, but Luna didn't feel the need to push it. Everypony had some things they wanted to keep to themselves, or things they just didn't like to talk about.

They were all silent for a good long time. Sandy and Sweet Potato finished up their meals, while Luna sat still and pondered. Her thoughts kept sliding back to the one big issue still on her mind – the question she'd been wondering about since coming to Hillside, but had never dared ask. She reckoned it was time to see if she had built up enough courage by now.

Besides, protracted silences with Sandy and Sweet Potato always made her nervous that they were only waiting for the chance to ask Luna when she would move out.

She cleared her throat, catching their attention, and looked at both of them in turn.

"Do you know anything about any other ponies named Luna?" she asked, her voice a little more high-pitched than she intended.

She could tell right away that they did not. Both of them looked at each other inquisitively and were reassured that the other knew just as little about any Lunas as themselves.

"I don't think so, no."

"Sorry, doesn't ring a bell."

"It wouldn't necessarily be somepony you know," urged Luna, "It might be a historical figure, or... something!"

She was too embarrassed to mention the possibility of "Luna" being the former co-ruler of Equestria.

"Well, if you're wondering about history, there's somepony who might be able to help you."

Luna leaned forward. "Oh? Please, go on!"

"There's an old pony that used to work in the big city many years ago. He's not quite a scholar, but he does know a lot, especially about folklore and things like that."

"Mind you, he is getting on in the years, so his memory is a little fuzzy. He can't remember his name anymore, so we at the village just call him Old Pony."

"He lives right near here, on Last Hill."

## **Turn 12**

Luna had a self-conscious look around before raising her hoof and knocking on Old Pony's door. Although the hut he lived in wasn't terribly big, it took a long time before Luna got any sort of response. As Sandy and Sweet Potato had explained to her, catching somepony while they were awake was a matter of luck, so she waited. Just as she started wondering whether it would be proper to knock again, she heard shuffling from inside. Soon after, the door opened, revealing a shriveled-up old stallion half the size of Luna herself. Old Pony had a coat of faded turquoise and little to none of his mane left. He squinted up his eyes in the sunlight.

"Hi?" said Luna.

"Oh? Oh, why hello there! I've been expecting you!"

Luna's eyes widened. "You- you have?"

"Well, aren't you here to deliver my milk?"

"What? No! That's not it at all! My name is Luna, I came here because I heard you could tell me something about the legends of Equestria's past!"

Old Pony stood still for a moment, an expression of utter confusion on his face, then smiled. "Is that how it is? Well, come on in then! You'll have to forgive me, it's a bit of a mess, eh."

Saying it was a bit of a mess was an understatement. The light shining in through the open doorway illuminated the oodles of dust swirling around in

the air, and everything else as well. There were books, scrolls and clothes strewn about everywhere, and a rolled-up rug took up most of the dining table – and there was a smell, oh yes. Luna could tell Old Pony was a bachelor. A moment later, she felt bad for thinking that.

Stepping into the room, she almost lost her balance and fell over when the small brown thing on the floor she had (for some reason) thought was a fur hat – but actually turned out to be a small cat – leapt up and streaked across the room. The only space clear for sitting was the bed, so Luna elected to remain standing. Old Pony ponderously made his way there to lie down. Once down, he paused to think.

"Oh my goodness," he said, "I forgot to offer you some water."

"That's all right," said Luna quickly.

It was apparently a bit discourteous for a visitor to refuse water when offered, but Luna was uncomfortable seeing somepony this old and infirm strain himself. She wasn't going to let herself be waited on. Old Pony didn't look offended, but that didn't stop an awkward silence from settling in. His eyes were half-closed and his head kept swaying downwards, as if he was close to nodding off.

"So," began Luna, "is it true you don't remember your name anymore?"

"What'd you say?"

"Never mind..."

"What?"

Luna bit her lip and raised her voice when she continued. "I have a question about the history of Equestria! I was told you were the pony to see?"

"Oh yeah? Well, I do know this and that."

"Well, what I want to know is..." She searched for the proper words. "Do you know anything about Queen Celestia ever having a sister?"

"You're referring to the Forgotten Princess?"

Luna lowered her head. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Hmmmhm. Not many primary sources survive from that period, but I am familiar with the known lore surrounding her. Her name was Luna, and she was once Celestia's equal and opposite." He cleared his throat. "Once upon a time, in the wake of the disastrous reign of Discord, both sisters ruled Equestria together. Celestia, the elder sister, controlled the sun and Luna, the younger sister, controlled the moon. In these days, you see, time passed in a cycle of days and nights, heralded by the movement of two different celestial bodies. The moon was similar to the sun, but brought darkness instead of light. Both sisters also had the title of Princess, in case you're wondering. Anyway, Equestria is said to have been very different in those times – very peaceful and harmonious. But a thousand years ago, something changed."

At this point, Old Pony paused and blinked his eyes in confusion.

"Yes?" Luna urged him.

"Easy, my dear. I was just collecting my thoughts. Now where was I? Oh yes." He cleared his throat again. "Princess Luna disappeared, and Celestia became Queen. Things continued on much the same for a while, and nopony ever knew what happened to Luna. However, there is one last reference to her in the historical texts. When the Queen declared the Eternal Day, destroyed the moon and started the wars of conquest, Luna is supposed to have returned and led a rebellion to try and stop her sister. She came with a secret weapon, something called the Aspects of Harmony or the Elements of Harmony and fought Celestia in a grand battle that is said to have moved mountains. But she and her rebellion failed, and that was the last anypony has heard of her. This was the beginning of what is commonly known as the Tyranny of Light, approximately 750 years ago. From then on, Princess Luna has been consigned to the realm of memory."

"So she was killed," said Luna, looking at the floor.

There was a substantial pause before Old Pony answered. "Yes," he said. He was now staring intently at Luna, eyes fully open, as if only now realizing how unusual she looked like. "What did you say your name was again, young lady?"

Luna ignored the question. It wasn't so much that she felt she had to be secretive – she just didn't see the point if he was likely to forget her as soon as she left anyway.

"Why?" she asked, "Why did Celestia do that? Did she... do it out of her own free will?"

"There is some question on the matter."

"Well, hurry up and tell me!"

"Ahem. There are some stories claiming that Celestia became a tyrant because she has been possessed, or that she has some sort of alter ego called Daymare Sun. The Queen has never referred to herself as such though, and in fact actively discourages ponies from spreading rumors like that."

Luna swayed on her hooves for a moment, then buckled and turned around. She muttered a halfhearted thank you to the surprised Old Pony and rushed out of the hut, back into the bright sunlight. There were perhaps other questions she might have asked, other important matters to consider, but for the moment, she just wanted to get out of there.

She galloped away at random, holding back tears, not even minding where she was going. A painful mixture of different feelings was swirling around in her chest. She felt at a loss on how to handle this, what to think, how to cope. It was hard to think even straight. Rationally speaking, she knew that the Princess Luna who'd lived and died in this world was not her, that she'd been another individual entirely. At the same time though, she knew without the shadow of a doubt that it could have been her, if things had gone differently. Distinguishing them was difficult.

There had once been a time when Luna had been terribly afraid that her sister was going to kill her, but the matter of her mortality was not something she felt she had ever resolved. The thought that she might come across her own dusty bones disturbed her, but that wasn't even the worst of it. Knowing that this entire world and everything wrong with it was a monument to her **failure** was something else entirely. Whereas Celestia had managed to use the Elements of Harmony to defeat the evil Nightmare Moon, Luna had fallen short in her mission to save the world from Daymare Sun, and died. How many species had gone extinct when the ecosystem

had collapsed? How many thinking beings had died in the wars? How many ponies had been killed for trying to resist? And how many still lived under the thrall of a tyrant, not even knowing that they could have been living full and happy lives in freedom, peace and harmony?

It was, all of it, Luna's fault as well – and that burned her more than the heat of the sun ever could. The sheer scope of it was hard to grasp. How was she supposed to deal with the weight of it all?

Underneath, in her heart of hearts, Luna even felt a touch of a sickening sense of triumph, mixed with familiar shameful jealousy. The fact that a world without her was a horrible, desolate wasteland was, in a sense, incontrovertible proof that she **mattered**. But that was the thing, wasn't it? While the absence of Luna and her moon brought about a decline, it didn't cause the death of everything in all the land like the disappearance of Celestia and her sun would have. It was clear who the more important one of the two was, was it not?

Luna almost wanted to laugh. Worrying over her place in the cosmos was such a ridiculously petty concern, especially in light of the suffering ordinary ponies went through. She hated herself for being such a pathetic crybaby. Acting hysterical like that should have been beneath her, but she simply didn't have Celestia's uncanny self-control; she couldn't help it.

Luna didn't get very far into the countryside before slowing down her pace and gradually coming to a halt. She sighed and looked around, blinking her eyes to clear the tears from them. She had ended up next to a large, half-empty field of carrots, with stalks of corn visible further away. A familiar-looking patch of pines was visible on the next hill over, indicating that she was still close to Sandy and Sweet Potato's cottage. Feeling rather drained, Luna flapped her wings and rose up into the air to quickly get back to bed and forget about everything for a while. There was no way that she wanted to face her hosts right now, but odds were that they had left to go to work by then.

As she was soaring, Luna's gaze accidentally drifted towards the sun. Looking at it made her flinch, and not simply because she didn't like what she saw. She knew nature, and could sense exactly how unnatural the sun's power was. It wasn't just radiating sunshine and fire, but also an evil magic that seemed frightfully familiar to her. The longer she let her gaze

linger on it, the more her impressions deepened of some vast intelligence staring back at her, of not being alone, of furious screams echoing inside her head...

With a start, Luna realized that she wasn't imagining it. The screaming was real; she could hear it. It seemed to come from the cottage ahead of her: her destination.

Frowning, Luna sped up and touched down before the cottage. Its door – the same one Luna had repaired previously – had been knocked off its hinges and was now lying on the ground, a large crack running through it. Several voices sounded from inside. Luna stepped into the doorway. The scene that unfolded before her made her blood boil.

The dining table had been tossed upside down, the dishes broken into pieces on the floor. Wingspan was cowering in the corner, a small trail of blood running from his nose. There was an earth pony soldier standing before him. Another one was beating on an unconscious Sweet Potato, already battered and bruised. Two more were menacing Sandy, who was backing away in stiff, twitchy movements, her face contorted into a fearful grimace. All of the soldiers were saying something or other, whether they were shouting angrily or speaking in quiet mockery. Luna couldn't make out what they were saying in the confusion, beyond hearing one of them call Sandy a whore. It didn't matter. She didn't care what they had to say. She didn't bother demanding an explanation either.

Quivering with silent rage, Luna took a step forward and raised her wings, blocking off most of the light from the doorway and causing the room to dim. This was enough to catch the soldiers' attention. Each of them turned to face her, but before they had a chance to react, Luna's shadow stretched forward on the floor, growing clearer and darker, swirling and spreading like a living thing. Once it touched their hooves, the soldiers were caught in it, unable to move. Luna plucked them from where they stood and dragged them towards her, away from their victims. One of them whinnied fearfully, another gave a wheezy scream of his own. Luna stepped back out the door, drew them out after her and tossed them in the air. The shadow retreated back into the approximate shape of a pony and reared.

One of the soldiers went rolling down the hillside. The other three were picking themselves up from their harsh landing. Luna jumped on the closest



one, knocked the helmet off his head and pounded down on his face until he stopped moving. Even seeing red, her mind completely blank, she held back her full strength so she only ended up knocking him unconscious. Without pausing to take a breath, she took aim at the next one and fired off a spell. The flare of black light burst out of her horn and struck the soldier in the chest. The soldier, somewhat protected by his golden armor, was left staggering backwards in a daze. A few more shots and he collapsed to the ground.

The third one was more prepared. He reached down with his mouth and pulled a short sword from a scabbard on his chest, then made a mad dash to get to her before she could get him. Luna deflected the sword with her horn and slammed her forehoof into the soldier's chest, but he had strength enough to shrug that off. His next slash, Luna ducked. This gave her the opening to buck him to kingdom come. The soldier's jaw shattered under her horseshoes. Luna – panting heavily, though more from anger than exertion – was left staring at him writhing on the ground in pain. Somehow, it didn't seem like punishment enough for hurting a child.

There was still one left – the one who had gotten separated from the others. When Luna scanned the hillside for him, she found him galloping away in fright. Luna took to the air and swooped after him. It took her mere seconds to catch up.

"Face me, you coward!" she yelled.

The soldier stumbled on the uneven terrain and went sprawling before Luna could even do anything. Luna came down on top of him and pressed him against the ground roughly, but before she could incapacitate this fourth bastard, she noticed more soldiers approaching. Two infantryponies and an officer were coming to their comrade's aid. Luna growled in frustration. She hadn't thought this through at all, had she?

The new arrivals were confused and frightened. They didn't understand what they were up against. Luna wasn't sure what to do about them, but unicorn officer made that decision for her when she ordered an attack. Both of the earth pony soldiers pulled out their own swords and split up to get to either side of Luna. The officer gouged out some sort of whistle and blew it. Luna had no patience for this, and tried to communicate that.

"I'm not the bad guy here, you fools!"

The group was warily edging closer. Luna had to swing her head around from one side to another to keep sight of them. More of them were coming as well, over the crest of another nearby hill. The one underneath Luna's hooves feebly tried to crawl free, so she kicked him.

"Stay away if you know what's good for you!"

They wouldn't listen. They were just moments from attacking. This was going all wrong...

"I said... **stay away!**"

Luna got rid of the soldiers surrounding her by teleporting them away, all the way to the other side of the settlement. She needed more time to think, but it was no use. The next group of reinforcements was much bigger – an entire contingent. It looked like every soldier in the vicinity was coming for her.

Luna was going to make them disappear as well, but it wasn't just soldiers that were coming. There were at least a dozen village ponies among them, chained together by leashes around their necks. They were being led by the mad commander Luna had seen earlier. She stomped ahead of the other, but slowed down the closer she got to Luna until she finally came to a halt opposite her. Upon seeing Luna's wings, horn, mane and shadow, the colonel's expression had turned to one of shock.

"What *are* you?" she demanded.

"What are these ponies doing here?" asked Luna in turn, nodding towards the villagers.

"Them? They're suspicious persons that I've placed under arrest!"

"On what charges?"

The colonel hesitated. Luna doubted that she could even describe whatever paranoid logic drove her to go this far with her "inspection." She had been gravely mistaken in thinking that this delusional madmare wouldn't be a danger to anypony. What would happen to them now, if Luna didn't do something?

"I don't have to justify myself to you, freak!" said the colonel, "I ask again: what are you? And what are you doing with my subordinate?"

"Help me, sir, please!" cried the pony under Luna.

She kicked him again. "Shut your mouth, worm!"

Luna didn't even try to calm herself down. She stood tall and proud and fixed the colonel with a glare.

"You want to know what I am?" she asked, "Well, I'll tell you! I am your rightful lord and master; I am your Princess! And if you do not obey me, I will be **your worst nightmare!** The conduct of the troops under your command is reprehensible, and their behavior reflects a failure in leadership on your part! Consider yourself relieved of duty! I will take charge myself!"

The colonel stared at her in disbelief, and some of her forces started murmuring amongst themselves. Luna heard some of what they were saying: "looks like the Queen," "what did she do," "insane," "look at her hair," "demon." Finally, the mare in charge started shaking her head, too flabbergasted even to laugh. In fact, she seemed to be getting angrier. Without looking at her forces, she gave them a single, simple command.

"Bring me her head!"

Luna wasn't certain, but she had the impression that Equestria had just declared war on her.

## Turn 13

Things had... escalated.

Luna had never meant for things to go this far. She had never meant for any of this to happen at all, but now the die was cast and Luna had to see how it landed.

She had been fighting for hours now, with hoof and magic both. Pegasi, unicorns and earth ponies alike had thrown themselves at her, but they'd bitten off more than they could chew. Luna had defeated them all. The mad commander herself had been taken care of easily enough, and her captives

freed and sent home. Luna had also checked up on Sandy and Sweet Potato to make sure they were all right, and imprisoned the four soldiers that had tried to harm them, though in truth, she had no idea what to do with the villains now.

These things accomplished, she had flown all across Hillside and driven out any and all troops in it. Then she had moved on to the dead city of the griffons, where she had done the same. She was still there now, scouring the streets of strays. Few of the soldiers resisted anymore; most simply left the city behind and escaped. Before Luna knew it, the place had been hers.

By this point, Luna had calmed down, more or less, and granted that she had probably overreacted a little. Even though the ironclad certainty that had driven her actions was starting to fade, she didn't really feel bad either. The thing that had been guiding her was pure protective instinct. True, she could have flown away, escaped, avoided conflict – but that would have meant having the leave Hillside at the mercy of these barbarians.

Not a single soul had been killed in the course of her rampage, not even those desperate few that had grasped her motives and tried to use the villagers as hostages. She did not fault all of them for the actions of a few, but it was obvious by now that the presence of the battalion might have been quite a bit more than a slight disruption in the villagers' daily lives. They were a threat. Luna had rectified that... but it wasn't enough.

Luna didn't feel tired, weak, lethargic or feeble any longer. Her sorrow and self-pity were forgotten for now, burned out by a righteous anger she had not felt in an eternity. For the first time since her arrival in this world, she felt exhilarated and alive. It might have been because she had done the right thing. She had needed something like this, something to snap her out of her funk. Rather than feeling bad about what her counterpart in this world had failed to do in the distant past, she had to work out what she could do right in the here and now. She'd spent enough time hiding and avoiding responsibility when there was so much for her to do, such a great many things that had to be fixed.

Luna truly believed that ponies were good by nature. They didn't do bad things but for bad influence, and an unfit commanding officer was neither the beginning nor the end. That's why Luna had to go directly for the

source of the problem. The first thing that had to be corrected was Daymare Sun.