

# Frigid Winds and Burning Hearts

By Grey Prophet



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# Chapter 1

The biting north wind blew across the lands of Equestria, carrying upon its breath the promise of an early winter. Everypony, from the mighty citadel-capitol of Canterlot to the humble village of Ponyville, took shelter from the fell notice; its howling call may just as well have been that of a pack of wolves outside their doorways. That is save one pony overlooking the lands from her mountain perch. Well, "pony" is perhaps unfitting to describe a living-deity out performing her daily task of seeing to the proper upkeep of the night-sky. Yet, obscured by its dark shroud, one would be blameless for mistaking the alicorn goddess for a commoner. Her stature paled in relation to her sister Celestia and, fair or not, the sun goddess was the standard of what ponies had come to expect from a divine being.

But this was not what troubled Luna.

Well, in a very small way it did. The ancient issue of respect was close to Luna, but she was never too keen of being too visible to her subjects, and her low-key appearance aided her in this endeavor. In fact, she found her natural form quite liberating as she did not need to don the pretensions of divinity and was therefore not constrained by the order and duty it entailed. Unlike her sister.

Yes, Luna was quite unlike Celestia. The obvious dichotomy the two represent manifested itself daily to the world in the very nature of the cycle the goddesses put into motion: Celestia's single, massive star subjugating the skies to conform to a uniform blue and Luna's multitude of stars shining and swirling across the chaotic void were fitting metaphors for their respective personalities.

Celestia was a leader, an apt, pragmatic politician who was keen with preserving the status quo. Celestia's dear student of a past age, Marechiavelli, had compiled her observations of her teacher and employed them in supporting her treatise, *The Princess*. The work was largely suppressed by the court at Canterlot, but nonetheless depicted Celestia's statecraft with deftness and insight. The goddess was a mare of many masks, a vital quality that allowed her the fluidity needed to survive as

supreme ruler of Equestria for two millennia. Over the centuries, her public life and private life had become blurred and the former gradually came to dominate her personality, though this isn't to say she had lost her famous sense of humor or any other aspect of her personality. Luna could attest to that. But even these light hearted characteristics had become increasingly just more tools in her political war-chest.

Luna, on the other hand, was no politician. She was a free spirit compelled to shatter the shackles of the ordinary and challenge her subjects to confront the unknown. The princess of the night was the patron and inspiration of all artists, those ponies who accepted her invitation to peer deeper into the inner-workings of both the natural and social world. Of the works of her many admirers, Luna loved Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* above all. It invoked the tranquility and peace of her night while providing the intellectual stimuli conducive to creating something wholly new and beautiful, and this she did daily with her wonderful welkin. Being a relatively undisciplined free spirit, however, left Luna susceptible to letting her passions impair her judgment and dilute her overarching objectives for change and reform, ones quite unpopular with Celestia...

It was just this fact that had brought Luna to the lonely mountain just outside Ponyville. As she stared up at the cosmos, the faint light of the stars reflected in her soft tears causing them to glisten; a final, tender act of comfort that both concluded and made worthy the ancient journey of her celestial rays. The wind, however, was no friend of the goddess. Her tears were buffeted by the chilling breeze, cutting at her flesh like a knife grating against stone. Her dark blue face was tinged with red, but the wind's harsh caress was not the sole cause for this; a pony need only look into her eyes to be assured. In them reflected the indignation and confusion in her heart, Luna's usual prescription of solitude doing little to allay her seething emotions. But then why would it?

She had confronted Celestia.

It was the first time she had done so since her madness was cast off by the Elements of Harmony one short year ago. Trying to beat back her emotional impulses, Luna focused on recounting what had occurred this evening in her mind.

Celestia and Luna were walking together from their quarters to one of the great dining halls of their castle. Luna was starving, having absent-mindedly passed over lunch. A little irritable, she quipped at Celestia.

"Sis, I don't see why we have to wait so long before we go seat ourselves at *our* table and eat something. Don't you ever get tired of this endless pomp and procedure? I mean, I would be fine with a hay sandwich, well, maybe a side salad too. It's a tad bit extravagant to put on such a pointless fea-".

Celestia stopped her there.

"Luna, you know full well that I would much rather have a quick meal with you and relax for awhile away from this...incorrigible lot, but these dinners serve their function. It's important to not appear distant to the nobility, you know. I have to assure them that we are serving their interests, even though we may not be. Please behave yourself, and I promise that we can prepare a more private dinner for us later this week."

"There, she did it again", Luna thought, her eyes rolling, "Trying to buy me off as if I were a foal to be pacified. "

Quickly picking up the fact Luna was peeved, Celestia realized what she had done. "Luna, I'm so sorry, it's just that I've been working on breaking up and redistributing the unproductive fields the nobility neglec-."

"Heh, "Nobility"!" Luna sneered, taking to the air and spinning around her sister casually.

"—t so that more farmers can produce to feed the demands of the growing population. The poor harvest this year isn't helping either..."

"Celly, why must we keep these "nobles" around? They're a bunch of lazy, pretentious hacks who spend way too much time reveling in your little "royal family" myth..."

Celestia turned to her sister with a stern look.

"*Enough*, Luna. I don't like their elitist airs anymore than you. But Luna, you know why. You're no foal," she said with exasperation as they neared the

dining room, "so please don't bring this issue up at the banquet. It took me 150 years to fix the damage your last outburst caused."

Luna's eyes widened and her body froze as Celestia passed her and entered the dining hall. It was the first time Celestia had mentioned their fight; the fact that it was in such a passive aggressive manner made it even worse. She descended on hoof and tried to shake it off before entering the hall, but the blood had drained from her face and her mind was a thousand miles away as she faintly heard the familiar announcements.

"Mares and Gentlecolts, the Princess Celestia and her sister, Princess Luna."

Luna heard the sound of a few hundred ponies rising from their seats at once in perfect orchestra. She quickly shook her head in an attempt to regain focus as she entered the great hall, but it did little to stave off her shock. As she took her seat next to her sister at the head table and everypony sat down, Luna desperately searched out something to distract herself from Celestia's cold words. Thankfully, the opulence of the hall and the droves of elite provided a significant amount of distraction fodder for the princess.

Admittedly, Luna had never actually attended a banquet in the hall. Heck, she had hardly met anypony present. After she had been cured of her ills, Luna kept a low profile in her quarters studying modern history and science in an upward-hill struggle to grasp the contemporary world. Though aspects of technology and chemistry often frazzled her, history was, at first, a pleasure. It showed Luna that Celestia had allowed the ponies to progress, even in the realm of governance. A few centuries after Luna's departure, Celestia had established a parliamentary body consisting of nobles and members of the bourgeoisie. As time passed, the assembly took on a democratic character with representatives catering to their constituent interests rather than class interests. Luna's heart rejoiced at this, thinking it as a sign that the monarchy had outlived its usefulness and that the goddesses could finally begin to detach themselves from the affairs of ponies and live life free, just what she had wanted to so long ago...

Through more reading, however, Luna found that Celestia still was still the ultimate authority in nearly *all affairs*, from local boundary disputes to national defense spending. Equestria's political history was clear; no major

party could effectively challenge Celestia. The common-pony's reverence for the goddess in their midst was a powerful political force that made it unnecessary for Celestia to dispose of her opposition directly, helping her to maintain her immaculate public appearance while allowing her to bend the system to her will. Parliament was Celestia's tool, an illusory democracy designed to pacify revolution and maintain the status quo. History became more unpleasant for Luna as this reality dawned on her. Celestia was still enthralled by her power drive...

"No!" Luna thought "Stop thinking about the past! Think of something else! Look at the hall, isn't it lovely?"

Indeed, the hall was an impressive sight. It was far grander than any room at the Everfree Castle had ever been. Mighty, classical columns rowed the entire length of the hall, each gilded with gold and silver along its grooves. Five long tables of solid oak dominated the room, four of the tables parallel with the head table running perpendicular to them and elevated. The number of tapestries and banners, however, caught Luna's eyes, each depicting Celestia's triumphs over the centuries or the coat-of-hooves of some insipid noble family. She saw that a few of them were of her raising the moon, and nothing else. Of course her *politique* of a sister would make sure little Luna got her shout out, but she thought it strange that it was the sole feat Celestia found her noteworthy of. Had Equestria forgotten her expulsion of the parasprites, the defense she led to safeguard Stalliongrad against the onslaught of an army of Griffins, or her eclipse that had blinded the Dragon Lord? She may not be a great leader, but Luna had intervened in the past numerous times to ensure her subjects immediate safety. Oh, why did she skip over early medieval Equestrian history?

"No, no, no!" Luna thought again, "I can't dwell on this, oh, why can't we just eat or dance or whatever? Is there somepony here I can talk to? Perhaps that Doctor is here, I liked him..."

Her eyes searched the room desperately for a familiar face. Hopefully Celestia wouldn't be mad if she trotted off for a bit...

But then it caught her attention.

A long, worn-looking banner decorated with a thousand images contained a scene that sent a shiver down Luna's spine. It was the picture of a black alicorn lying subdued before a white one with a pink mane.

"Black...and pink! This can't be last year's fight. This is not Celestia's encounter with my insanity...this is when her mane was pink...yet I was not Nightmare Moon then either! What is this I don't..."

"Welcome to tonight's banquet, everypony."

Celestia's voice snapped Luna back to reality.

"Nobles." Celestia turned to the left, where the multitude of coat-of-hooves was clustered.

"Members of parliament." She said, turning to the right and giving a quick wink. Seeing their cue, the servants emerged from the kitchen ready to serve the prepared feast.

"It pleases me that so many of you decided to attend the festivities, despite the recent fiasco at the gala. As you can see before you, such bravery does not go unrewarded! I know you all have waited long for this to start, so, for the sake of our appetites, let us skip the formalities for now, shall we? So please, eat and be merry!"

Luna looked at her sister with a smile, Celestia's sweet, comforting voice and light-hearted comments dispelling Luna's immediate anxiety attack. As Celestia took her seat again, Luna smirked and gave her insightful critique:

"Good speech. Nice and short."

"Leaves more time for drinking!" Celestia replied as wine filled their goblets. The two laughed as they toasted and put the cups to their lips. Reassured of her sister's love and respect for her, Luna felt much better, but the image of the alicorns continued to gnaw at the back of her mind. Celestia's focus was diverted by some noble or minister, so Luna turned her attention to the other ponies sitting at the table. The pony sitting next to her was a rather large white unicorn with a star resembling the points of a compass on his flank. His fore hooves were adorned with smooth silver bracelets and his torso covered by an elegant tuxedo. He turned to Luna and began speaking in an accent dripping with everything she hated about Celestia's little caste system.

"Oh, Aunt Luna! Such a surprise it is to see you at Aunt Celestia's table. From the way I heard it, you were still completely native."



There were several things with the unicorn's words that caused a look of confusion to wash over Luna's face, but one stuck out in particular. Lifting an eyebrow, she replied:

"Uh, 'Aunt'? Excuse me, but do I know you?"

The unicorn looked indignant as he responded.

"My auntie, I am not like you in at least one respect. Everypony knows me for I am Prince Blueblood of the House of Neighrange. I am the object of adoration of many as my valorous feats of daring and intrigue are well recorded by periodicals-

"Tabloids" a nearby pony coughed.

"*Of excellent repute.*"

"You're...a prince? I can't say I really believe you, and, uh, do I have a sister I don't know of?"

"Here are my papers, *dear aunt*" Blueblood responded haughtily, using his magic to present a large scroll to the princess. "I carry them at all times for the rare occasion I cross a skeptic, like you."

"Of course you do." Luna said as she rolled her eyes. As she looked at the ancient looking parchment, she completed her thought "You sad, little foal." It was indeed an extensive genealogy, but as Luna scanned the older branches, the names devolved back into Old Equestrian. Luna knew the language and writing quite well, however, and proceeded to the patriarch of the House of Neighrange. "My little long lost brother", she chuckled to herself. And there he was, his name clearly written by Celestia herself. The great and powerful δενάλογο, or rather "Nopony". Luna's amusement with the document was piqued by her sister's ancient joke, and she burst into a fit of laughter. It was so terribly simple and cliché, but Luna simply couldn't help herself, to her the timing was all too perfect and fitting.

"Ha! My, oh why yes, this is...this is, INCREDIBLE, "nephew"...Bwaha! Should I crack out my copy of *Lord of the Bridles* for reference? It's in the appendices, right? Haha!"

Prince Blueblood gave a look of shock as Luna let go of the document, nearly dunking the weathered parchment into a bowl of steaming carrot soup. His magic was just able to save the only thing sparing him from bucking apples out in the boonies. He turned to Luna, who was now banging the table with her right hoof as she continued to laugh loudly, and mustered up every pretentious fiber in his being to give Luna such a look of contempt and bewilderment that would put even a goddess to shame.

Well, that's not exactly how it panned out for old Blueblood. Luna hardly noticed the white unicorn as she continued banging the table. As the fates would ordain it, this soon changed as Luna's hoof hit the dreaded carrot soup, sending it flying. If the villainous bowl couldn't ruin the idiot prince's life, it was going to make damn sure he gave the bastard a scalding burn, perhaps leave a little scar as a reminder too. With its destiny before it, the bouillabaisse bomb sailed perfectly into the muzzle of the unlucky (but deserving) prince.

*As Barry Bowl hit the floor, the inanimate object knew it had earned its place in the pantheon of its fellows, accompanying such illustrious notables as Mr. Turnip and Rocky for all eternity.*

A gruff roar silenced the entire hall. Celestia, who up to this point was dealing with a difficult old aristocrat and writing off Luna's obnoxious behavior as typical, turned abruptly to the unpleasant scene to her side, mouth agape. Luna's amusement turned quickly to silence as she noticed the enraged and burned unicorn before her. Embarrassed, a shade of red tinted her blue complexion.

"Uhh...Nephew! I'm so, so sorry abou-"

"You...you...WITCH! You wretched demon what have you done to my beautiful face!" Prince Blueblood exploded, leveling his burnt face with Luna's "Celestia should have put you to the sword 1000 years ago when your power lust drove you to exterminate all life! Your second coming no different! You genocidal barbarian, you wicked beast, you...NIGHTMARE MOON! Cursed be your name, may all remember you as the *murderer* and uncivilized power *whore* that you are. You jealous tyrant! May Celestia damn you to the moon, *forever this time!*"

With that he raised his hoof and smacked her face. Seconds later several guards had tackled and subdued the furious prince. Luna had not expected

much pain, she was, after all, an immortal otherwise impervious to mortal means of injury. But she felt the full force of the brawny pony's hoof bashing against the side of her head. She felt dizzy and disoriented. Perhaps the pony was cut from immortal cloth? No, that was impossible. Why did this hurt so much?

As Luna regained her focus, she felt a stream of blood drip from the side of her face. Blood. She had not bled since that day 1000 years ago. Her eyes widened in amazement as she turned around the silent room. Everypony stared at her with equal shock. Not only had they watched their goddess insulted, but they had also seen her bleed. Luna's mind drifted back to Prince Blueblood's words. She was the power whore? Genocide? What was the meaning of this?

And then it caught her eye again. The black and white alicorns.

"Celestia wouldn't, she wouldn't!" Luna thought, tears welling.

Her sister was making a damage control speech, but Luna didn't hear it, she couldn't. She was so distressed at the dark revelation her mind was piecing together, she didn't even hear the final venomous words of Prince Blueblood as the Royal Guard took him away.

*"She saw me as a threat. Once I was gone, she lied and crafted her own history, purging all my contributions and replacing them with a brief morality tale until even that became myth. She took advantage of the ponies' primitive moral duality of good and evil and replaced it with Celestia and Luna. The madness that corrupted me during my imprisonment was used to justify a false history."*

*"She doesn't love me. I'm just her morning star."*

As Luna came to this conclusion, a worried Celestia trotted towards her and nuzzled her.

"Luna, are you all right? Let me heal tha-Luna!"

Luna broke away from her sister and fled the banquet hall, blood and tears streaming as she ran to her room. As she reached her destination, she slammed the door and ran out to her balcony and threw herself on the ground.

How could Celestia do that? No wonder everypony hated her. It wasn't just the brief Summer Sun disruption; it was a long history of systematic demonization.

Her tears dried as sadness turned to rage.

"Luna!"

The moon princess turned sharply and glared at her older sister. Celestia was taken aback at Luna's animosity towards her, it was unlike her sister to be so angry.

"Luna, please, let's get your wound treated. I'm sorry about the prince, but I warned you not to bring those sorts of issues up."

"No Celly, I'm glad I did." Luna sniffed "That smack to my face did wonders for me!"

"Wha-what do you mean?" Celestia asked in confusion.

"Sis, please don't play dumb with me. I know it has worked this far, but no longer." Luna paused and looked at the moon. "Do you remember why you set me to that rock? Do you remember what crime I had committed to deserve a thousand years of loneliness, sorrow, and madness?"

Celestia did not respond.

"You don't? Well, let me refresh your memory, because you won't find it in any of your history books. I wanted you to stop ruling and let our creation tend to itself. Once I assembled a group of influential...nobles...to write you what we called back then "the great letter", you had little patience for me. You said I didn't understand government, that I was going down a path riddled with chaos and uncertainty that would ensure Equestria's ruin. I guess that's where the "genocide" from your accounts comes from." Luna shouted, not relenting for a second.

"Luna, please," Celestia began, her eyes filled with tears "your actions threatened to destabilize everything we had worked so hard to build up! You wanted to pass our rule into the hands of a mob of mortals, a lot doomed to die. It would be a never ending succession struggle for power!

Civil war and slaughter would have been inevitable had you been able to carry out your misguided plan."

"Celestia, many other nations do without deities running their affairs..."

"Yes, and they haven't had the blessing of divine protection that accompanies it."

"Sister!" Luna shouted "That's just the problem! You've treated our creation like it was a giant, retarded foal that needs constant care instead of letting it grow! Your justifications are just rationalizing the issue! We are goddesses, and even we cannot make such predictions."

"History shows us..."

"History shows nothing Celly! You are this nation's history! We know nothing else but absolute rule!"

"Then why change? I have ensured peace and prosperity in this land for two thousand years, would you see that end?"

"No, but we don't belong here. We belong in the heavens. We made this country for them, *not us!*"

Celestia stood in silence. Luna had never succeeded in overcoming her sister's skills in persuasion before, so she took the opportunity to drive the nail in deeper.

"The day you banished me to the moon...a day I lived over and over again as I wandered my barren prison...I will never fully understand. I know *why* you did it, I mean, it doesn't take an expert to see that I was an imminent threat to your authority. But *how* could you do it! Your only sister, your sole equal!"

"Luna..." Celestia's voice quivered "I thought a millennia would be enough to let our creation grow in an environment free from your...your...radicalism. I was protecting them from something they weren't ready for—"

"And a thousand years have passed and they're no more ready! Should you, you know, bim-zam-boom, send me to the moon again?" Luna

interjected furiously, "Enough about protection and security! You know deep down you stay here for the power."

Celestia's eyes narrowed, her voice tinged with shock and rage "Ho-how dare you, Luna! Are you calling me a tyrant?"

"Well, according to the prince and your little myths, no. I am the tyrant. It's a good thing my subjects don't know of my crippling inability to focus or govern or I'd have an uprising on my hooves!"

Celestia tried to avert her eyes, but Luna met her sister's gaze again and moved in closer "Being a goddess isn't enough, is it Celly? Nature is beautiful, but boring in comparison to the ponies that populate our fair land. Each with her own story and a journey, a special talent and a dream. It's much more fun to play with them then fly among the empty heavens and watch, isn't it? Your beloved student Twilight Sparkle is an excellent case and point, isn't she?"

At the sound of the young mare's name, Celestia's ears perked up.

"Yes, Twilight Sparkle, my savior." Luna continued, her thoughts and feelings pouring out like floodgates releasing a mighty river "it's a good thing you had her assemble the Elements of Harmony to cure me of my inevitable insanity and fill my heart with unconditional forgiveness. Eternal night? That's what a thousand years of unjust imprisonment does to the psyche."

"Luna, I apologized for what I did, but I...I" Celestia began to cry, taking Luna off-guard. "I can't let go, they need me!"

"No sister." Luna said coldly "You need them. Certainly so now that I too am...mortal."

Celestia looked at her sister confused and scared.

"No, no, Luna—"

"Don't cry for me, dear sister." Luna shouted, the flames of rage growing in her heart "No, I can only guess that your dear student purged my immortality along with the shell of Nightmare Moon. But look on the bright side Celly, with me dead you can reign unchallenged and alone for all

eternity! You asked me if you were a tyrant. If you aren't now, you will be when I'm gone."

Celestia fell to the floor weeping. Luna couldn't stand the sight, she wanted to comfort her sister. But Celestia needed this. Luna needed this.

Spreading her wings, Luna flew upwards, the cold wind brushing against her feathers. With tears in her eyes and anger in her heart, the moon goddess spoke her departing words:

"The prince said I was jealous. Of you, I assume. But he couldn't be further from the truth. Celestia, I never have nor do I want to be you; a slave to power and ambition! My only wish is that if you leave any record of me, let it contain those very words so that Equestria may know that I was not the Nightmare you depicted me as but rather the Dream that never was!"

With that, she flew into the night with reckless speed, not looking back for a second. Her mind remained tormented by conflicting emotions, anger and compassion, despair and love, until they blurred together into a primitive drive to escape. No better place in Equestria existed for this than the lonely mountain before her. As her hooves hit the mountainside, she collapsed emotionally exhausted and physically weary.

Reflecting on what happened eased Luna's mind a bit, but it also brought to mind some questions she still had not answered. How could she have been injured? Sure she told Celestia an idea, but it was purely conjecture. As brave as Luna was about the whole issue in front of her sister, she was scared out of her mind. The idea of her dying was impossible for Luna to grasp.

"Well, at least Celly has to grapple with it too," Luna told herself, "I can only hope it will make her reevaluate her outlook on things. My, just the idea that maybe she'd relinquish some of her authority and go home...Only good can come of it."

*You would have to die.*

The thought sent a shiver down her spine.

"No" she thought "I don't even know if I'm a mortal for sure. Before I cave into these morbid thoughts, I should to talk to somepony about this and see if we can't find out just what's wrong with me."

She couldn't return to Canterlot, her sister needed time to do her own soul searching. As she gazed across the land from the mountain, she saw a quaint village not too far from her position. She recognized it as the site of her return and home of the Elements of Harmony. Ponyville. Luna smiled at the convenience, for if any mortal could aid a goddess, it was Celestia's beloved student, Twilight Sparkle.

With the cold wind to her back, she spread her wings and took off, gliding across the moonlit sky towards Ponyville.



# Chapter 2

Before reaching the sleepy village, Luna descended on hoof a safe distance away. She needed to be cautious; if there was any place in Equestria that would have reason good reason to harbor a distrust or fear of the moon goddess, it would be Ponyville. Its residents witnessed the pinnacle of her insanity in a display that only confirmed her portrayal as the manifest evil of Celestia's mythology. Though a feast was thrown after the defeat of her alter ego, Luna couldn't help but to think that it was more of a celebration of her sister's return than a welcome for her. The wreath of roses the villagers had bestowed on her spoke of the veiled bitterness they felt towards her. Yes, the flowers were beautiful, but the interlocking stems wove a crown of thorns that gripped and tore at her neck with every movement she made.

As Luna neared the village, she pondered the source of that sensation. At the time, she thought the irritation was merely due to her body's sensitivity after being freed from her illness. Was what she felt merely discomfort or pain? Had the thorns cut her, had she bled? Were her fears correct, had the Elements of Harmony cast out her immortality?

Questions of this nature swirled in Luna's mind as she entered Ponyville. Shaking the thoughts away, she focused on her present situation. Luna initially made sure to stay in the shadows so as not to bump into anypony, but a particularly violent blast of icy wind reminded the princess that the likelihood of encountering a pony in the streets this night was slim. Feeling freer to move undetected, she took to her wings and swiftly glided towards the town center.

"Now, I know Celly mentioned that her student was staying in the town's library, so it shouldn't be too far away from the other civic buildings" Luna thought.

As she rounded the corner, she froze and retreated behind the building. Peering from her hiding place, she saw two members of the Royal Guard speaking to a pony with a scroll on her flank, the town administrator no doubt.

"...and so Madam Mayor, it is imperative that you maintain order here while the authorities in Canterlot sort this mess out," The first instructed. "General Hawkeye has drafted a contingency plan in the event of panic, so if need be, contact the district's barracks if you see any signs that usually prelude a public riot. We, of course, will be standing by as well..."

Luna listened in, impressed that Celestia had mobilized her Royal Guard so quickly, or had she? Luna had a natural sense of time synched with the rotation of the planet, but she still managed to forget or ignore it at times, much to Celestia's grief. She looked up at the moon and realized that seven hours had passed since her departure from Canterlot and took note of it. On the run or not, Luna still had to lower the moon to make room for Celestia's sun. As she calculated when she should perform her duties, Luna caught the sight of two more guardponies moving towards her out of the corner of her eye.

"Ack! I'm such a scatterbrain!" Luna thought "Ok, now how did that spell work again?...ugh..."

The guards drew closer and Luna began to panic. She was flanked.

"...no...no...Oh right!"

With a quick spell, the princess of the night dissolved into the shadows of the town hall. It had been awhile since she had performed the feat, but luckily she just managed to evade the guardponies' gaze. As they walked, Luna overheard what the two were discussing.

"...can't believe this, captain. Of all the nights, it had to be the one when the wind is so cold it feels like I have a bloody glacier accumulating in my wings!"

"Hold your tongue, private," barked his superior officer, a stout, dark brown pegasus, "I know your daddy got you into the Royal Guard, but I thought by now that I'd taught you a thing or two about speakin' out of line and complainin'. You do it again, and you'll find yourself back in the mess hall peelin' apples!"

"Ye...yes sir! But, I was just voicing everyponys' thoughts. It's just terrible flying conditions for a marehunt..."

"Well soldier, looks like you'll be bakin' apple fritters for a month! I expect 'em to taste the way my momma made 'em! Now stop makin' yourself useless and get back to your patrol! Bother me again with your brilliant observations again and I'll make damn sure you never wear that armor again. You got that? One more slip up and you'll find yourself back at daddy's business sittin' behind a desk; a front row seat to watch the best years of your life be mercilessly swallowed by mundanity and an ever creeping sense of your own worthlessness! Now-"

"Captain! Did you hear that?" interrupted the timid guard, his voice tinged with a sudden anxiety and his ears perked up "It wasn't the wind, right? It's gotta be something bad, it's gotta be Nightmare Moon. Should we draw our weapons?"

"Wha-? Are you kidding me, private? Grow a pair, it's just the rest of the battalion. Great Celestia, the shit I have to deal with..."

Over the howl of the wind, Luna could make out the sound of rattling armor growing closer. In a minute, about 25 pegasi were assembled and lined up in to two neat rows, ready to be presented to their commanding officer.

The first pair of guards, their task complete, joined their company and arranged themselves into rank and file. Once done, they saluted their captain.

"Captain Braveheart! The local authorities have been informed and are taking the appropriate actions as prescribed by General Hawkeye." The first guard reported.

"Good work Lt. Blackmane, Private Hoofsly." Braveheart commended, moving on with his inspection of his soldiers. When all seemed satisfactory, he faced them:

"Now pegasi, I know we've never had to deal with runaway goddesses before. It's a daunting task, but it's damn important we complete the mission or all hell will break loose, understood? That Princess Luna has always been a ticking time bomb and Prince Blueblood set her off. The scumbag. Anyway, given the circumstances, we can only assume the worse. She may look innocent and small, but I've been briefed that she has more blood on her hooves than...well...anypony! You aren't sealed in the

moon for no reason, if you know what I mean. The general has sent us, the elite Royal Guard, to personally search and garrison this village while the rest of the armed forces search elsewhere."

He paused and then shouted "Do you know why, pegasi?"

"No, sir!" The soldiers shouted in unison. Captain Braveheart grinned and chuckled.

"I didn't think so; it ain't exactly Manehattan now, is it?"

"No sir!"

"Well, this little dinky town apparently houses somewhere a weapon of incredible power. The general believes Princess Luna will be drawn to it either to claim it for herself or destroy it. Both scenarios are unacceptable!"

"Yes sir!"

"Now, the town has another gem we should be aware of. Celestia's prized pupil Twilight Sparkle resides in the local library. She is to be guarded at all times! Ms. Sparkle was reportedly instrumental in Princess Luna's defeat last year, and is thus a likely target. Being who she is, Ms. Sparkle may also prove to be a source of vital intel. Lt. Lightning Strike!"

A yellow pegasus emerged from the ranks.

"Yes sir!"

"How did the questioning of Ms. Sparkle proceed?"

"Sir, she was somewhat reluctant to provide any information to us."

"You didn't tell her anything, right soldier?"

"No sir, the questions pertained to her contact with Princess Celestia and her knowledge of Princess Luna. A search of the library was conducted as well, per your orders."

"Good pony. First the questioning. What did she tell you?"

"Not much, sir. She told us that she had indeed sent a letter last evening to Princess Celestia and that the princess had responded. We then requested that she replicate her original letter to the princess."

Lt. Lightning Strike paused and reached into his saddle bag to take out a scroll and passed it to the captain.

"Sir, the correspondence."

"Very good. Continue."

"When pressed for information on Princess Luna, Ms. Sparkle insisted she knew little and told me to ask the Royals myself. Sir, I remember Ms. Sparkle quite well from her studies with the princess. She can't lie worth a damn. She's hiding something."

"And the search?"

"The library yielded little. All we could find were these old books concerning medieval Equestrian history that seem to depict Princess Luna, or rather Nightmare Moon. However, the texts are written in a strange language. It's not Old Equestrian, that's all I can say."

"Hmm...perhaps we can get an egghead down here to translate 'em...or we could get Ms. Sparkle herself," the captain suggested. "If it better prepares us for an encounter with a pissed off goddess, it'll be worth it. At 0800 hours I want you to alert Ms. Sparkle that her services are compulsory. Until then, you, Private Lighthoof, and Private Hoofsly are to guard the library. Understood?"

"Yes sir!"

"Lt. Blackmane!"

"Yes sir!"

"Take the books from Lt. Lightning Strike and have them delivered to my quarters in the town hall. Same goes for these scrolls." The captain ordered, giving up the letters.

"Yes sir!"

Captain Braveheart turned his attention to the whole battalion and spoke:

"Well pegasi, you know your orders. I want you stationed at every entrance to the village and four of you doing aerial reconnaissance at all times. It's basic night watch protocol, think you dumb foals can handle it?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Damn good! Inspection will happen at 0700 hours, and I want you all as alert and active as that bouncin' pink pony who ran out to greet us tonight!"

The soldiers looked at each other uneasily.

"Well...?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"You all are dismissed, make me proud boys!"

"Uh-hem."

"...and Ms. Sgt. Storm Cloud."

The Royal Guard divided ranks and flew to their respective posts. Seeing his pegasi in such excellent formation, Captain Braveheart confidently turned to the town hall and entered the building knowing, knowing well that his pegasi would not fail him.

With nopony in the immediate area, Luna materialized and proceeded to throw up. There was a reason she rarely performed spell, being torn atom from atom generally wasn't what Luna considered to be fun.

"Hopefully I don't have to do that again." Luna thought before turning to more serious issues, "But it looks like Celly is worried that I snapped. A fair assessment granted our fight, but she won't get me quite yet; this goddess has a few more tricks to spare..."

Luna contemplated the best course of action. Teleportation was far too visible and noisy and, like shadow drifting, would have her puking up her

stomach by the time she was done. A camouflage spell? No, these guards were trained to pick up on such petty magic.

And then she got it. Smiling, she thought to herself:

"It's been a long time since I played the Sand Mare."

When Equestria was still young and the ponies far from civilized, Luna had been tasked with putting their nighttime fears of dragons and griffons to rest by inducing a powerful and peaceful sleep over them. As centuries past and towns began to crop up and her subjects felt more secure, she stopped performing the duty. The ponies of Equestria still referred to her as the Sand Mare for some centuries until that memory too past into myth.

But tonight Luna was going to show Captain Braveheart's pegasi that folklore rather than history contained the greater truth when it came to the princess of the night. The gall of that pegasus and his company! Luna's face burned red when she recalled the vociferous captain's words.

*She may look innocent and small, but I've been briefed that she has more blood on her hooves than...well...anypony! You aren't sealed in the moon for no reason, if you know what I mean.*

The lie-passed-as-truth stung and only helped to support her suspicions that Celestia had demonized her in an effort to re-consolidate her authority after her attempt to check it. Celestia's reaction to Luna's accusations and Prince Blueblood's vitriol were more telling, but it was still difficult for Luna to outright conclude her darkest fears. She wanted to see those books the soldiers had confiscated from Twilight; they no doubt contained the answer.

"Twilight Sparkle!" thought Luna, "The poor young mare, it's unfortunate that she got dragged into this, but I need her help."

*Do I? How can such a young unicorn even hope to solve a crisis that ails an ancient goddess?*

Luna suppressed the thought. She was no fatalist. She was an innovator who saw endless potential in all aspects of life. To bow down to death out of fear and helplessness would be contrary to everything she had come to embody. She could not betray herself, neigh, everypony in such a way.

Taking courage from her brief reflection, Luna surveyed the town. The whole village was dark save one beacon of light shining from within a great tree. It was crowned with a large telescope, much to Luna's amusement. It was clear that Celly's young student lived there.

Peering further, she caught the silhouettes of the pegasi charged with guarding Twilight.

"Ok I've got a job to do now!" Luna mused, "Let's see...ah yes this should do it!"

Luna's horn glowed as she transfigured several nearby rocks into piles of fine blue dust. Using her magic, she gathered the powder and swirled it around her body to test the substance. Its fragrance was reminiscent of spring flowers and its caress warmed the body, making her eyelids feel heavy...

Luna shook herself and grinned.

"Still got it."

It was quite the distance for her to drug the guards, and she didn't want to use her magic as the vehicle lest the guards remember the obvious glow when they awoke. No, she needed to be more discreet. While she thought, a fierce wind blew in the direction of the library as if summoned by Luna's necessity.

"Perhaps we can be friends yet, fell wind." Luna whispered as she dispersed her potent drug into the night breeze. Faithfully and quickly it carried her gift to the Royal Guard.

As the guards patrolled, they felt a sudden shift in the weather. The buffeting cold wind turned into a light summer's breeze that melted their stiffened bones and made them recall fair memories of seasons past. Their eyes dried and grew impossibly heavy and, one by one, they fell into a deep-seated sleep.

Luna chuckled as she trotted up to the library and looked at her victims.

"Poor dears, looks as if you'll be missing inspection in the morning. Shame, the captain will be most disappointed. Oh well, the company can do without the additional 'yes sirs', don't you all think? Have a pleasant night."



Luna turned to the door. A sense of nervous anxiety swept through her body. Twilight was a loyal to the throne, no doubt, but it was mostly Celestia that had her heart. She had been cultivated in the image Celly found to be most favorable to her rule. How would she see Luna? The demon of her teacher's fables? Luna could only hope not. Perhaps Twilight could sympathize with her? For the more she thought, the more Twilight's expedition to the village became questionable in nature. Had Celestia considered Twilight as a threat? Was this town a subtle form of banishment? Luna's head began to ache from the strain; her sister was extremely crafty when it came to disposing her political enemies and it was often difficult for Luna to understand this game Celestia loved to play. Often her purges were seen as voluntary resignations by the public, but Luna knew that Celestia was always pulling the strings, manipulating the outcome to maximize her interests. Just what those may be all the time remained a puzzle for Luna.

"Well, no use fretting, Luna, best to be informal and apolitical in this situation." She told herself, hoping to calm her misgivings. Luna knocked on the door.

"WHAT NOW!"

The princess was taken aback by the loud growl erupting from just behind the door. Luna heard the door being unlatched and saw it thrown open, a very angry purple unicorn standing in the doorway.

"You barge into my home, throw all my books off their shelf—"

Twilight stopped as she realized who she was addressing, her rage changing quickly into awe and fear.

"Uh, ugh, eh..." the awkward mare stuttered, a bead of sweat dripping from her forehead.

"Hello Twilight Sparkle, may I come in?"

"...oh, ah, yes! Yes of course, come in, of course!" Twilight said. As Luna entered her home, Twilight brought her hoof to her face. "Stupid, Twilight stupid Twilight, protocol!" she muttered to herself as she prostrated before Luna, burying her face into the library's floor.

"Princess Luna, goddess of the moon, arbiter of the night sky, mistress of the cosmos..."

"Twilight?"

"Yes your majesty?"

"Please ditch the protocol."

Twilight arose and looked at the princess. The unicorn's nervousness and anxiety could not be shielded by the cheesy smile that now stretched across her face.

"Of course, Princess Luna." Twilight said through her clenched teeth "May I be of any service?"

"Well, yes. I require assistance, a lot of it." Luna frowned, "I was hoping that my sister's star student could perhaps help me sort out a few questions I've been tossing around in my head."

"Oh well, umm, yes, uh, I can try, but, you know, don't you think Celestia would be, ugh more helpful?"

"To be straightforward with you Twilight, I'm largely here because... I fought with Celestia this evening."

"You, wha-what?" Twilight's nervousness broke into shock "Well, that explains why the Royal Guard came in here and ravaged my book collection! But why, why did you fight with Princess Celestia!"

"Twilight, I don't expect you to understand what transpired between Celestia and I. Let's just say I was trying to address an ancient grievance."

"Um, against you?"

"Yes."

"Uh, Princess Luna, not to disrespect you in any way shape or form here, but I don't think you're coming from a good position to...how do I put this....complain about past injuries."

A flash of anger passed over Luna's face, but it was quickly replaced with a look of resignation. She sighed.

"As I said, I didn't come here expecting you to understand. I came here to ask you a few things. Now, what exactly did you tell the Royal Guard about me?"

"Oh, you know of that? Ah, well, nothing princess, really! I thought it inappropriate that they should just bust through my door and interrogate me without a proper warrant. So I told them..."

"To ask Celestia."

"...right."

"Yet you surrendered your letter from my sister."

"That's true, but that was largely Spike's fault. Well, actually all of it was. He answered the guard when I was pressed to give up information. The little dragon has a good heart, but sometimes he doesn't know when to keep his jaw shut. Anyway, I was pretty much forced to comply; I don't think I've ever seen them so pushy before...or so disrespectful for that fact. Just look at this place!"

Luna looked over the library. Sure enough, all the books had been torn from their shelves and were cluttered throughout the room. Not a few of the books were trampled and ripped during the Royal Guards' raid. Twilight sighed and began picking up books and sorting them to their proper shelves.

"I must say that I'm sorry about the mess" Luna said, "It's completely my fault..."

"Oh no princess, it's all right. This kind of thing seems to happen to me every other day. So, what kind of help do you need? Magic? Science? Well, the two actually go hoof in ho-"

"No Twilight. I want you to tell me what you know about Nightmare Moon."

Twilight's eyes bulged at the request and dropped the book she was putting away.

"Princess! Umm, I'm not really a historian at all." She said, giving a nervous laugh "I work with the natural sciences mostly. I can tell you that a thousand years ago she grew jealous of Celestia's power and popularity and sought to overthrow her to establish an everlasting night..."

"Enough Twilight." Luna interjected calmly "I don't want the foal's tale, I want an actual account."

"Uh, sorry Princess! I can't really help you here, but, uh, send Princess Celestia my love, okay?"

Once again, a cheesy smile plastered Twilight's anxious face. Luna huffed and rolled her eyes out of impatience.

"The Lieutenant was right. You are a terrible liar."

Twilight's phony smile quickly turned to a genuine frown.

"I'm, I'm sorry princess" her voice quaked, "it's just, well, it's just...I swore to Celestia that I wouldn't tell anypony!"

Luna's ears perked up at the mentioning of her sister's name.

"Twilight, it's of the utmost importance that you tell me. I cannot reconcile with my sister until I know what the old histories say about Nightmare Moon. Please, for our sake, tell me!"

Twilight sniffed and contemplated the goddess's request. At length, she finally replied.

"Okay, Princess, I'll tell you."

Luna gave a big smile and nuzzled Twilight, surprising the young unicorn.

"Oh thank you Twilight Sparkle! Please, go on!"

"Um, so I mentioned that my main studies deal with the natural sciences. I was never too good with the social sciences, as you can probably tell by my assignment to Ponyville. But during my schooling under Celestia, I was taught several academic languages; Old Equestrian, Wyrnish, and Ancient Griffon. Being taught a skill, I didn't want it to get rusty during my stay here,

so I sent a request to the royal library to send me some old texts to translate in my spare time. The mailmare, Derpy had one heck of a delivery that day; they must have mailed me thirty books! Anyhow, while I was sorting through them, three Wyrnish titles caught my attention. Rendered into Modern Equestrian, I think they were titled *A History of the Great Shadow*, *Of the Pestilence of the Moon Witch*, and *The Triumph of the Sun Goddess...*"

"I'm aware that the guards confiscated these books."

"...yes. Anyhow, having just defeated Nightmare Moon, I was curious to learn more about her..."

"Me, you mean."

"No Princess Luna, you and Nightmare Moon were not the same pony! Celestia made it clear to me..."

"What, that I was possessed? Or that she needed a convenient excuse to bring me back into the public light! Twilight, I am the sole pony responsible for my actions, I refuse to put blame on any phantom designed by Celestia."

Twilight gave a confused look, raising a single brow. She was quite unsure what to make of Luna's sudden mood swing and rejection of Celestia's interpretation of events. It seemed contrary to what one with Luna's kind of history would want to say.

"Oookayyy...As I was saying, I wanted to learn about *you*. So I translated the one of the books and parts of the other two and what I found was, well..." Twilight paused, hesitating for a bit "Princess, you were a monster. Tens of thousands died of the famine, disease and dubious wars that you largely caused."

At Twilight's words, Luna had to fight back the urge to cry. It was true; her sister made her the very incarnation of evil on earth.

"I don't know why you want me to tell you this, do you want to destroy these books or something?" Twilight asked "Because Celestia was not happy that I had them either. Just last month, she sent me a letter asking me if I had them. Apparently, Derpy mixed up her delivery at the censorship bureau

and ended up taking several rare books that were intended for the incinerator. Luckily, they ended up in my hooves. Knowing their fate, I told my teacher that I could not in good conscience send the books back. Celestia consented under the condition that I not translate them and keep them out of sight. So naturally, I obeyed. I stopped, but I could not bear to throw away the work I already had, so I hid the translations in the safest place in the library."

"Under your mattress, right?" Luna joked half-heartedly, trying to mask her sadness.

Twilight blushed.

"Well, yeah! This library is constantly in a mess! I'm sure I would have lost them by now if I hadn't put them there. But you're right, it's a good thing they didn't search my room, the Element of Magic..."

"Is under your mattress too?"

"No!...It's in the drawer of my nightstand."

Seeing Twilight's embarrassment, Luna shifted back to the matter at hoof.

"Twilight may I see your translations? Based on what you told me, they're the only documents left that can help me piece together my sister's past."

"You may princess, but they'll open up some old, ugly wounds..."

"Believe me Twilight, these wounds are quite fresh. Don't worry about my feelings, I can handle myself."

"All right, one second then. Spike! SPIKE!"

"...what?" came a muffled voice, "it's late Twilight, can't we clean up tomorrow...?"

"SPIKE!"

"Okay, okay! I'm coming!"

A small purple and green dragon descended down the stairs, his eyes still tinted with the fog of sleep.

"Hey Twilight, hey Lu- "

Spike stopped, his eyes widening to the size of saucers.

"Ah, oh, Princess Luna, um, how do you do? No, what was I supposed to say again? Darn—"

"Spike, Princess Luna has requested to see my translations. Please organize and retrieve them for her."

"Uh, right away ma'am!"

With that, Spike dashed back up the stairs to prepare the documents.

"All right then." Twilight said, turning back to Luna, "Would you care for any tea, princess? It's really cold and windy outside tonight. Not to be disrespectful, but it looks like you were out there for quite awhile!"

Luna looked at the nearby floor mirror. Sure enough, she looked like a mess. The wind had blown her mane into a tangled frenzy and her coat was still tinged with gray dust of the mountainside.

"Sorry about that," Luna said, her mind a thousand light years away, "I'll take care of it."

The glow of alicorn magic covered her body. It swiftly brought order to the persistent knots in her mane and removed every foreign particle on her body. Once again the spitting image of a living deity and no longer a ragamuffin, Luna looked back to Twilight and faintly smiled. The unicorn did not return her sentiment, her face instead contorting to an image of horror.

"Pri—Pri—Princess! You're bleeding!"

Indeed, the trickle of blood from Blueblood's blow continued to run gently and slowly down the side of her face. The frigid night winds had numbed her pain, but at some point the gash had opened back up. Now Twilight's cozy abode was beginning to revive the unpleasant sensation. Still a bit distant, Luna responded in a low tone.

"Oh, yes, I guess that's why I came here in the first place, isn't it? Like before, Twilight, I'm not going to beat around the haystack. I believe I've lost my immortality."

"Huh-huh wha-?H-how? Celestia didn't..."

"No Twilight, Celestia did not rob me of it, I doubt she even has the power to do so. No, I don't know how and I'm not quite sure if what I think is true. I came here to confirm or disprove my suspicions. If the latter, I wish to discuss with you about the Elements of Harmony, as I feel that they are somehow involved with my...problem."

"Oh no, oh no, no no no no no! This is bad, really, really bad! Princess, if you die, the world will too! The heavens will collapse without you! No, no, what can we do? What can I do?..."

As Twilight proceeded with her panicked rant, the reality of her situation dawned on Luna. She had been so absorbed with her own relationship with Celestia that she failed to take into account the impact her death would have on the world. Luna bowed her head in shame. Sometimes she was so selfish, so thoughtless that she wished maybe a bit of Celestia's omniscient foresight was hers. Perhaps Celestia was right, maybe she was too short-sighted and too detached to make wise decisions concerning her subjects.

"No." she thought, "Even if that were the case, it should never merit a thousand years of solitude."

Luna brought her attention back to Twilight who was still going on.

"...where could it have even gone? Is immortality a spiritual or physical manifestation? What would Celesti—"

"No Twilight, my sister can't help me. Not with this. I need you to be strong with me. I'm scared too, but you're the most talented unicorn in Equestria. Celestia often tells me that she has never seen a mortal with such power, capability and intelligence. If there's anypony that can help me, it's you Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight's distressed expression gave way to one that radiated with confidence and pride.

"Well, I'm pretty gifted, I guess." she responded, trying to hold onto at least a little shred of humility.



"I'm glad to hear you're willing, because the first thing I need you to do is to hit me."

"All ri-wait wha!"

"I told you, I need to know that I'm truly mortal. The head injury you see was the result of a mishap at a banquet Celestia was throwing. To be brief, it involved Prince Blueblood striking my face."

"Blueblood...your, uh, son?"

"Son! Dear sweet Celestia no! What gave you that idea?"

"Well, he's Celestia's nephew, and you're her sister..."

"You're quite mistaken. Apparently, I'm his aunt too."

"That doesn't make any sense at all! Who is he then?"

"He's the Prince of Neighrange from the line of our brother, Nopony."

"Nopony?"

Twilight wasn't getting it. Luna contemplated whether it would be wise to tell Twilight that Celestia's

"Royal Family" was nothing but a politically useful fabrication her sister had concocted. After a bit of thinking, Luna decided in favor of it. Twilight was a bright pony, she could handle the truth.

"How should I put this...Twilight, the Royal Family is a lie."

The purple unicorn looked at Luna with disbelief.

"...Perhaps I laid that on you a bit too thick. Umm, a long time ago, in order to rule more efficiently, Celestia decided to create a class of ponies that would be unquestionably loyal to her and administer their land in accordance with her standards and orders. She instilled in them the idea that they were linked to her through blood, making them feel special and privileged. However, this intimate connection bound them to Celestia's will and interests, making them unlikely to rebel against her rule. In short, it was

a way for her to fragment her political responsibilities without giving up any of the power. Do you understand?"

Twilight's brow furrowed.

"That doesn't sound like something Celestia would do, princess...that just sounds ruthless."

"Twilight," Luna sighed, "Didn't you ever pay attention to the way Celestia governs Equestria? Her relationships with different aristocrats and ministers? The law making process?"

"Uh, no. As I said, those things don't really interest me at all. That's why Celestia sent me here, to acquire a better range of social skills."

"Okay then, but you enjoy reading, right?"

"More than anything!" Twilight beamed.

"Have you by chance then come across Marechiavelli's *The Princess*? The book is essentially a day in the life of Celestia."

"No, but the author's name is familiar, it's so strange, isn't it? I think Celestia brought her up once when she had me accompany her to parliament to deliver a speech or something. I was kind of reading up on transfiguration spells at the time, so I can't really recall, but the name stuck out. To be honest, though, the book sounds like it'd be boring. To me at least, I lived with her for a couple of years. She just has a *lot* of meetings."

Luna wasn't making much headway with convincing Twilight that her teacher was a master of manipulation and moral ambiguity. Defeated again by Celestia's clever calculations and constructions, Luna tried to steer the conversation back to its original content. The moon goddess was starting to notice that, between the two scatterbrains, focusing longer than five minutes on a single issue was going to be a monumental task.

"Never mind then, Twilight. The point is simple; the prince is not immortal. Thus, he shouldn't have been able to hurt me. He was, however, wearing mithril bracelets. I don't know where he got them, but I think it likely that Celestia must have given them to the stallion. If that's the case, it may have been blessed by the dragon gods, as only they may horde mithril. But it's

also just as possible that they were not blessed and simply given to Celestia as a token of goodwill. So to be sure, I need you to give me a good smack to the side of my face."

"Uh, okay then...umm...how do you want me to do it?"

"Do you really need instruction?"

"All right then," Twilight said with obvious uncertainty, "Sorry princess..."

Twilight raised her right hoof and brought it down heavily across Princess Luna's face, sending Luna straight to the ground.

"Okay Twilight, I go—What the hay is going on Twilight!"

The small dragon stood in the stairway with a look of disbelief on his face.

"Spike! It's not what it looks like..."

"Twilight, you just punched the princess in the face!"

"We were testing to see if, uh she was still immortal, that's all!"

"Well why the hay didn't you just prick her with a needle or something?"

"I don't know, she told me to, and, umm, and..."

"It's fine Spike, Twilight did nothing wrong." Luna said as she got back up, her face bearing a new dark blue bruise that contrasted dimly against her azure coat. Twilight looked at her with a worried expression.

"Princess...does this mean..."

"Yes." Luna responded. She had no desire to voice the obvious but disturbing revelation.

A long silence passed in the room as Luna tried to grasp her fate. She had put so much hope in the possibility that her wound had some divine roots. But no, she was doomed to die, quite possibly bringing the world down with her. A fitting end for the evil-made-flesh; if she could not exist, neither would the whole of creation. In the end, Celestia's predictions finally came true. Luna would be the ruin of everything. The moon goddess closed her

eyes, a single tear escaping. It trailed down the side of her face, uniting with the stream of hot blood that now surfaced from the site of Twilight's strike. Her sorrow and pain now joined as one, the single droplet fell from her face and splattered on the library floor, breaking the library's silence with a light thud that resonated throughout the library.

Twilight kept her gaze fixed on Luna. She was clearly hurting, but Twilight was hung up over the proper means to comfort royalty. After pondering over what to do for a short while, Twilight shook her head

"What am I thinking? She's in pain and I'm wondering which operating procedure I should base my response on! Celestia was right to send me here, I'm too insensitive when ponies need me the most..."

Breaking out of her comfort zone, Twilight moved to Luna and nuzzled her. At the unicorn's touch, Luna's dark thoughts dissipated. The princess of the night smiled and returned her affection. Another tear, clean and pure, traveled down her cheek until it rested upon Twilight's purple mane.

"Thank you Twilight Sparkle. Thank you."

In an attempt to duck out of the growing sense of awkwardness he felt, Spike ran and placed Twilight's translations and notes on a nearby desk.

"I got what you wanted Twilight," Spike said "so I'm going back to bed now. Night Princess Luna, uh, get better!"

With a wave, the dragon rushed back to his bed.

The two hardly heard him. They remained together for quite some time, saying nothing until at long last Luna broke their embrace.

"Twilight, that meant everything to me. I thank you with all my heart. But the night grows short, and we have some things to discuss yet before I set the moon."

"Yes princess, you wanted to know about the Elements of Harmony?"

"Correct. I'm almost certain now that they are the cause of all this."

"Well, perhaps the first thing you should know then is that I am an Element. All five of my friends are as well. It's true that their power is channeled through several jewels, but the source always dwells within a pony that best manifests the purest form of each specific quality: Honesty, Loyalty, Laughter, Compassion, or Generosity. Once these individuals are assembled, the Element of Magic is revealed and the power of the Elements may be unleashed. It is said to be the most powerful of all magic, as I'm sure you know. It defeated even you, a goddess."

"Right after my defeat, I felt a change come over me. It wasn't merely the departure of my madness, my sense of touch became far more acute and sensitive. We now know that it was a sign of mortality, but did you or your friends experience a change of sorts too? Perhaps something you'd never expect yourself capable of, or maybe your personality changed?"

Twilight listened to Luna's questions and tried to recall anything odd. Well, other than all the crazy adventures she had in Ponyville. Then it struck her.

"Actually, I have noticed that my friends and I are...durable, to say the least."

"Yes, go on."

"It's just that whenever something dangerous happens to us, we manage to always pull out all right."

"Twilight, that sounds more like good luck than anything else."

"No, I don't think we're on the same page here. The dangerous thing *happens*. But we're always okay. For instance, once I was trying to figure out my friend Pinkie Pie's strange behavior, a whole delivery truck of goods came crushing down on me. I'm talking about pianos here."

Luna's eyes were fixed on Twilight.

"Yes?"

"My injuries were grave. I was even put in a wheelchair with a full body cast. But after a few hours, I hardly needed any of the medical care. My body seemed to heal itself. I chuckled it up as the result of my special gift. You know, magic."

"But how about your friends?"

"I'm not as sure about them, though I swear Rainbow Dash should have severe brain trauma by now. Applejack tells me her flying has gotten far more reckless and her tricks far more insane since I came to town. Oh and speaking of Applejack, she managed to go for a week without sleep despite her unrelenting harvest of the entirety of her orchard. Alone. Pinkie Pie is an enigma, I have no idea how she works at all. Fluttershy and Rarity aren't very physical, so I'm not as sure about them. You'd have to ask them yourself, but I'm pretty sure the pattern will hold up. We've been through some pretty dangerous adventures."

Luna smiled.

"I think I've figured out the most plausible answer. Twilight, Celestia didn't steal my immortality, you did!" Luna said with a light laugh, "But what is taken can be returned, don't you think?"

"Now listen, I think I understand what happened now. When the blast from the Elements hit me, it coursed through my being and purged every villainous intention I had. When it retreated from my body, it must have taken a part of my divinity, namely my immortality. As you said Twilight, the elements can defeat even a goddess, and how does one kill a deity? They strip away her immortality and let either the sword or the passage of time to do its work."

"Then my friends and I..."

"Yes, my immortality was fragmented and passed into you six. Though you're not exactly immortals, you still have a magnificent resilience to pain and injury. If surviving a falling piano cannot attest to that, I don't know what else can."

"Princess Luna, if what you say is true, then we need to get my friends and find a way to give back your immortality immediately!"

"And we'll do just that," Luna replied, magically gathering the documents Spike left behind, "but we'll need to pack first! Here could you put these in a saddlebag for me? Gather your Element and...wait, Twilight, are you tired? I've kept you up all night..."

"Oh, don't worry about me princess. I'm a professional student, I've pulled off hundreds of all-nighters!"

At the mentioning of "all-nighters", Luna froze. How could she forget the Royal Guard!

"Twilight, there is another thing you should now. The Royal Guard has been sent here not just to question you, but guard you. They're stationed throughout the village, and outside of my door. We need to be careful. Not only are they looking for me, but the Elements as well."

Twilight frowned and rolled her eyes.

"Really? Ugh, well, we can teleport to Sweet Apple Acres, that's where my friend Applejack lives. It's on the outskirts of town, so we should be able to sneak past the guards with little trouble."

"A good start to a plan. Now pack light and meet me outside your door. Don't worry about the guards assigned to the library, I took care of them when I arrived."

"...took care of them' princess, you didn't..."

"What! Of course not! I put them into a deep sleep!"

"Oh, right, yeah! Just playing with ya, you know?"

Luna was a bit annoyed by Twilight's presumptions of murder, but she let it pass. There was no point trying to prove to Twilight she was never the demon her sister's stories made her out to be. She had just better get used to it, especially since she'd have to deal with ponies that probably had far less sympathy for her.

Suddenly, Luna's felt a twitch, her body's internal clock telling her to perform her duty.

"Twilight, I have to go and lower the moon now. Collect our things and meet me outside."

"Will do princess. Be careful."

Luna turned and exited the library and looked up at the sky. Her face quickly melted into shock. There was no dawn, the same darkness was in place as it had been on the mountainside. Celestia was not raising the sun. In vain Luna tried to lower the moon, but she needed her sister to complete the cycle. Panic seized Luna.

"No, no, Celly, where are you?" she shouted at the sky, abandoning all other concerns "Sister, don't abandon me now! I need you, please!"

There was no reply save the north wind's roar.

Luna began to head back into the library to retrieve Twilight, but, out of nowhere, she heard a rush of air and the familiar clattering of golden armor. Before she could react, she was encircled by the entire company of the Royal Guard. Emerging from the ranks to greet her was Captain Braveheart, a cigar hanging grotesquely from the side of his mouth.

"Well, well, good work pegasi! We've caught the fugitive princess! Ha, I've had harder times gettin' my gramps outta the casino! The ol' colt loves them slots, both types, if you catch my drift! Ha, what more can I say?"

The captain turned his attention to Luna, leaning in with a smirk on his face.

"You're a goddess, but you're not very bright are you? The general said you had a knack for ignorin' details and procedure! When you knocked out my pegasi, did you care to remember the idea of a 'night rotation'? You've had an eternity to live, but you're as predictable and sneaky as my teen-aged daughter. Did sittin' on the moon for a thousand years rot your brain black, highness?"

Luna blushed at her foolish mistake, shifting her eyes away from the cocky captain.

"We've been waitin' for you to start feelin' safe and tired. Made you just that much easier as a target! And now you'll be coming back home to Canterlot with us, princess."

Fed up with the captain's impudence, Luna mustered her courage and shouted back.



"How dare you?" her voice shook, "What right have you to take a goddess into custody! When my sister hears of your disrespectful and shameful conduct..."

"Lt. Blackmane!" Captain Braveheart barked, turning to the soldier on his left and handing him a scroll "Read the princess the charges!"

" Yes, sir! You, Princess Luna, alias Nightmare Moon, have been charged with kidnapping her royal highness Princess Celestia and plotting to once again plunge our land into the heart of eternal darkness."

Luna could not believe her ears. Her sister was missing? The possibility was nearly incomprehensible. Celestia would never leave her throne. Luna's mind shut down, leaving her face stuck in a state of violent shock.

"Any resistance to us during the arrest will be met with force."

"Well said, Lieutenant, now restrain her and bring her in! I can't wait to get outta this dump of a town."

"Not so fast!"

The library door burst open. From the doorway Twilight leaped to Luna's side, positioning herself in an aggressive stance, her horn lowered and hooves stomping.

"Back off!"

Twilight's horn began to glow, causing the captain to grin even wider at the scene.

"Oh, what are you going to do? Throw a rock at me? Might as well make me a sandwich, it'd be more worth your time! Bwahaha!"

"No captain, I'm going to ruin your day."

"Ha, look at the sass in this one! I can't wait to see you break in the ol' torture chamber, *collaborator*. Arrest 'em!"

"Good-bye!"

In a brilliant flash of light, Luna and Twilight vanished. Captain Braveheart's jaw dropped, the cigar falling to the ground. A unicorn could do that? He had never seen such a thing.

The captain's foul curses rung throughout the village, waking many a pony. It would be an unpleasant start to a horrific day.

# Chapter 3

"Big Mac, what in Sam hill is goin' on here?" a confused Applejack asked her giant of a brother, "Clock says it's 7, but it looks like the middle of the gaul darn night!"

The two earth ponies stood in the midst of their orchard looking up at the night sky. The Apple family had been fortunate to avoid the blight that many other farmers in Equestria had been suffering, but their output was still far less than expected. Nonetheless, it was still back breaking work that needed to be done, so the pair had woken up at the usual time, 4:30, to start harvesting the last of their crop before an early winter could claim the sweet, juicy life blood of Sweet Apple Acres. Being early birds, the absence of the morning sun was that much more noticeable and disturbing.

"Ah dunno Applejack" Big Mac responded in his usual droll tone "Maybe we forgot it was daylight savin' time an' Granny turned the clocks back?"

"You kiddin' me? We just had daylight savin' time!"

"Ah know Applejack, but Ah can't say nothin' else. Ah'm just as stumped as you, Ah ain't seen nothin' like it before."

Applejack paused at her brother's words.

"Say that ah'gin Big Mac?"

"Well, Ah ain't seen nothin' like it before."

Applejack's memory struck her like a ton of bricks.

"Nah Big Mac, Ah reckon we have seen this before, just last year even. Remember the Summer Sun Celebration?"

Big Mac's eyes widened.

"Eh-yup..."

Applejack's face scrunched up in anger. Suddenly she erupted, catching Big Mac off guard.

"She's behind it! After we trusted her, after Celestia forgave her! The witc—

"Now slow down there Applejack," Big Mac interrupted, "Ah think it a might early to be jumpin' to conclusions..."

Applejack butt heads with her older sibling and stared him down.

"The hay you defendin' her for Big Mac, cause she got a pretty face?"

"Now, now, Applejack, there's no need to get angry with me." Big Mac said, averting his eyes, "It's jus, well, you're too quick to act sometimes when you should really wait 'n see for a bit..."

"What are you talkin' 'bout Big Mac? You don't act fast enough! Jus' takin' everythin' slow 'n steady all the time! If you had to challenge Nightmare Moon—"

The bickering pair was interrupted by a loud boom and a flash of light from across the orchard. Applejack smiled, but her brother still looked just as confused as he had been looking up at the sky.

"Uhh, Applejack..."

"No worries brother, it's Twilight teleportin', I know that sound anywhere!"

"Uhh, what's 'teleportin'?"

"It's travelin' magic or somethin', don't worry 'bout it. But Twilight's a real smart gal, she'll know what's up with the sky, she's gotta direct line to Celestia after all! C'mon Big Mac!"

With that, Applejack galloped off in the direction of the sound. Big Mac smiled and trotted slowly behind.

"Lil' sis, you'd run intah a gator's gut without thinkin' a second 'bout it, but I dunno what Ah'd do without c'ha."

/

A thunderous bang struck the ground and a blinding light illuminated the surrounding apple orchard. As it quickly faded and the dust settled, the freshly teleported duo emerged from the epicenter. Twilight stood looking down at Luna, who had fallen to the ground. Her eyes were still wide open and her mouth agape; the unraveling events were too much to bear. There was too much to process, too much to explain to Twilight. Too much convincing that needed to be done.

"Princess, princess are you all right?" Twilight asked, meeting Luna's empty gaze. The goddess blinked heavily several times and got up, saying nothing.

"Princess, what's the meaning of all this? Why didn't you set the moon? Where's Celestia?"

Luna turned back to the inquisitive unicorn with a frazzled expression. She stared at Twilight for a minute before responding:

"Twilight, I, I have no words for you right now."

"What do you mean 'you have no words'?" Twilight snapped, her voice now raised "Princess, you told me you got into a fight with Celestia last night. What did you do? What have you done?"

Twilight's accusative interrogation snapped Luna back to the present situation. Of course it was Luna's fault; it could only logically be the great adversary of life who would be so cruel as to rob the sun from the heavens. She had done it once and tried a second time. What would stop her from doing it again? Trying to keep calm, Luna replied:

"Twilight, I must have your trust."

"Princess, it's difficult to do that when all the signs seem to point to you as the cause of this. Celestia never just up and leaves her throne! Everypony knows that. The last time that happened, you appeared as Nightmare Moon and kidnapped her."

"Wha-, excuse me, I kidnapped Celestia? How?"

"Well, umm, with divine magic I presume?"

"I overcame my older sister, the goddess of the Sun, the one who imprisoned *me*, in a matter of minutes and then imprisoned *her*, somewhere, until the moment you defeated me? Twilight, if I had actually encountered my sister beforehand, there would only be one of us alive. Do you recall a rainbow pegasus asking me what I did "with your princess"?"

"Yeah, that was Rainbow Dash..."

"What did I say?"

"...Nothing about Celestia. You just said 'Am I not royal enough?'"

"Exactly. Twilight, if you don't have a solid grip on what actually occurred last year, can you at least give me the benefit of the doubt? Please, trust me when I say that I do not know where my sister is, and that I cannot set the moon without her starting the cycle anew."

"I, I guess. I mean, you do seem really, *really* distressed about this whole predicament. But how can you say about the cycle be true? Celestia took care of the sun and moon by herself for a thousand years."

"I was curious about that myself, but Celestia told me that she used an ancient spell to channel my power from my prison in the moon. Of course, the power she took was but a fraction, so her nights were never as fair or beautiful as mine. It just gave her the base ability to raise and lower the moon."

"Well, can't we use that spell?"

"Twilight, you know more than anypony that Celestia's private collection of books is only accessible to her and is constantly guarded. Even if we could pass the guards and break Celestia's enchantment, it would take us days to find the book and when we had it, I have no idea where Celly is. I cannot channel her strength out of thin air. No, I can't raise the sun. We do need to find Celestia, but first I think it best to focus on the present mission. At least we know what we have to do to accomplish it."

"...okay Princess Luna. I guess I agree..."

"Twilight!"

Suddenly, a familiar country twang caught their attention and the duo turned in the direction of the sound.

"Twilight! Twilight! Where are ya girl?"

"Applejack!" Twilight responded, "Over here!"

It didn't take long for the country mare to pick up where her friend was. In a minute the orange pony saw two obscured shapes and dashed over.

"Hey Twilight, hey Rarity, do y'all see what I'm seein'? The darn sun ain't risen ye..."

Applejack stopped midsentence to get a better look at her audience.

"Yer Twilight" she pointed to one, and then moved her hoof to the other "But yer definitely not Rarity..."

"Applejack, this is, uh, Princess Luna, you've met before remember?" Twilight nervously said.

"Hello Applejack." Luna said, hoping to give a good impression, "Forgive us for intruding on your farm, I hope we didn't wake you or your family."

Applejack stood back, flabbergasted for but a second, and then positioned herself back to her original footing, neck lowered and eyes narrowed.

"Nah, you didn't wake anypony *princess*. We're hard workers here, early to bed, early to rise, ya hear? Besides Ah think it's time for folks to be gettin' outta bed round this hour anyhow, don't cha think?"

"Yes, I suppose..."

"Usually some folk need a bit of sunshine to remind 'em that a new day is startin'. I ain't seen the sun yet today, have you?"

Applejack leered at Luna, waiting for the goddess to give away her guilt. However, her open hostility did not faze Luna; she was expecting that the down-to-earth pony would need a good deal more convincing than a student stuck in the ivory tower. Then again, she still had a lot of work with Twilight left to do as well. "This is going to be a difficult day" Luna thought,

giving a light sigh. It was a sign of weakness that the cowgirl pony was waiting for.

"Ah ha! Admit it, you've done kidnapped the princess again! *Nightmare Moon*."

"Applejack," Twilight spoke up, "please, I think that Princess Luna is not at fault here."

"Twilight, I love you, but this witch has played you like a fiddle! You honestly believe that anypony 'cept Princess Luna could be behind this? It's nighttime Twilight! Not dawn, not dusk. Nah, it's straight up pitch-black night!"

"But..."

"But nothin' Twilight! She's a trickster, a conjurer of illusions and black magic! Remember our journey to Everfree Castle? All the trials she put in front of us? She tried to kill us!"

It was now becoming very hard for Luna to keep a calm disposition. Applejack wasn't lying and the truth hurt. Luna had tried to dispose of the six ponies; they were direct threats to her goals of vengeance. True, she was batshit insane, but she was still responsible for her actions. She could only hope that the farm pony would fail in turning Twilight against her. Luna turned to the purple unicorn and was disturbed by the doubt she saw in Twilight's eyes.

"She's a no-good murderin' psycho witch!" Applejack railed "Can't ya see, Twilight? She's turnin' you against—"

"Uhh, AJ?"

Twilight and Luna turned to look at the newcomer, a great red stallion standing just behind Applejack. Sure enough it was Big Macintosh.

"Big Mac! Glad to see ya caught up! Quick, I need ya to take this here devil down!" Applejack said, still staring down Luna, "She's got Celestia, Ah know it!"

"Eh-nope!"



Applejack's eyes bugged. She shot her brother with an angry face.

"An' why not?"

"Sis, Ah think you should calm down a bit. Ah know you've been doin' the talkin', I followed the sound of yer voice here, and that's just the problem. AJ, you need to learn to listen and stop accusin' all the time. Ah know yer guess 'bout the night sky sounds pretty smart right now, but it all just doesn't add up. If the princess kidnapped Celestia, why would she be runnin' 'n teleportin' round Sweet Apple Acres with Miss. Sparkle here? Ah think the princess might like to say somethin' 'bout what all is goin' on 'round here."

Humbled, Applejack looked at the ground. Big Mac turned to Luna and smiled.

"Sorry yer majesty, AJ here has bit of a short fuse. The kid's gotta a lot of heart and sometimes she gets herself into trouble with it. Ah see you're hurt too, we'll needa take ya to the house and fix that up fer ya. But fer now could ya tell us 'bout what ya know?"

Luna was moved by the giant red pony's intercession and kindness. He managed to cut through the tense emotional environment and bring a sense of rationality back into the discourse. Luna couldn't help but be reminded of her own sister. The thought put a smile on her face.

"Thank you Big Macintosh, your patience is the greatest gift anypony can give me now." Luna said, making the stallion's face a bit more red. Luna then took a long breath and continued .

"I know what everypony thinks of me, I know that most do not trust me the slightest. I have come to expect this, the wicked nature of my return to Equestria cannot be simply dismissed. However, the madness that grew in my mind during my millennia of imprisonment was purged by the Elements of Harmony and I have since returned to my former sanity and character. But the Elements also stole from me my immortality. That is why you see wounds on my face, they were given to me by mortals, not in a struggle with Celestia. You should also know that Celestia and I fought last night over how she has portrayed me over the centuries, but it was an exchange of harsh words and nothing else. I flew to Twilight's seeking her help in answering some questions and finding a way to gain back my immortality.

At some point during my absence, Celestia too departed Canterlot. I have no idea where she is, she has seldom ever vanished like this. In recent memory this only occurred during last year's Summer Sun Celebration where everypony assumed I kidnapped her. Based off this knowledge, supreme General Hawkeye assumed, like Applejack, that I was to blame and sent the Royal Guard to Ponyville to arrest me while I was trying to set the moon. However I cannot perform my duty without my sister to help me begin anew the cycle."

As Luna spoke, Applejack made sure Luna didn't break eye contact with her. She read every bit of body language she could gather from Luna, but couldn't detect a bit of discomfort or deception. As the Element of Honesty, Applejack could call out any liar with ease, but Luna didn't meet any of the tell tale signs she was apt at keying in on when dealing with a deceitful pony. Applejack was torn, her pride and gut feeling refused to accept Luna's interpretation of events, but she had no proof and her brother made an excellent point. Sweet Apple Acres was a strange place for a fugitive to flee to. Still, she had a nagging feeling that the goddess was a masterful trickster above her powers of observation.

"Twilight teleported us just before the Guard could arrest me. And so I stand here, Applejack, asking you to forgive me for the dangers I put you and your friends through during the height of my insanity and believe me. I need your help if I am to regain my immortality and find my sister. Will you do so?"

Applejack looked to Twilight who nodded her head in affirmation of Luna's account and turned to Big Mac who simply smiled back at her. Facing Luna with a look of defeat, Applejack responded solemnly.

"...Yeah, Ah forgive ya and Ah'll do what I can to help...Ah can tell if somepony is lyin', an' you ain't. But you gotta understand princess, mah faith in you is small an' shaky. You fib to me once, an' Ah'm done, you hear? Now what's the plan?"

It was now Twilight's turn to speak up.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled. I feel like we've spent too much time in one place, the Royal Guard are probably tearing Ponyville apart looking for Princess Luna. As such, Luna and I can't go into town and get Pinkie Pie and Rarity..."

"Wait," Applejack interrupted, "why do we need the whole gang now?"

"The princess and I figured that the Elements of Harmony drained her of her immortality. We need to reassemble and return it to Princess Luna."

"...Ah think this sounds a bit sketchy, reversin' the Elements' power and all..."

"Applejack! We have to do this, if Luna dies, so will everypony!"

"...okay then. So you were sayin'?"

"Right. So we'll need you, Applejack, to retrieve those two with their elemental jewels. The guards won't bother with you, I don't think many will even recognize you, but still: be careful. Keep out of sight the best you can. Luna and I will find Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy."

"Got it. Ah'll head over there now, you two go with Big Mac back to the house. My elemental jewel is under mah mattress, take it with ya. We'll meet up 'round Fluttershy's place, sound good?"

"It's fine with me, how about you, princess?"

"Yes, it sounds like a good enough plan." Luna replied.

"All right then," Applejack started, "I don't think Ah'll be long, I may even beat y'all to Fluttershy's. But if it's as risky as you say I may be a bit late. Explainin' things may take time too, darn it...anyhow don't worry 'bout me."

Applejack then turned to her brother.

"Show 'em the way home Big Mac. Make sure they eat somethin' there and bandage up the princess here, okay?"

"Eh-yup!"

"Good, see y'all later!"

With that Applejack dashed off in the direction of town. Big Mac shook his head and smiled again.

"Mah sister, always runnin' off. She has a foal's energy, don't y'all think? Anyway, follow me, Applebloom should be finishin' breakfast 'bout now."

The big red earth pony turned his back and began walking back, Luna and Twilight not far behind.

"Big Mac, you let Applebloom cook alone?" Twilight asked, coming up alongside the large pony.

"Well Miss. Sparkle, the filly's yet to find her true talent, so we figured that cookin' is a good thing fer her to do to help out. Everypony needs to know how to cook. Yeah she can be messy, but she always puts edible food on mah plate and that's all that matters to me."

"Pinkie Pie showed me the remains of her cooking. It looked like black death."

"Nah Miss. Sparkle, I think you'll be pleased what you find. Ponies grow an' change with time, nopony is the same forever, especially the little ones." Big Mac said. He then turned to Luna "Yer majesty, are you feelin' all right? Those are some nasty cuts ya got there."

"Yes, thank you for asking Big Macintosh," Luna replied "and thank you for encouraging Applejack to listen to me. I can tell she respects you greatly."

"Yeah, I suppose. Ah know her weaknesses and she knows mine. We do our best to point out to each other when they flare up durin' inappropriate times. That way we can avoid lookin' an' behavin' like foals. It's what sibblins' ought to do fer another, ya know?"

Luna looked at the ground and then back to Big Mac with a frown.

"You're wise far beyond your years, Big Macintosh. Even goddesses forget such things. I wish only that Celestia were here to listen to your advice, I feel that she could use it."

"Yer majesty..."

"No Big Macintosh, please call me Luna."

"Luna, you may be right 'bout yer sister bein' all high an' mighty, but you gotta remember that we all fall into the same sorta self-righteousness at times. It's only natural an' healthy to think ourselves right, but it can blind us to what all is actually happenin' 'round us. Jus' be sure that yer not in the wrong before ya harp on others."

Luna was not expecting sage advice from a simple country pony, and yet she just received plenty of it. It'd be difficult to translate well into the political and cosmic struggles of Equestria while also requiring a lot of reflection on Luna's part, but the goddess was convinced that it was necessary before encountering Celestia again. She had a feeling their next meeting would not be as one-sided as the last.

"Well, look at that y'all, we made it back in record time. Eh-yup!"

As they emerged from the orchard they came upon the Apple homestead. Approaching the door, they could hear the clanging of pots and pans being shuffled about. Whatever was for breakfast, Twilight had a bad feeling about it.

Peering through the screen door, Luna could make out a bit of the layout of the household. The entry way led into the foyer, which had a staircase leading up to the second floor. Straightforward from the foyer was the entry to the kitchen.

Big Mac opened the door and called to his youngest sister:

"Applebloom, we have guests. Now be proper an' c'mere to greet 'em."

A loud crash of dishes and a galloping of hooves were heard as the group entered the Apple home. Suddenly a small figure leapt through the air and landed atop Big Mac's back, surprising Twilight and Luna.

"Big Mac, yer back already! Ah think you'll like breakfast this mornin' I worked real hard on it an' everythin'!"

"Ah'm sure ya did, but don't be rude now..."

"Oh right, sorry!" Applebloom apologized, turning to Twilight and Luna.

"Mornin' Twilight! Mighty fine you could join us this mornin', were ya out helpin' Applejack? Ah'd be out helpin' too, but she says I'm too..." Applebloom paused, the stranger catching her eye, "...uh sorry ma'am, but who are you? Yer a unicorn but, ya got wings? What the hay?"

"Applebloom, this here is Princess Luna" Big Mac introduced, "An' she's Celestia's sister, so respect her kindly."

"Yer Princess Luna?"

"Pleased to meet you Applebloom..." the goddess responded before being pounced on by the enthusiastic filly.

"Oh mah sun! Yer Princess Luna!" Applejack cried out, embracing the goddess with a surprising amount of strength, "Ah can't wait to tell Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo! Can ya help us find our cutie marks, princess? Of course ya can! You know how to do everythin' after all!"

Luna was happy to see somepony that ecstatic to see her. It was likely that Applebloom had witnessed the return of Nightmare Moon, yet the young filly had failed to make a connection between Luna and her alter ego. Such was the beauty of the innocence of youth, bereft of the prejudices and free of the web of myths and inventions of her sister. But as the filly's hug tightened around her neck, Luna's thoughts of happiness quickly shifted to ones of her own mortality. Finding it difficult to breathe under Applebloom's vice-like grip, Luna gasped for a fresh breath of air.

Seeing this, Big Mac grabbed Applebloom's collar, tore the two apart, and set his sister down lightly.

"Now Applebloom, ain't right to be so bold an' familiar when meetin' new ponies. Remember when AJ took ya to market?"

"...yeah."

"Ya darn well scared most of the townsfolk with yer in-yer-face behavior. Now Princess Luna here is a special pony who deserves special respect. Ah can tell you Applebloom, you'd be in big trouble if the Royal Guard ever saw you chokin' out the princess, ya understand?"

"...yeah."

"The Royal Guard!" Twilight said, bursting into Big Mac's lesson in proper etiquette, "Big Mac, I don't want to seem too hasty right now, but the Guard is searching for us as we speak. I think it's best that we do as Applejack instructed and then get moving on again. I'd hate to see Sweet Apple Acres torn up like my library..."

"Ah think yer right, Miss Sparkle. Applebloom, how're the flapjacks comin' along?"

"Well ah reckon I need to make a couple more for Twilight and Princess Luna, so 'bout 10 minutes?"

"That'll do Applebloom." Big Mac said, then turning to face Twilight "Miss. Sparkle, why don't cha help Applebloom with the cookin' while I go an' bandage up the princess? Maybe you can even teach her a thing er two."

"Yeah Twilight, teach me! C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!" Applebloom shouted as she ran back into the kitchen.

"Of course I can." Twilight said, giving her typical nervous smile while slowly following the filly. "Yes, I'd love to help you not blow up the kitchen."

Big Mac gave a light chuckle and turned his attention back to Luna.

"Princess, if ya just follow me, ah got some first aid stuff jus' right over here. This is a farm, injury ain't too uncommon an' so we're always prepared for the worst an' you got it bad."

Turning left, Luna was led into the living room. Big Mac trotted up to a big chest that sat adjacent to one of the few pieces of furniture that occupied the space. Opening it up, Big Mac took out some bandages, tape and disinfectant.

"All right Luna, come here an' lemme get a good look at that pretty face."

With a slight blush, Luna parted her mane to give Big Mac access to her wounds.

"Eh-yup, this is gonna sting a bit."

A shot of pain went through Luna as Big Mac applied the ointment, but the healing properties of the substance soon replaced it with a feeling of cool relief. Luna gave Big Mac a smile, and he returned it, saying nothing. As he began wrapping a bandage around her first cut, Luna was a bit surprised at the stallion's quite demeanor. He stood in the presence of a goddess, seemingly oblivious to that reality. Unlike many before him, he did not incessantly plague Luna for answers about life's mysteries or ask her for any special favors. He did not even inquire into her past. The giant farmer pony was clearly not intimidated; he was perhaps the most relaxed pony she had ever had the pleasure to meet.

As Big Mac began preparing to treat her second cut, Luna's curiosity got the best of her.

"Big Macintosh, why the sudden silence?"

"Oh, ain't nothin' Luna. Ah don't talk all that much, only when Ah really need to. In fact, I don't think Ah've talked this much in months, but it ain't everyday that a goddess pops up outta nowhere askin' me fer help an' the sun don't rise."

"But Big Macintosh, aren't you the least suspicious about me? Do you know what they say I've done?"

"Nah princess, all I know 'bout ya is what happened last summer an' you sounded honest in yer apology. Ah've got not one reason to think ya a bad pony."

"That's all you really know about me? Did you not take medieval Equestrian history in school?"

"Eh-nope. I wasn't ever a very smart pony; Ah was only really good at math. When my folks died, Ah had to drop outta school an' take care of AJ, Applebloom, an' Granny Smith so Ah never really gotta study any history. Nah, I'm none to book smart at all, but Ah'm good at listenin'. Ah think it best like that."

"I see, but hasn't Applejack told you anything?"



"Well, yeah, she did. But not much. She would jus' say we couldn't trust ya so quick-like an' Ah nodded not knowin' a thing about the situation. Ah like to reserve judgment fer myself, so Ah jus' let her vent."

Taping the final wrapping, the big pony stepped back.

"There ya go, Ah'd like to say 'good as new' but you'll be needin' some time to rest an' let it heal."

"Thank you again, Big Macintosh." Luna said, "You may think yourself a simple farmer, but you're more the gentlepony than any prince, duke, or knight in Celestia's court."

With those words, Luna leaned forward and kissed Big Mac on the cheek. She then proceeded to brush past him to join the others in the kitchen. The unexpected gesture surprised Big Mac, making him unable to prevent his face from melting into a goofy smile. Only one word could surmise the red pony's feelings.

"Eh-yup!"

As Luna was about to enter the kitchen, she inadvertently crashed into an excited Applebloom.

"Oh princess! Sorry 'bout runnin' inta ya, but I was jus' gonna tell y'all it's breakfast time! C'mon!"

Following the filly to the kitchen table, Luna saw that Twilight was finishing setting out the plates and utensils.

"So Twilight, how do you think Applebloom did with the pancakes? Are they as horrifying as you made them out to be?"

Twilight blushed sheepishly.

"No, they actually smell...well, divine! Unless they're poisoned or something, they should be really good."

"Delightful! Now shall we take our seats then, my little chef?" Luna asked Applebloom. The young pony was busy carrying a large stack of pancakes over to the table, but responded cheerfully.

"Sure can princess! But where the hay is Big Mac, I thought he was comin'?"

"Ah'm right here lil' sis." Big Mac called out joining the three at the table, "Ah wouldn't miss yer flapjacks fer the world."

"All right!" Applebloom shouted enthusiastically while serving each pony a couple of pancakes "Then dig in everypony, it's mah specialty! Blueberry strawberry banana flapjacks with a bit of apple, of course!"

Luna complied with the order; she hadn't eaten for a full day. Politely, she used her magic to use both fork and knife to cut her a piece of her first pancake and put morsel to mouth. Luna's eyes widened.

"This...this...this is...Scrumptious! Well done Applebloom!"

Throwing her sister's laws of etiquette to the wind, Luna began scarfing down her plate of pancakes.

"They are pretty good, aren't they?" Twilight said, having taken her first bite as well.

"Eh-yup!"

"Y'all really like 'em?" Applebloom asked, just about crying from the pride she felt.

The three nodded in agreement.

"Oh boy! Flapjack makin' cutie mark, flapjack makin' cutie mark, c'mon!" Applebloom repeated as she moved her apron to check her sides. Unfortunately for the filly, her flank was still as blank as it was before.

"Ah don't get it," Applebloom sighed with disappointment, "If everypony really liked 'em, then how come I ain't got mah cutie mark?"

"Huh, well sweetie," Twilight began, holding back a laugh "you may make good pancakes, but you're not very good *at* making them."

"Huh?"

Twilight pointed her hoof to the kitchen. It was a disaster zone, pots and pans were strayed all over, many of them covered in flour and batter. Fruit peels and broken dishes littered the floor, and, for some reason, a fish wrapped in some newspaper was flailing on the ground.

"Generally, it takes less than twenty dishes to make a dozen pancakes."

"Ah, rats!"

Twilight and Luna laughed while Big Mac simply smiled.

"Don't worry about your cutie mark!" Luna said in between laughs, "Applebloom, I feel you're destined for something much greater than just making good pancakes."

Applebloom's eyes lit up.

"Ya really think so?"

Luna nodded.

"Yeah, yer right! Ah can do somethin' much better than makin' crummy pancakes! Wait, y'all see that Applebloom and the Cutie Mark Crusaders will find the coolest, most awesome talents that anypony has ever even known! We'll make ya proud princess!"

"I'm sure you will." Luna smiled, still chuckling "Perhaps you can visit Canterlot and demonstrate them to my sister and me. We'd like that greatly."

"Oh wow Princess Luna! Really? You're the best princess Equestria's ever had!"

Once again, Luna found the young filly's hooves wrap around her neck in a painful embrace, but she too was lost in the moment. It had been centuries since she last heard herself be praised above Celestia. Even though the words came from a naive foal, Luna could not help but bask in the light of Applebloom's admiration. That is until she felt the living day lights being squeezed out of her.

"Uh, Applebloom, I love you...too...but...air..." Luna gasped.

"Oh right, sorry princess! Usually I stop when folk turn blue, but it's hard tellin' fer you! Ah don't wanna get in trouble with the Royal Guard or nothin', honest!"

The young pony released her grip, allowing Luna to take several deep breaths.

"Applebloom brings up a good point, princess." Twilight said, her tone punctuated with grave seriousness, "We don't want to get in trouble with the Royal Guard. We need to get going to Rainbow Dash's house. I think we've stayed too long."

"Aww, you can't go now!" Applebloom begged "We gotta go see Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, Princess Luna! C'mon, pleasssee!"

"Now Applebloom," Big Mac said, "The princess and Miss. Sparkle are on royal business an' need to be on their way. Maybe if you're good, Princess Luna will come back to visit ya and yer lil' friends, ain't that right princess?"

"Yes, I'd like that," Luna smiled, "and perhaps I can show you some of my favorite recipes. I don't like to boast, but I make the meanest hay sandwich! I hope you like hot sauce."

"Oh Ah do prin-"

Before Applebloom could finish her sentence, the front door shook with a violent knock.

"Open up, open up! By order of the Royal Guard, open this door or we'll bust it down!" a familiar voice shouted.

"Oh no, no, no, no!" Twilight whispered frantically "We still need to get the Elemental jewel from under Applejack's mattress!"

"Ah'll go an' distract 'em." Macintosh said, laying out his plan, "Twilight, you sneak upstairs. Mah body should be able to block their vision of the inside, but be stealthy anyway. Luna, wait here fer Twilight and do that teleportin' magic once ya got what ya need. Got it?"

Everypony nodded in agreement except Applebloom who looked confused.

"Umm, Big Mac?"

"Open up this bloody door now you damn hicks!"

"Applebloom, lock the backdoor and make sure to warn Luna if somepony tries to knock it down, all right?"

"But..."

Without another word, Big Mac and Twilight struck out into the foyer.

/

Big Mac gulped as he walked from the kitchen to the front door. It was uncharacteristic of him to lead, and he was unsure whether his half-baked plan would work. Grabbing the handle, he opened the door to reveal several angry pegasi clad in golden armor. The captain, with his red plumed helmet, stood at the front with a chewed-up cigar in his mouth.

"Well, well, look at what we have here. It's Andre the Big Red Horse." Captain Braveheart said with contempt "Anyway, there have been reports that a loud flash of light was seen and heard on your property. We're here to give your house a thorough search, so don't try any funny business and you won't get beat, boy."

"Why Ah dunno where you folk are all from, but that kinda talk is considered rude 'round these parts."

"I don't give one damn about 'these parts'!" the captain barked back, "Let my company in or I'll make sure 'these parts' go up in flames, got that?"

"Eh-nope!"

With that, Big Mac slammed the door, and put his back up against it as the Guard began to bash it down.

Twilight, what're ya doin'? Get goin'!"

/

Twilight watched as Big Mac dealt with the Royal Guard. She was so incredibly nervous, she was shaking. Slowly she crept over to the stairs,

but she could swear she could feel Captain Braveheart's piercing gaze on her as his gruff voice entered her ears. Too afraid, her body tensed up and refused to move despite the mind's desire to press forward. Why didn't she just teleport? Stupid, stupid!

"Twilight, what're ya doin? Get goin'!"

Big Mac's words snapped her back to the present. Twilight rushed upstairs and quickly entered her Applejack's room. The purple unicorn leaped over to the bed and kicked the mattress clean off the bed frame, revealing the ruby treasure it concealed. Twilight grabbed the elemental jewel and stuck it in her saddlebags. As she turned to leave the room, however, she heard the shattering of glass behind her. Horrified, she looked behind her to see a yellow pegasus in the room. It was Lt. Lightning Strike.

"Twilight Sparkle, halt!" he ordered in his usual disciplined voice as he drew a nightstick from his side, "Surrender! Do not try to resist or flee, or you will be met with greater force!"

/

"But..."

Applebloom was ignored as her big brother and Twilight exited the kitchen. Confused she looked to Luna for answers.

"Princess Luna, what's goin' on? Who's yellin' at us?"

Luna frowned. She didn't want to expose the young filly to the bitter realities that were now trying to break down the door of the Apple family homestead.

"Shhh..it's okay Applebloom. It's just the Royal Guard..."

"The Royal Guard? Oh no! They know Ah touched you!" Applebloom shouted, her eyes welling up with tears, "Ah don't wanna be banished! Ah'm sorry, Ah'm sorry!"

"Shhh, Applebloom, shhhh..." Luna said, trying to comfort the distressed filly, "It's not that at all. I forgot to tell them I was coming to visit you today, and they must have gotten pretty worried."

Luna's words soothed Applebloom's fears. Calming down, Applebloom nuzzled the princess.

"Twilight, what're ya doin'? Get goin'!"

Big Mac's call alarmed Luna, the normally calm and collected pony's voice was now tainted by an obvious fear. Breaking from Applebloom, she went to peek into the foyer.

"Princess Luna..."

"Shhhh, Applebloom." Luna said, not bothering to look back.

"But Princess..."

"What, Apple-"

Luna turned back and saw two pegasi with nightsticks drawn. As one cracked over her head, everything went black.

/

Eyes closed, Big Mac put all of his strength into holding the door against the five guardsmen. He could easily buy Twilight and Luna plenty of time if this was the best the Royal Guard could manage. Not two seconds past before he was proven wrong.

"Big Mac! Help!"

Big Mac's eyes popped open. His sister was in trouble. Abandoning the door to its fate, Big Mac dashed into the kitchen and saw the two guardponies carrying away a limp Luna and a struggling Applebloom.

"Lemme go you cloud biters, lemme go!"

"Put 'em down!"

The two guards turned to be greeted with a mighty kick from Big Mac's powerful hind legs, the force effectively separating them from their captives. With a loud crash, the pair was sent flying into Applebloom's pots and pans. It would be a while before they would be able to get back up.

"Big Mac!" Applebloom cried, tears flowing wildly "They hit the princess, they jus' hit her right on the head!"

"Applebloom, I told ya to check the back door!"

"Ah'm sorry Big Mac!"

A loud cracking sound confirmed that the Royal Guard had broken through the door.

"Where are ya you bloody piece of red shit!" the Captain growled, his coarse words heard throughout the house.

"Applebloom, get behind me."

/

"Come on Twilight, courage!" the purple mare said to herself, her knees shaking and her horn glowing.

"No magic or I'll be forced to hurt you!" the Lieutenant warned

"Don't do this Lieutenant, you can't win." Twilight responded, her tone mixed with defiance and fear.

"Orders are orders Twilight, you know that."

"Then go ahead, do it!"

Accepting her challenge, the pegasus bolted over to Twilight, nightstick raised. Using the mattress, Twilight shielded herself from the charge, stopping the soldier dead in his tracks. Seeing her opportunity, the unicorn slammed the mattress down onto the Lieutenant. Hoping that the blow would incapacitate the elite guard for a brief while, Twilight dashed to the room's exit only to be tackled by the swift veteran.

"Get...off!"

"Surrender!"

"No!"



Two loud cracks sounded as the guard struck Twilight on the back in succession. The pain seared throughout her body, awakening within Twilight a frightening power. Eyes now glowing, she managed to kick Lightning Strike off her and meet the pegasus' gaze. It was now the Lieutenant who shook with fear as he saw Twilight's body course with magical pulses.

"I'm the royal protégé of Celestia, goddess of the sun and sovereign of Equestria! In her name, I order you to stand down, Lieutenant!"

Obedient to whatever end, Lt. Lightning Strike shook his head.

"I can't do that Sparks."

With a loud battle cry, the yellow pegasus charged at Twilight a second time. The unicorn countered with a magnificent bolt of purple lightning that stunned the soldier before he could get within striking distance, knocking him from the air and onto the mattress. Her excess power now receding, Twilight grabbed a paper bag from her bag and breathed heavily into it. Calming down, she looked at the lieutenant remorsefully, sighed, and vanished with a loud bang.

/

"Ah'm in the kitchen, face me like a real stallion!" Big Mac shouted, his body tensed up in preparation for the fight ahead. He just had to hold them off until Twilight returned, but it seemed like an eternity since the unicorn had gone upstairs.

"Ha! You're not a real stallion, you're a freak on steroids!" Captain Braveheart sneered back from the comfort of the foyer "Get 'em boys!"

Four pegasi flew into the kitchen, encircling Big Mac as he stood protectively over Luna and Applebloom. The red giant was a patient and perceptive pony, his eyes followed the soldiers and his ears were perked to full attention. Hearing a rush of wind, Big Mac turned to his right and head butted the assaulting pegasus with tremendous force, knocking the unfortunate soldier out of consciousness. Seeing their comrade easily cast aside, the Guard opted for a more straightforward strategy: overpower and conquer. All at once, the three pegasi charged Big Mac with nightstick in hoof. One mounted the red stallion and wrapped himself around Big Mac's

neck while the other two hovered over him while savagely beating his sides. Big Mac flailed wildly trying to shake the pegasus off of him, but to no avail. The pegasus, confident that he had Big Mac right where he wanted him, drew his night stick with one hoof and gave Big Mac a stinging blow across the face. The red stallion roared with pain as he gave a mighty buck that sent the pegasus flying into the same cooking deathtrap his first comrades suffered. The two remaining soldiers kept up their attack, beating Big Mac relentlessly. Blood now flowing into his eyes, Big Mac thrashed with reckless abandon.

Seeing her brother's condition, Applebloom dragged Luna away from the battle scene the best she could lest they catch one of Big Mac's hooves in one of their own faces. Looking back at her brother, Applebloom swallowed her tears, mustered her courage and shouted.

"Go Big Mac, ya got 'em big brother! Show those pansy feather dusters what the Apple family is made of, ya hear me Big Mac? Don't give up!"

Hearing Applebloom's sweet voice calmed the stallion's blind rage. Enduring the blows from the guards, Big Mac focused, trying to predict his enemies' next move. Timing each strike, Big Mac finally made his move and kicked one of his attackers square in the ribs while dispatching the other with a fierce head butt.

Both soldiers fell to the ground moaning.

Big Mac, blood flowing from his face and body beaten raw, turned to his sister and gave his familiar, friendly smile.

"Enough of this bull."

A whirring sound was heard briefly before a crossbow bolt found its way wedged into Big Mac's right thigh. A loud growl of agony greeted Luna as she came around. Looking around, she gasped at the horrific condition Big Mac was in. Before she could get up and help him, she saw Captain Braveheart fly into the kitchen, crossbow in hoof and a smug look on his face. Hovering over his prey, the captain spit into Big Mac's eyes and grinned.

"Ha! Not so tough now are we, ya dumb hick! I've got reinforcements on their way right now, so you best behave! I swear, if a single of my pegasi

are dead, I'll have you ripped limb from limb right in front of your family just before they lose their heads to ol' lady guillotine! Like the sound of that, boy?"

"Silence you impudent scoundrel!" Luna shouted from across the kitchen, disgusted with the conduct and words of her sister's elite soldiers.

"No, shut your mouth, your *highness*. I've won this fight. And a hundred others. That's why I'm the Captain of the Guard, and you better damn respect it!"

"You petty pegasus! You honestly believe you're rank means anything to me? In the face of my power, you're nothing but a noxious dust in the wind, an irritant, nothing more."

With a bang and a flash, Twilight teleported to Luna's side. At the sight of the purple mare, the captain began to reload his crossbow.

"Princess!" Twilight said, "I've got the elemental jewel! Let's get out of here!"

"Oh no." the captain interjected "You two won't escape from me this time. No, I'm going to make you rue your words, *princess*!"

"Captain Braveheart!" Luna replied with indignation "You forget who you deal with! I am the goddess of the night. You *will* bow before me!"

"Over Celestia's rottin' corpse I will!"

The captain aimed his crossbow at Luna and released the bolt. With a glow of Luna's horn, the projectile burst into flame, turning to ash before the hooves of the goddess, an offering to her raging fury. With anger and vengeance in her heart, Luna flew with incredible speed and tackled the bawdy captain and pinned him to the ground. Using her magic, she manipulated the gravity around them to bring down a greater force on the captain, ensuring that he would be unable to resist her.

"What're ya waitin' for you bloody witch!" Captain Braveheart yelled, struggling underneath the princess, "Kill me and be done with it! I know you've done it before, there ain't nothin' you love more than the sweet taste of blood on your wicked lips! Kill me!"

His words infuriated Luna, but she couldn't let him have that victory over her. It would only prove the myth a fact. No, she was far more creative than that. An alternative plan came quickly to mind as a cocky smile spread across Luna's face.

"No, I don't think I will. I think I'd rather have you report back to the general so that you can tell him how you escaped from *me*. You can also explain to him why you abandoned your post for a seedy 'gentlepony' club in Canterlot. I'm sure he'd love to hear about that, don't you think?"

Captain Braveheart shot Luna a look of horror.

"No! Kill me, kill me you fucking wench!"

"Language, captain! Be sure to add to your report that your atrocious disrespect and pride cost you your mission more than once."

"No!"

"Have a pleasant homecoming, captain."

"Don't!"

With a simple glow of her horn, the captain vanished with the usual flash bang.

Before Luna could rest for even a second, she heard a call from outside.

"Spread out and surround the building! Let no pony escape!"

It appeared the captain's reinforcements had arrived. Luna turned to Big Mac who was now quite unconscious. Luna could not suppress a tear as she beheld the terrible state Big Mac was in. His red coat and yellow mane were now both a damp crimson, his eyes were swollen shut and the captain's hideous bolt protruded from his thigh.

"Twilight quick, teleport us away from here! We need to get Big Macintosh medical attention right away."

"Got it princess, I have just the place in mind." She replied somewhat solemnly.

"Good, where's Applebloom?"

Twilight pointed her hoof in the direction of Big Mac. Sure enough, the young filly was nuzzling her injured brother, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Big Mac, get up! Get up, please! You gotta be okay, yer the biggest, strongest pony ah know!"

Applebloom's words once again called her brother back to his senses. Opening a single eye, Big Mac weakly spoke up.

"Applebloom, Ah'll be okay. You be a good gal fer Miss. Sparkle an' Luna now, ya hear?"

"Ah will, ah promise Big Mac." Applebloom sniffed, hugging her brother tightly. "Ah love ya big brother."

"Ah love ya more than anythin' Applebloom," Big Mac responded, a bloody tear running down his cheek, "but now y'all need to get goin' on yer way."

"And leave you here? Big Macintosh, there's a fine line between noble sacrifice and stupidity!" Luna retorted "You're coming with us!"

The usual rush of wind was heard as several pegasi guard entered the kitchen.

"Halt don't...!" one guard said, failing to finish his sentence before yet another thunderous blast sounded throughout the house, leaving nopony for the guard to order.

"...don't do that..."

Confused, the soldiers surveyed the nasty scene before them: dishes and cupboards laid in ruin, their comrades were strewn throughout the kitchen groaning in severe pain, and patches of splattered blood covered every other square hoof of the room. Also, there was a fish wrapped in newspaper floundering about. It was not a pretty sight. However, one thing, or pony rather, was obviously missing.

"Where the hay is Captain Braveheart?"

# Chapter 4

In a small hut on the far reaches of Ponyville and nearing the border of Everfree Forest, an unhappy rabbit thumped his foot in impatience as he stood in the kitchen waiting for his breakfast. Angel Bunny was a creature of habit, everyday he'd awake at 8:00 and be promptly served his morning carrot by 8:15. It was now nearing 8:30, and his pegasus had still not awoken to perform the daily ritual. Fed up with waiting, the peeved ball of white fluff hopped upstairs to see to it that his Fluttershy got her yellow carcass out of bed. Jumping up and turning the knob to her bedroom door, Angel bounced to Fluttershy's bedside. Grabbing her clock from the nightstand, the rabbit leapt on top of the snoozing pegasus. A light sleeper, Fluttershy's eyes snapped wide open, a terrified squeak soon following. Peeking from the covers that were currently serving as her first line of defense against the many evils and perils of the world, she saw only her beloved rabbit before her and smiled.

"Oh Angel Bunny," Fluttershy said groggily, pointing to the night sky outside her window "it's much too late to be up. Don't be anxious, I know we have a lot to do in the morning. We have to see more of our bird friends off before they leave for winter, snuggle in the frogs and lizards, and..."

As she spoke, Fluttershy slowly drifted back to sleep, a single crude snore signaling the finality of her retreat back into the world of dreams. Angel brought his paw to his head in disappointment and aggravation. Hopping up close to her face, the rabbit gave the pegasus a light wake-up slap on the face. Torn from her sleep again, Fluttershy gave Angel an annoyed look.

"Angel Bunny! It's—"

The rabbit interrupted her by shoving the clock into her face and pointing to the hour.

"...It's 8:30! Oh my, but it's so dark outside," her eyes narrowed, "Angel, you wouldn't happen to be playing a trick on me, would you?"

The bunny shook his head and pointed at the clock again.

"No? Hmm not a trick...an all day eclipse? An Ursa Major ate the sun?"

The rabbit disconfirmed each theory with two more headshakes.

"Daylight savings time?"

The rabbit gave her another light smack, causing Fluttershy to blush in embarrassment.

"You're right, that was silly of me; that was just last week. Then...am I dreaming?"

Angel gave Fluttershy a pinch.

"Ah! Okay, so that's a no..."

Angel leapt from the bed and hopped back to the doorway. Pausing, he turned back to look at Fluttershy with an angry expression as he pointed down the stairs. Realizing what Angel really wanted, Fluttershy's sleepy demeanor shifted quickly to an alert concern as she hurriedly flew out of bed and down the stairs.

"Oh Angel Bunny, I'm so, so sorry! You must be starving you poor thing! I, I just slept in today without thinking. Please forgive my selfishness little friend, let Fluttershy get you a nice, juicy morning carrot."

From back upstairs, the white rabbit smiled and hooped merrily down the stairs. Fluttershy met him at the bottom with a particularly large carrot. At the sight of the monstrous orange root, Angel's eyes widened and began salivating. Jumping up and snatching the carrot, Angel Bunny scurried off to a corner and proceeded to gnaw away on his prize.

Glad to see her pet satisfied, Fluttershy's thoughts turned back to the unabated night outside her door. Gazing through the window, she saw that the stars were shining brightly and that the wind was still as fierce as it had been when she went to bed. There was but one change: the moon was fixed in the corner of the sky as if it were trying to escape the welkin, but with little success. Not quite sure to make of the phenomena, she looked back at Angel and shook her head.

"I don't know Angel," she said to her gorging pet, "I don't like the looks of this, it reminds me of, well,—"

A blinding flash lit the room, followed immediately by a loud bang. As the light dissipated, Fluttershy immediately took cover underneath her coffee table, her eyes glued-shut and body shaking. Then from the darkness she heard a familiar voice:

"Fluttershy, it's all right. It's me, Twilight."

The yellow pegasus slowly opened her eyes only to meet Twilight face-to-face. Relieved, Fluttershy smiled at her friend.

"Oh Twilight," Fluttershy said as she emerged from underneath the table, "you gave me quite the scare! You really should knock next time, it's just plain rude to..."

"Fluttershy, I know this might sound weird," Twilight interrupted her tone gravely serious "but I need you to be strong for me, can you do that?"

"Umm, I don't know...I thought...is something wrong?"

"Fluttershy, I want you to take a deep breath and brace yourself."

"Umm, why?"

"We have a problem, a very, very nasty problem that requires your medical expertise."

"Oh, did you find an injured animal?" Fluttershy responded, her timidity giving way to a sense of urgency "That's terrible! Please, let me see it right away!"

"Well, it's not exactly...wait Fluttershy!"

As Twilight spoke, Fluttershy weaved around the purple unicorn to get a look at her new patient. Nothing, especially Twilight's few words, could prepare Fluttershy for the shocking sight before her. The only way the fragile pegasus could process the situation through the one way she knew best: vocalizing every observation until she could make sense of it. She started her list with the blood drenched pony before her.



"Big Mac bleeding? Applebloom crying?"

Fluttershy then caught sight of the blue alicorn's figure.

"Princess Luna!"

She quickly turned her head back to her window.

"Night during the morning!"

Looking back to Luna, she made her final conclusion.

"Nightmare Moon is back to wreak her terrible vengeance on us! Eeep!"

Before her friend could fall into her usual catatonic state, Twilight firmly grabbed a hold of the terrified pegasus.

"Fluttershy, you've played with a deadly manticore, lectured an enormous dragon, and literally stared down a cockatrice! I need you to show me some of that courage, Big Mac really needs your help now. Please, we can't afford you to pass out!"

"But, but Nightmare—"

"No, that is Princess Luna. It's a long story, but, put simply, Big Mac was assaulted by the Royal Guard. As things are, we can't take Big Mac to the hospital, Ponyville is unsafe for Luna and I right now..."

"But, but why did they do it, Twilight? Why would they hurt Big Mac?"

"I promise I'll explain everything to you. I Pinkie Pie swear. But you have a patient that is in dire need, do you think you can help?"

Fluttershy looked from Twilight to the severely injured pony in her living room. Taking Twilight's words to heart, she bucked up; her expression of horror was soon replaced with one of determination. Somepony required her aid, and she would do all in her power not to fail him.

"Yes Twilight. I can help." Fluttershy responded resolutely, "I'll need you to lay him down on that table and start cleaning his wounds. I'll have Angel get you some wet wash clothes. Angel!"

The rabbit hopped over to Fluttershy quickly. It was clear by his haste that he was far from oblivious to the crisis that was now playing out in his home. Having heard the pegasus' order, Angel saluted and dashed into the kitchen to retrieve the requested rags.

"Good," Fluttershy said, returning her attention back to Twilight, "I'm going to disinfect my hooves and gather my medical supplies. The largest animal I've ever had to care for was a bear, so I think I can, uh, do this."

"Fluttershy, I have no doubt in your ability. I've seen you take the most hopeless creature in and get them back on their feet in no time flat. Even Philomena looked a little better before she combusted."

As Fluttershy trotted into the kitchen, she looked back at her friend and gave her a nasty look.

"Don't ever bring that bird up in this house again, Twilight, I mean, if you don't mind." Fluttershy said, her final words reverting back to her usual meekness.

Realizing her mistake, the unicorn thought it prudent to just shut up and help Luna and Applebloom prepare for Big Mac's surgery. Both her companions had up to this point been silent, doing only their best to comfort the massive pony. Like Angel, they had heard Fluttershy's instructions and immediately followed them.

Using her magic to lift Big Mac onto the table, Luna could not help but be overcome with revulsion at the hideous wounds that marred his body. She had witnessed terrible sights in the past, many that even dwarfed the present, but never had the shadow of death seemed so close to her. The centuries of watching fillies turn to ponies and ponies turn to dust did much to desensitize Luna to the tragedies of life and death, but now her heart could not help but to empathize deeply for the mortal in front of her. The goddess knew that her selfishness was at the root of her morose reaction; being mortal herself she could not simply write off life and death so lightly, especially when death came so unnaturally and undeserving.

Once again, Luna shook off her morbid fears. She would not permit death to come for Big Mac.

Setting him down, Luna lowered her face on level with Big Mac. The red giant opened a single eye and looked at the princess, saying nothing but telling her everything. The pain of every excruciating wound and shattered bone coalesced and was made manifest through the reflection of his swollen and bloody eye. Resisting the urge to cry, Luna whispered gently into the pony's ear.

"Big Macintosh, my champion, I can never repay you for your selflessness, but at the very least I can relieve you from the pain you suffer."

Angel returned, bringing the ponies a bucket of water and several wash rags. Wetting the cloth, Luna wiped the blood from Big Mac's face, his body stiffening from the sting of her touch. Seeing his discomfort, Luna plucked one of her azure feathers and transfigured the plume into her potent sleeping powder. As she dispersed the drug around Big Mac, she lightly sang an ancient lullaby.

"Hush now, quiet now, it's time to go to sleep..."

Big Mac felt a wave of relief pass over him as the fragrant substance soothed his weariness and numbed his pain. He felt the touch of spring on the doorstep of winter; Luna's soft voice sounded to him a chorus of songbirds calling him away to green pastures and a warm sunrise. With a peaceful smile, Big Mac closed his eye and drifted into serenity.

Seeing Big Mac fade, Luna felt fatigue finally catching up with her. Coupled with the fact that she too sustained significant injury, Luna had not slept in a day. Trying to snap out of the sleepiness that now gripped her, Luna slapped herself and shook her head about. The princess couldn't doze off now, Fluttershy needed her assistance, so she continued to clean his wounds.

Returning from the kitchen, the yellow pegasus was now clad in green scrubs and had her mane tied back. In her mouth was a large white medical kit with a red sun blazed on the front. With a stern look on her face, she approached Big Mac and inspected his body. After a minute, Applebloom broke the silence.

"Fluttershy, will Big Mac be okay? You can help him, right?"

"Well, yes, I hope." Fluttershy responded, "Let's see...it seems that Big Mac was hit by a blunt object repeatedly on the torso and several times on the head. The cuts he has on his face I can easily stitch up, no problem, but I worry about blunt trauma possibly sustained on both parts of his body. I'll need to check if there is any internal bleeding, but from the looks of it his back bore most of the strikes so damage to the organs seems unlikely."

"And this," she said with a hint of disgust, turning her attention to the bolt that pierced Big Mac's thigh, "I've seen this type of injury many times, unfortunately. Poaching around Everfree Forest is not too uncommon, you know. For now the arrow is stopping the bleeding, so we can tend to it lastly, but we need to be very, very delicate when we do! I'm almost certain the arrow fragmented some bone, so I'll need to perform a lengthy surgery."

Twilight was impressed at how quickly her demure friend had analyzed Big Mac's condition and prescribed an appropriate course of action. But Fluttershy was a caretaker; it was only natural for her to be so perceptive. Like the great flock of butterflies that spared her from certain death, Fluttershy was a fragile, gentle savior capable of seemingly miraculous acts. An excellent testament to her destiny, it was fitting that the elegant insects be venerated as the yellow pegasus' emblem.

As Fluttershy began to lay out her instruments, she noticed that Twilight's eyes were bloodshot. It must have been a long night for the unicorn prodigy.

"Twilight, before we start, I need to know if you slept last night at all."

"No Fluttershy, I can't say the princess and I had that luxury."

"Twilight, I can't have you two help me if you're going to doze off mid-way through surgery. I insist that you both go to my bedroom and get some shuteye."

"But..."

"Don't 'but' me, miss! Now take Princess Luna with you upstairs and have a good rest."

Twilight sighed in defeat. There was no point in arguing with the pegasus when she felt the need to be assertive. Besides, Twilight was dead tired and the prospect of sleeping in a soft bed right now was very appealing.

"C'mon princess," Twilight called to Luna, "Fluttershy says we should rest for a bit."

"What?" Luna replied with a look of rejection, "Fluttershy, surely I can be of help! I've already sedated Big Mac an—"

"Princess Luna, if you could please go upstairs..."

"Wha-? I am a goddess, Fluttershy! Not some fil-"

Fluttershy's eyes bore down on Luna, her frightening stare paralyzing the princess.

"Upstairs!"

Luna was suddenly compelled to comply with Fluttershy's order, despite her better wishes. She knew full well of "the stare"; it was a very rare ability developed through one's close relationship with the natural world. The fact that it worked on her was what was troubling to Luna, it only reminded her of the limits of being mortal. In her mind, there was nothing worse than a restriction of her liberty. It was partly this dearly held conviction that drove her to insanity during her imprisonment, but even then it was Celestia, her equal, who had banished her. Now she was at the mercy of a soft-spoken pegasus? She could not help but resent Fluttershy and curse the new prison her mortal condition had come to represent. In some ways, it was far worse than the moon.

As Luna obediently ascended the stairway, Fluttershy turned to Twilight.

"Tell the princess I'm sorry for raising my voice, it was, uh, quite rude of me to be so disrespectful, but you two need sleep. Don't worry about me, Angel Bunny and Applebloom will be all the help I'll need to perform the surgery. It's mostly a one pony job, anyway, uh, so please don't feel bad, okay?"

Twilight nodded to her friend and went upstairs, eager to throw herself on a pillow and sleep. She welcomed the reprieve a good rest would provide

from the questionable journey she had gotten her and her friends involved in, almost with deadly consequences. Twilight could only hope that Applejack, Pinkie Pie and Rarity could make it out of Ponyville all right. Reaching the top, she entered Fluttershy's room and found Luna asleep on the floor. Twilight gave the princess an apathetic look that just bordered on open disdain before jumping into Fluttershy's bed. It had been physically and emotionally trying night in many ways, and Luna was the cause of all of it. The unicorn did her best to chase away this and the many other troubling thoughts plaguing her, closed her eyes and fell asleep. Luckily for her, happy dreams carried her off to the Royal Equestrian Library at Canterlot where a pile of research was waiting for her to tackle.

Luna, however, was not as fortunate as Twilight.

*The princess of the night found herself alone, surrounded in darkness.*

*"Celestia! Sis! Where are you?"*

*A feminine, regal laugh was all that responded. Luna's face turned red with anger.*

*"Sister! This isn't funny! Show yourself!"*

*"Very well," A voice chuckled, "Let me get the lights then!"*

*A fiery red flash exploded from the void, blinding Luna with an intense, searing heat. Opening her eyes, she found a giant ball of fire before her, a crude mimicry of the sun. As she looked into the fire, she could make out what appeared to be a large pupil gazing intently back at her.*

*"I see you Luna! You will never be alone again, for I see all that dwells within your heart and mind. I know all that you have done, plan to do, and will do. "*

*"Celestia, don't do this, you're scaring me!"*

*"Don't fret dear sister, my vision pierces cloud, shadow, earth and flesh. No pony is free of me, all live according to my will in perfect harmony."*

*"No Celly, that isn't what we wanted! It's not right!"*

*"Right?" the voice laughed "There is no good and evil, little sister, only order and chaos! Now take your place in the grand tapestry of my design!"*

*With a cataclysmic thunder, the ball of fire imploded, blinding Luna a second time. Her vision blurred, she checked her new surroundings. She found herself in the middle of a field, the sun above scorching the desolate brown earth. She soon saw a hundred grey earth ponies bearing plows moving towards her in a perfect line, each step they took was in complete unison. As they drew nearer, Luna gasped in horror. The ponies had no eyes, yet each wore the same disturbing smile. Their flanks were bore no cutie mark, but rather a nine digit number. Unable to stand the dystopian scene, Luna turned around only to behold her sister.*

*"Why, hello Luna. I see your checking on the crops today too. How responsible of you, I commend your initiative."*

*Celestia sat upon an ornate sedan being carried by several of the Royal Guard. Unlike the farmers, the pegasi had eyes, but their cold, empty stare made Luna question if there really was a difference between the two. Looking back to Celestia, Luna saw that the sun goddess was garbed in the vestments typical of an Imperial Drake: a suit of golden armor covered her entire body while an extravagant red cape lined with fur draped across her figure. Her head was adorned by her usual, simple crown, but in company with her opulent costume it served to accentuate, not diminish, the intimidating stature of the princess. At her side was a seethed long sword and in her hoof was a scepter of many precious metals covered in equally precious gems. The staff was crowned with a ruby sun resembling that of her cutie mark.*

*"Celly, what do you think you're doing? Have you looked at yourself? You look ridiculous!"*

*"Aww, you don't like it Luna? That's a shame, after all that trouble I went through to order you one. Would you at least give it a chance? It's the latest fashion."*

*At Celestia's beckoning the Royal Guard brought forth a mannequin displaying the goddess' gift to her sister. The silver armor and the dark blue cape were akin in style to Celestia's save for the intricately forged metal weights and chains decorating the suit.*

*"Go on, take it. Come; join me at my side. It's where you belong, after all."*

*"No!" Luna shouted, her anger rising, "I'm not your puppet, Celly! I do as I please; I belong free in the heavens and so do you!"*

*"What is this?" Celestia responded in feigned surprise and distress, "Nightmare Moon has returned? Somepony stop her before the rivers run red with the blood of fillies!"*

*Instantly, the entire corp. of guards turned, locked their dead gaze on Luna and advanced.*

*"What? No Celly, don't bother. Nightmare Moon exists only in your fairy tales! I'm your sister!"*

*"Oh, you don't look anything like my little sister, you lying traitor!"*

*Panicked, Luna looked at her hooves, and discovered that her coat was now pitch black. Trying to flee from the guard, Luna tried to fly, but found that her wings were missing. Horrified, she tried to teleport, but her magic too failed. Helpless, five guards easily subdued the princess, beat her with clubs, and brought her to her knees before Celestia. As she struggled with the guards, Luna opened her mouth and heard somepony speak out.*

*"You may triumph here Celestia, but I will never bow to you!" the voice said with defiance and contempt, " 'Tis better to reign over the Moon than to serve in Equestria!"*

*The voice and words were not hers, yet they came from her. Was she really Luna or was she Nightmare Moon?*

*"Huh, you won't be so lucky this time, you piece of demon shit. I've waited too long for this." Replied a familiar gruff voice.*

*Looking up in fear and disgust, Luna saw that Celestia's face had been replaced with the sneering visage of Captain Braveheart. Drawing his sword and raising it above his head, the captain brought the blade down on Luna's exposed neck.*

*"Have a pleasant death, princess! Bwahahaha!"*



Luna awoke in a cold sweat, her heart pounding and her breathing rapid. The dream had been so vivid, so memorable, that she could still hear the captain's laugh ring in her ears. Gaining her bearings, she checked her surroundings nervously, making sure that she had escaped her frightening dream. Assured of her safety, she sighed and rose to her hooves, the shadow of the nightmare still lingering in her mind.

Checking the bed, Luna found Big Mac sleeping peacefully. It seemed that Fluttershy had performed her task with little problem: all of the red pony's wounds had been tended to diligently, each cleaned, stitched and bandaged. Big Mac's right leg was propped up by several pillows, a new cast now covering his thigh. Seeing Big Mac in recovery momentarily dispelled Luna's disturbing dream from her thoughts. She smiled and ran her hoof affectionately through the stallion's yellow mane and kissed his forehead lightly.

"Oh my!"

Luna heard a soft voice and the fumbling rattle of dishes. Turning to the doorway, she found Fluttershy blushing intensely. Around her neck was a tray carrying two bowls of carrot soup, two glasses of ice water, and a single red pill.

"Oh, um, I didn't mean to, uh, oh my, I mean I see you're awake Princess Luna! Would you, uh, care for a late lunch? I thought you might be up, so I, uh, brought extra, you know, just in case."

"That would be lovely, but I just ate not too long ago, ..."

Not soon after she spoke these words Luna felt her stomach growl.

"...or perhaps not. Fluttershy, would you be as kind as to tell me the time?"

"Certainly princess, uh, I believe it's about 3:00 in the afternoon, I mean, if it wasn't night still..."

"3:00? Already? It felt so short, but I suppose I should be thankful for that...sorry, I'm getting off topic again. Fluttershy, do you know where Twilight is? We best be making preparations to move on. Your friends have arrived by now, correct?"

Fluttershy looked to the ground before looking back at Luna, replying in a low voice.

"Um, well, no. Twilight is downstairs, I had to wake her two hours ago to give Big Mac proper bedding, so I think she's a tad, well, grumpy. While we waited for you to get up, I made her some cocoa and she told me your story and plan, too, and, umm..."

An awkward silence.

"...and?" Luna prompted. Fluttershy averted eye contact with the goddess, preferring to instead look upon her non-threatening floorboards.

"I, umm, I, guess I can, uh, trust you. I mean, you seem kind enough to Big Mac..." Fluttershy said, blushing heavily again, "I mean, whatever you did to put him to sleep, that was wonderful. He didn't stir once during the operation and he seemed very tranquil the entire time."

"Everything went all well with the surgery I presume then?"

"Oh, yes, just give him time."

Another awkward silence descended in the room, but this time it was Fluttershy who broke it.

"Uh, if you like, you can take some soup and join Applebloom and Twilight in the kitchen downstairs. I need to attend to Big Mac right now..."

Seeing that she was being dismissed Luna nodded and gave a weak smile.

"Thank you Fluttershy, I will."

Taking the bowl of soup, Luna went downstairs where she was promptly greeted by a worried looking filly.

"Princess Luna, Princess Luna!" Applebloom called out as she dashed to meet the princess. "Didja see Big Mac? Do ya think he looks like he's gonna be okay? Fluttershy had me leave when Ah started cryin' durin' the operation, said that'd be best that Ah not see it an' she sent me to the kitchen. Ah haven't seen Big Mac since."

Luna patted Applebloom's red mane and replied.

"He's looking much better now, Applebloom. He's sleeping still, but I don't think it would be much of a problem for Fluttershy if you went to see him."

The goddess was surprised to see that her words of comfort did little to change Applebloom's gloomy expression.

"Ah'm glad to hear it an' all princess, but why did it have to happen? Why'd the Royal Guard hurt Big Mac? Why'd they hit you?"

Luna was now visibly nervous; she could only hope the young pony didn't catch on to it. She didn't want the incident to shatter Applebloom's innocence any more than it had or the truth to ruin her new relationship with the little filly. Luna didn't want to lie, she despised lying, but lie she did.

"Well, Applebloom, you see, do you remember when I told you that I had not told the guard of my absence?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, in their haste to retrieve me, they used excessive force and mistakenly hit me without knowing it. Yes, and, uh, they saw Big Mac as a threat to my safety."

"Well, he was thrashin' about and beatin' em up, I guess..."

"Exactly, there was...an error in communication. I demoted the captain for that reason."

"But, why'd they want you so badly that they'd wreck mah house?"

Luna was frustrated with the persistent questioning. Her lie was going to have to get bigger. Resigned to this reality, Luna hoped to kill two parasprites with one stone with her next fabrication.

"Well, I was being irresponsible. Today is the Autumn Moon Festival, a ceremony in my honor. Celestia thought it only fair, so in celebration she decided to not raise the sun so that all could appreciate my night sky. However, I don't care for such pointless showboating, so I skipped the festivities. I'd much rather eat pancakes with you!"

Applebloom had her hoof to her chin as she processed Luna's story, a look of concentration dominating her expression. After a brief while, it finally clicked in her head.

"Oh! Okay! That explains a lot, princess, Ah was wonderin' why it was night outside, I was startin' to think that nasty, no-good Nightmare Moon was back or somethin'. Ah asked Twilight why it was dark but she didn't say anythin'. She's been sad all day, Princess Luna, maybe you should talk to her?"

Luna looked from the filly to Twilight. The unicorn stood next to the window, gazing into the empty night with a pained expression and her brow furrowed in deep thought.

"I think that's a good idea, Applebloom. Now, go upstairs and see your brother! I'm sure Fluttershy woke him up to take his medicine, you should be there for him."

"Yes ma'am!" Applebloom replied enthusiastically, running past Luna up the stairs. Taking the bowl of carrot soup, Luna trotted over to her sister's student.

"Twilight, would you care for some of Fluttershy's soup? It's nice and hot, despite the cold draft. Normally I'd eat it, but this kind I find to be...unsettling at the moment."

"No thank, princess," Twilight replied in a distant voice, not bothering to break her gaze, "I had some earlier."

Luna rested the bowl on the window's ledge.

"Twilight, is the safety of your friends' bothering you?"

Still refusing to look at the goddess, Twilight responded.

"Yes, but I think they're okay. I doubt if even the Royal Guard could ever catch Pinkie Pie...as for Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy sent one of her messenger birds to alert her to our...plans...I hope it can make it...the wind is unforgiving today..."

As Twilight spoke, her voice trailed off until she abruptly stopped talking all together. Luna was now becoming worried.

"Twilight, look at me."

The unicorn either didn't seem to hear her or refused to comply. Luna's fears were exacerbated by Twilight's dead silence. It came across as she repeated herself.

"Twilight, look at me!"

Reluctantly, she faced the goddess and looked Luna dead square in the eyes. In them the goddess saw the same doubt she had seen earlier at Sweet Apple Acres. Choking back, Luna knew full well what was troubling the young mare.

"You don't trust me."

Twilight looked away from Luna and resumed looking out the window, her face now stern as stone.

"No, no I don't, princess."

Luna was at a loss of words as anger and confusion gripped her. This unicorn, her friend, had provided her with several precious histories, fought the Royal Guard, and saved her from imminent capture and yet she had no faith in her. Trying to check her frustration, Luna did her best to calmly respond.

"Why Twilight? After all we've been through in just a short period of time, why can't you trust me?"

The unicorn turned back to the princess. The doubt in her eyes had been replaced with indignation.

"Why? Why? You want to know why? I've thought long and hard, and it just doesn't make any sense! You came to me for help at the same time Celestia disappeared and essentially accused her of being an amoral tyrant. I cannot rid myself of the feeling that you're manipulating everypony with your revisions towards some self-serving purpose!"

Twilight's words were so potent that Luna's ire could not be contained.

"I've manipulated everypony! I think you have me confused with your benevolent teacher, Twilight. She's built up this world on revision, lies, and careful manipulation!"

"Don't you dare speak ill of Celestia again!"

Luna paid no heed to the unicorn's command.

"As her student, you've been subject to her subtle art on a daily basis, so I can only imagine how pained you are to hear this, but just think back to the Grand Galloping Gala. Once my sister found out your commoner friends wanted to attend an elite social event, she counted on their ignorance and misconceptions of noble norms to ruin the stuffy soirée."

"No, no, Celestia said it was the best Grand Galloping Gala ever...no pony got hurt and everypony just laughed it off..."

"I'm sure it was, I'd love to see the nobles and dignitaries scared out of their gaudy tuxedos and dresses, see them put in their place. And that's exactly what Celestia wanted, to remind them who was in charge, who it was that stood in the balance between anarchy and order. Don't fool yourself into thinking she did it for laughs, that's juvenile, Twilight. Celestia would never cause chaos or endanger lives if it didn't meet her ends."

Twilight was troubled, but not fazed by Celestia's words. The unicorn was still clearly angry.

"Princess, you act as if Celestia actually controlled everything, but Equestria is a democracy, I just voted in the provincial elections last month!"

"Twilight, if Celestia were merely a figurehead like you seem to suggest, why would she be attending all those meetings you yourself noted? If you paid any attention to her duties or weren't the least socially oblivious, you would have been aware of all the backdoor politics that transpire at Canterlot Castle!"

Her eyes welling with tears, Twilight tried to respond, but she couldn't find words to express herself. Luna's words stung too greatly.

"My sister loves control, she'll do the most heartless things to secure it." Luna continued, her tone still as fiery as before, "She'd even banish her own sister to the moon!"

Twilight shook her head.

"No, no, no! I, I know what happened a thousand years ago, Luna! You're no innocent!"

"You know nothing of the past!" Luna said, her face burning from Twilight's accusation, "I lived it, I fought it, I suffered it! What do you have? Nothing! Nothing but a collection of dusty dragon books!"

"Stop it, stop it!" Twilight cried, falling to the ground and curling up defensively. Luna stopped her verbal assault. Seeing the unicorn so vulnerable made Luna realize that she had let her emotions get the best of her again.

"Stop it please...just listen!" Twilight pleaded, "How can I trust you when you constantly try to turn me against everything I know, everything I love? Celestia, Lightning Strike..."

The second name caused Luna's ears to perk up in interest. Her curiosity now tempering her anger, she interrupted Twilight.

"Lt. Lightning Strike? The pegasus who raided your library and stole your books?"

The memory of the incident summoned several soft tears to stream down Twilight's red cheeks.

"Yes." She responded in a solemn voice, "I was a timid little filly when I became Celestia's pupil. Going out in public with her was a living nightmare, there were so many ponies asking me questions, taking pictures of me...it was just all too much. It became so bad that I couldn't even visit my parents without being mobbed. Fearing my safety, Celestia assigned me a fresh private from the Royal Equestrian Military Academy, Lightning Strike."

Twilight smiled weakly, her happy memories doing much to soothe her anger.

"At first Lightning Strike did his best to be an average, boring guard. But as time progressed, his true fun-loving nature came out. When Celestia was really busy, we'd play in the courtyard instead of having lessons. Sometimes he'd even go as far as to prank me!"

Twilight's smile faded.

"But when we went into town together, he was always professional and very protective. If I ever got into trouble, he'd lecture and lightly discipline me, but he was never insensitive to my feelings. If ever the other fillies made fun of me, I'd run to Lightning Strike and cry and he would pet my mane and call me a strong little trooper and..."

As Twilight rambled, Luna found it difficult to believe that her sister's guards could ever be that affectionate, especially one who had proven himself resolutely obedient and detached.

"... and so it hurt a lot when he was promoted and reassigned." Twilight continued in a low voice, "Celestia offered me another guard, but I refused. That was seven years ago."

Twilight paused and inhaled deeply hoping it would give her the strength to continue her distressing tale. Another tear trickled down the side of her face.

"...Then last night he knocked on my door. I was so happy to see him; I called him by his old nickname, "Strikey", and pressed him to catch-up with me. However, he ignored my questions and wasted no words. It was all "Miss Sparkle" that and "Royal mandate" this. As his pegasi started stripping my library, I was shocked beyond words; the only thing I could do was to try to separate the cold guardpony from my memories of Strikey. If he wanted to act like a faceless soldier, I'd treat him like one. It was a weak attempt to block off the pain, but it worked until we met again at Sweet Apple Acres."

"The Lieutenant was there?"

"...Yes. Upstairs." Twilight replied, her body beginning to quiver with emotion, "But this time was different. This time, it was so much worse he, he..."



Twilight could no longer contain herself. Tears burst forth as she raised her voice to fill the house with all that tormented her.

"He called me Sparks! Only he called me that! I didn't want to believe it, my mind still refused to accept that he was my Strikey! And he hit me, Luna, he smacked me twice! He hit me, and I, I had to shock him! Princess Luna, my heart broke when he fell to the floor, but I could feel nothing. There was too much happening; I just couldn't process all of it. But I love him, Luna, he, he's the closest thing I ever had to a big brother. I don't understand why this had to happen, why I feel so empty!"

"Twilight," Luna said, her anger subdued but not subsided, "I empathize with you, I really do. What you feel is betrayal, something I know all too well. He wronged you, just as Celestia wronged me."

The unicorn's expression hardened at Luna's words.

"No, you're wrong princess," Twilight rebuked, now standing to her hooves, "We betrayed them! I betrayed both Celestia and Lightning Strike! I should have listened to Applejack; I should never have fallen for your lies!"

"My lies?" Luna said, a bit taken aback, "How can you say that? You saw me bleed, you *made* me bleed! Not even a deity can fake that!"

"That's just it, princess; I don't know what a deity can do. You could have limitless power for all I'd know! In the affairs of gods and kings I'm just as ignorant as little Applebloom. That's right Luna; I heard what you told her."

Luna looked away, mortified and angered that her little lie had damned her in Twilight's eyes.

"You spun a plausible web of deceit pretty quickly for one who claims to herald truth and expose Celestia's 'lies'. I doubt you hesitated a second when you told her! But why should you? I have piles of research that paint the exact same portrait of you: a deceiver, a trickster!"

"That's not fair Twilight!" Luna said, a tear falling from her eyes, "I wanted to protect Applebloom, I wanted..."

"You wanted her to love you, and you did it through deception." Twilight said pouring as much contempt into her words as possible, "Just like you did to me."

"Twilight, that is a *gross* exaggeration and you know it!" Luna responded, standing her ground, "It was a white lie, nothing more! Don't try to use it to justify your misguided malice towards me!"

Hearing her words, Twilight's fury receded, leaving only sorrow and shame in its wake. She did know Luna was right.

"I'm, I'm s-s-sorry princess, I, I" Twilight sputtered, fresh tears flowing "I, I'm just so confused, I don't understand anything that's happening, and it scares me!"

As the goddess realized what truly ailed Celestia's student, her hot temper faded. Despite Twilight's harsh words, Luna could only empathize with the pitiful unicorn before her. Nuzzling her, she did her best to comfort the distraught mare.

"No, Twilight" Luna said, her voice now soft and soothing, "I should be sorry. It was wrong for me to burden you with divine politics and conflicts. No mortal can fully comprehend them, no matter how brilliant and wonderful the student is."

Twilight looked into the goddess' eyes only to find the greatest sincerity. Seeing this, she reciprocated Luna's affections in silence, wiping her hot tears away as her face caressed Luna's blue coat.

"I did it because I hoped to discredit Celestia's history," Luna continued, her eyes now closed, "as if it would succeed in proving to you that I'm not evil, that I'm not power hungry witch. I love my sister more than you could possibly hope to understand, it was never my intention to turn you against her."

A short silence passed between the two before Luna broke off their embrace and looked Twilight deep into her eyes.

"Twilight, why did you join me if these doubts festered in your mind? What compelled you to comfort me, to defy the Royal Guard, to assemble the Elements?"

The unicorn sniffled, trying to gather herself before responding.

"Princess...I'm a perfectionist. When I was a young filly, I was so excited to learn everything, but I just ended up getting frustrated by my limitations. Princess Celestia saw this, and she taught me that if ever I could not understand a situation fully, it was best to let my heart guide me."

"Celestia...Celestia taught you that?" Luna questioned, amazed that her sister would ever advocate an emotional response to a problem. It sounded more like something she would advise. Was Celestia genuine with Twilight or did she want to check her student's appetite for knowledge?

"...Yes, but it's always been difficult for me to follow. When you came to my library, every rational bone in my body screamed to dismiss you. But as you told your story, your pain was so genuine and your predicament so disturbing that I couldn't think evil of you. I had to help you; it's what Celestia would have wanted..."

"Twilight, can I ask for you to renew your faith in me? I swear to you on my life that we will find Celestia!"

To Luna's disappointment, Twilight did not respond immediately. Instead, she turned her head away from Luna and looked back to the window.

"...I'm sorry princess, but I just need to clear my head...I'm not used to emotional roller coasters, I need to go outside for a bit."

As Twilight left the cottage, Luna thought of warning her of the Royal Guard or the chilling winds, but she didn't. The unicorn needed to be alone for awhile, and Luna honored that decision, she knew all too well the drive to escape and find solitude. The goddess could use the time herself to eat and perhaps finally look at Twilight's research in peace.

Luna grabbed her bowl of soup and brought it to the kitchen table. Before she could try it, she heard Fluttershy's soft voice coming from upstairs.

"Umm...is...uh, everypony okay down there?"

Luna returned to the stairway and called back to the shy pegasus.

"Yes, we're sorry for the commotion, Twilight and I...we were...just sorting things out between us."

"Oh! Umm, you wouldn't happen to be, uh, done would you?" Fluttershy said, peaking out from the doorway of her bedroom.

"Yes, Twilight's gone out for a brief walk and I'm about to eat, would you care to join me?"

"Umm...I guess, if that's all right..."

Fluttershy descended the stairs nervously and slowly, unsure what to make of all the yelling and gnashing of teeth that just minutes ago filled her house. Meeting the princess at the bottom, the two went into the kitchen. As the princess returned to her bowl at the table Fluttershy noticed that Luna's soup looked as if it had cooled.

"Princess Luna, let me get you another bowl, that has to be cold by now." Fluttershy said as she poured herself and Luna more soup from the pot on the stove.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Fluttershy." Luna said politely and calmly, trying her best to spare Fluttershy from the intense emotional aftermath of her fight with Twilight, "This whole affair has taxed your strength at a moment's notice and yet your kindness has not diminished the slightest."

"Oh, yes, I'm always glad to help, princess, even if I'm...a little frightened. Can I get you anything else?"

Luna thought for a moment and replied.

"Actually, yes Fluttershy, you can. Do you recall seeing Twilight's saddlebags?"

"Uh, why yes. Twilight left it in my room, would you like me to fetch it for you?"

"I would appreciate that a lot, thank you for offering."

It did not take the yellow pegasus long to retrieve Twilight's things for Luna. Opening it up, Luna was surprised to see so many pages of translation; she

did not remember Twilight's compilation to be that voluminous when she packed it. It would take days to read through all of it, time that would be best spent towards finding Celestia. But Luna was good at digesting information, so she was sure a quick skim, though not giving the unicorn's work justice, would suffice for her purposes.

Taking a sip of her soup as she glanced over the documents, Luna quickly realized that Twilight had not been merely translating the books. The margins were covered with her notes, spanning from typical translation explanations to her own empirical research into the topics. The tedious effort evident in the writing made it clear to the goddess that Twilight wasn't just brushing up on her Wyrnish, this was her hobby. It was of little wonder why the unicorn felt so torn now; there was probably nopony in Equestria that had studied Luna's 'history' more.

Taking a particularly note-riddled page from *Pestilence of the Moon Witch*, Luna began to read:

*...The Dark One and the Princess of Light struggled in open conflict, neither ceasing to sleep or eat. For many years, the sun and moon did battle in the heavens. When one sister overcame the other, their respective cosmic body\* would dominate the sky, causing great confusion and disorder in Equestria. The normality of the days and seasons in tatters, crops between the Years of Despair\* 1001- 1033 failed to grow in sufficient quantity\*. Thousands of the peasantry died of starvation as a result of the cruel power lust of the black witch. So many dead could not be contained by the graveyards, and thus many nameless funerals for the dead were performed. They were interred en masse\*.*

Luna stopped to read Twilight's citation notes.

*Doctor Van der Hoof writes of several mass graves found not too far off from Stalliongrad and St. Ponyburg, two of the oldest towns in this province. He lists several likely explanations, but fails to give a definitive conclusion. I'm certain that here I've found what he wanted to say. (Van Der Hoof, Dusty. "A Dirty Business: The Reasons for Mass Burial." *Journal of Equestrian Archeaology* 34.1 (2011): 212-28.)*

Perplexed, Luna continued to the translation of *History of the Dark Shadow*, searching for an equally enlightening entry from Twilight until she came upon it.

*The Demon consumed all life. With one hoof she rose the cruel and wicked to power, with the other she shielded them from the wrath of the sun goddess. The war in the heavens soon spilled to the lands of Equestria as the Nightmare's nobles and griffin allies sought to dominate all. With the help of the Dark One's black magic\*, they summoned fell beasts of black fire\* to join their armies on the field of battle. Town after town fell to their forces until at last they reached Canterlot. The city's defenses were led by the valorous Royal Guard, who successfully repelled the assault with the aid of a young dragon called Blackteeth.*

Again, Luna checked Twilight's adjoined notes.

*Blackteeth is a legendary figure in Canterlot, but there has been little proof he ever existed.*

*Visited Canterlot 5-4-2011. Noted that many of the remains of the old city walls stored in the museum archives are scorched with fire. Likely evidence for the siege.*

*5-8-2011, found an article detailing the excavations of medieval weaponry, armory, and remains near Canterlot. Also a surprisingly large store is kept in the archives and not on display.*

*6-11-2011, Asked Celestia about the siege via letter. Her response was disappointing, she told me to go hang out with my friends.*

*6-26-2011 Found more evidence of the Lunar War in the census records. This has been another fruitful trip to Canterlot, I'm lucky to have gotten copies. Will have Spike organize them.*

Luna stopped reading. Twilight's research was far more detailed and explored than she had been counting on. The goddess was now quite upset: had Celestia simply fabricated a myth or actually determined the outcome of Equestria's history? And then she recalled Celestia's thoughtless slip.

*"It took me 150 years to fix the damage your last outburst caused."*

The moon goddess knew her sister was a dictator, but she never believed Celestia to be a tyrant prepared to sacrifice droves of innocents in war and

famine just "to fix the damage" Luna's challenge brought about. But the notion seemed increasingly credible...

Luna shook herself. Why was she willing to think the worst of her sister? Was it because nopony else would dare do so or was she being just as unfair as Twilight had been with her? Thinking back to Big Mac's words, she quietly reflected her own faults as she continued to flip through Twilight's translations.

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Twilight walked slowly past the gate to Fluttershy's cottage, her mind as distant as the stars above her. As she neared Everfree Forest, she paused and gazed at the enigma. Why was it that the weather required no upkeep there? Was weather not actually dependent on the labor of pegasi? Twilight tried to rid herself of these thoughts, but to little success. Luna's talk of conspiracy was infectious, everything she took for granted now needed to be reevaluated. It was painful to think that Celestia could orchestrate such a complex world by herself, but Luna's arguments were not fantastical. Twilight knew they could be true. However, she also knew that Luna was just as passionate and emotionally driven as her research had suggested Nightmare Moon was. The possibility that Luna was blameless seemed remote, but it was probably best to trust her. She had sworn upon her life, essentially the doom or salvation of the world, that she would find Celestia. Twilight decided that she had little other course to take but help restore the goddess's immortality.

Looking to the stars, Twilight lost herself in thought. Unbeknownst to her, the roaring wind deafened her to the approach of a flying pegasus. Descending, the pegasus' hooves slammed into the ground with a thud, catching Twilight by surprise.

"Rainbow Dash?"

The figure stepped forward, the moonlight catching his golden armor and red plumed helmet.

# Chapter 5

Floating in the skies above the outskirts of Ponyville, an extravagant cloud castle swayed to and fro as the unrelenting winds threatened to disperse it back into nothingness. Thankfully for the rainbow-maned resident, her abode was safeguarded by fine pegasi craftsmanship and unicorn charms, leaving her with little to fear as she continued to snooze undisturbed. Yes, it was nearing 4:00 in the afternoon and yet Rainbow Dash was tucked firmly in her bed and snoring heavily. Well, that is until an ungodly buzz blared from her alarm clock.

*Bzzzzzt.*

"Ugh, you gotta be kidding me!"

Tossed cruelly and unnaturally from the depths of her tranquil slumber, Rainbow Dash sat up straight in her bed slowly, her eyelids groggily leveled in annoyance. If her friends were to see her now, they would most likely chalk her behavior up to her penchant for lapsing into spontaneous bouts of laziness, but that was not the case today. Yesterday had been grueling for Ponyville's Weather Officer. Not only had she taken a double shift, she also had the misfortune of being on duty during the arrival of an unscheduled tempest. Her superiors at the Provincial Bureau of Weather Services ordered that she find the source and correct the problem, so she had been up late trying to overcome the Arctic blasts of air and put a reign on it, but to little avail. Rainbow Dash was beyond frustrated with the unexpected anomaly, she felt as if her job might as well entail taming the entirety of Everfree Forest itself. Flying for hours in freezing conditions, Rainbow Dash and her colleagues failed to harness the storm. Her report back was not taken well with her boss, a hot-headed pegasus who proceeded to chew her out for being incompetent and unprofessional. Adding more to her humiliation and workload, she was given a mountain of paperwork to prepare and sign so that the higher echelons of government could know how much she sucked. The midnight oil burned at Dash's home until the wee hours of the morning as she trudged through endless paperwork, each form she completed being more difficult and absurd as the last. The reckless pegasus had filled out her share of damage reports back to



headquarters, but this was by far the single greatest waste of time the young mare had ever experienced. The questions either pertained to why she couldn't accomplish her orders and what more she could've done to aid her co-workers, or were trying to flush out character weaknesses. But what was Rainbow Dash to do? If she knew any of the answers, she wouldn't need to be sitting around writing about it! But that's life when you're employed by the Equestrian government, so she did her best to write some nonsense, send it off to the mailbox, and hit the hay in what she wished could've been ten seconds flat. It was more like four hours.

As Dash looked to the clock, she sighed and got up. She knew that ten hours was more sleep than she should need, but her body still ached from her long struggle against the rouge winds. Jumping out of bed, Rainbow Dash stretched her muscles in an effort to alleviate the tension in her limbs, but she was shaken off balance as another furious gust of wind buffeted her abode.

"Seriously? Seriously it's still going at it?" Rainbow Dash shouted, trotting over to her window "What the hay! Celestia, I'm sorry for the foal that has to work today...wait wha-?"

As she glanced out her window, she was not only greeted by another chilling breeze but a familiar night sky. Dash quickly flew back to her clock. Could she have slept a whole day? No, she had set her alarm to make sure that didn't ever happen...again. Before she could dwell longer on the mystery at hoof, she heard a faint sound emanating from the heart of the wind's howl. Looking back out her window and squinting her eyes, the pegasus could make out a shadowy figure approaching her. With a loud shriek, a falcon swooped right past her and perched itself on the bed. Shivering, the bird looked at Rainbow Dash and gave another cry, drawing the pegasus' attention to the note tied around its leg.

"Oh Screech, you got a message for me, buddy?" Rainbow Dash asked, recognizing the bird as being Fluttershy's. The bird again shrieked and flew to Rainbow Dash, landing on her outstretched hoof. The pegasus grimaced a bit as the bird bore its talons into her flesh, but calmly untied the letter nonetheless, doing her best not to exacerbate the situation by spooking it. Shoeing the falcon off her, Rainbow Dash saw that the hoofwriting of the note was not Fluttershy's but Twilight's. Curious, she began to read:

*Rainbow Dash,*

*As time and writing space will not permit me to be as detailed as I like, we desperately need you to bring your Elemental jewel to Fluttershy's cottage. Be wary, the Royal Guard and the Equestrian Army are no friends of ours' at the moment. With me is Princess Luna, she has lost her immortality and we need to restore it. She is not to blame for the perpetual night you see outside. It is my belief she is not Nightmare Moon, but I am also finding it difficult to trust her. However, she is the most likely pony to know where Celestia is. Celestia went missing shortly after Luna left Canterlot, so there will be widespread rumor that Luna kidnapped her. DON'T believe it. Be careful, avoid the guards, and get to Fluttershy's with the jewel.*

*Twilight Sparkle*

Despite the letter's urgent tone and seemingly apocalyptic content, Rainbow Dash could not help but grin at her friend's request. Twilight had led Dash and company through several adventures at the behest of Princess Celestia, and every time they came up on top. It was the boost the pegasus needed: so what if she couldn't stop a stupid little wind storm? In the past she had defeated a moonbent goddess, kicked a dragon's jaw in, and perfected the impossible Sonic Rainboom. As she grabbed her Element and flew out the window headfirst into the opposing gale, she knew pretty soon she was going to add "delivered goddesses from doom, and brought the sun back *again*" on her résumé. The bureaucrats at Weather Services could go chew on those apples!

She was so freakin' awesome. Oh, and her friends. They were pretty cool too.

As the cold wind brushed against her feathers, Rainbow Dash felt her body burn with renewed zeal and energy. Her aches disappeared as her newfound strength coursed through her, emboldening her to press on faster. The bite of the freezing current did little to slow her, if anything its rough caress invigorated the cyan pegasus as she defied its forceful trajectory. Then, as if the tempest itself admired the pegasus' gusto and resilience, the wind changed its course to favor Rainbow Dash's flight path. Exhilarated and proud, Rainbow Dash shouted as the winds accelerated her speed.

"That's right, greatest flier in Equestria comin' through! Not even these freak winds can keep this legend down!"

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimmer. Slowing down a bit, she double-checked. The night made it difficult to discern for certainty, but it looked as if it was one of Celestia's elite guards on patrol. Only they could wear golden armor, and Rainbow Dash doubted that anypony less than a Royal Guard would be out flying in this weather. The pegasus felt a wave of anxiety pass through her, and it wasn't out of any concern for her safety. No, she was conflicted over whether she should listen to Twilight's letter and avoid the guard or give into her irrational temptation to race him. Rainbow Dash knew that there were few pegasi faster than the Royal Guard; it was not uncommon for veterans from the corp. to join the Wonderbolts or vice versa. It would be the ultimate test for the young aerial daredevil. Despite the possibility of setting up a match in happier times, Rainbow Dash was an impatient opportunist at heart. Her arrogant confidence also prodded her on: surely the cold, armored pegasus would comically fall by the wayside as soon as Dash could pull out her vast assortment of tricks.

Resolved and ready to race, the pegasus closed her eyes and bolted forward.

"Sorry Twilight, but I just gotta do this!"

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Lt. Blackmane soared the skies on the northern outskirts of Ponyville running reconnaissance. Alone, the guard was free to display his displeasure with his lot.

"The hay is General Hawkeyes thinking?" the pegasus thought "How can I still be stuck doing bloody surveillance? After Captain Braveheart's botched operations, Old Man Hawkeyes passes me over-wait, what?"

A multi-colored blur blew past the lieutenant's periphery and stopped before him.

"Hey rust bucket! Think you got the stuff to take on the best?"

"You, halt in the name of Celestia!"

"Don't think so, I think the princess would prefer to see me race! C'mon slowpoke, show me what you got!"

As the gutsy pegasus flew off ahead, Lieutenant Blackmane failed to repress a grin. It had been a long time since anypony had the nerve to challenge the former Wonderbolt performer. He was going to have fun with this arrest.

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Rainbow Dash weaved through the storm with a smug smile. Looking back, she saw no sign of her pursuer. Rainbow Dash laughed to herself. Elite Royal Guard? This wasn't even a contest, it was just plain pitiful. Preparing to perform a victory loop, she saw a shadow diving from above in her direction. As the hunting falcon strikes and stuns its prey, so too did Lt. Blackmane. The crushing blow sent Rainbow Dash plummeting, but before the lieutenant could apprehend her, she turned course and bolted away. The lieutenant was impressed and a tad amazed; he had never seen somepony shake off such a violent wallop in such a short frame of time. This one was clearly made of tougher stuff.

The guard's surprise attack shook Rainbow Dash to the core, but she had endured far more vicious threats to her bodily integrity. However, her faith in her ability now came into question. Why did her stupid pride have to get in the way all the time? There wasn't even anypony to see a possible victory and now she was close to be taken down by the Royal Guard! Facehoofing, Rainbow Dash knew she should've just listened to Twilight. Her friends badly needed her and now she was stuck in a terrible mess she could have easily avoided.

"Get a hold of yourself Dash!" she thought to herself, "You can shake off this chump, no problem! Show him your best stuff and he won't stand a chance!"

As the lieutenant closed the gap, Rainbow Dash quickly split off to the right and looped about. Checking over her shoulder, she found that the guard had matched her moves with little effort. Trying several more of her aerial stunts, she found herself no closer to losing the persistent and talented lieutenant. Growling to herself, Rainbow Dash corkscrewed to the left and shot straight up. Sure enough, the guard was still on her tail and getting closer. Rainbow Dash knew that if it wasn't for her rival's armor, she

would've been in custody by now. Trying several more acrobatic feats in the freezing stratosphere, Rainbow Dash quickly came to the realization that she couldn't hold off her opponent for much longer. There was only one trick she knew the guard could never hope to replicate: the Sonic Rainboom.

"Hey buddy," Rainbow Dash panted, getting a good look at the guard  
"You're really pretty good for a tin can! But let's see if you're got what it takes to follow this through!"

Rainbow Dash dove straight down, shattering the ice from her feathers and accelerating rapidly. Looking to her side, she saw the lieutenant nearing her. Grinning as she felt the sound barrier cracking around her, she couldn't help but to leave the guard with a snide quip.

"You're getting old Blackmane, no wonder they kicked you off the squad!"

Before the angry lieutenant could get a shot back, a magnificent array of color and light blinded and disoriented him. Not soon later, a deafening boom pealed through the skies, overloading his senses and striking him from the sky. Fortunately the boughs of Everfree Forest caught the soldier, sparing him from an unpleasant end.

Rainbow Dash's face was beaming as she prepared to land. Not only had she pulled off the Sonic Rainboom in the most adverse conditions, she had also defeated a former member of the Wonderbolts! Her hooves touching the solid earth, Rainbow Dash looked back and shouted.

"Ha! The Shadow Swoop is classic Blackmane, that's for sure, but it's no match for Rainbow Dash's super-awesome-amazing-totally undefeatable-super epic-legendary Sonic Rainboom! Yeah!"

A panicked voice from behind her dampened Rainbow Dash's celebratory spirit.

"Rainbow, what have you done?"

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"Umm...Princess Luna?"

"Yes Fluttershy?"

"Oh, uh, do you not like the soup? It's okay if you don't, I don't mind, but can I get you something else?"

Luna looked up from the pile of papers and remembered the carrot soup Fluttershy had just served her but fifteen minutes ago. She had been busy searching through Twilight's research hoping to find an account of that fateful day, but to little luck. No longer immersed with the translations, Luna could see now that she had made a mess of the meticulously assembled and organized documents. Luna huffed, disappointed that she couldn't even keep a bunch of loose papers in order. Turning to Fluttershy, the goddess realized that she had failed to respond promptly to the pegasus' question and now ran the risk of appearing distant and unthankful.

"Oh no, Fluttershy, it just slipped my mind. Pardon my rudeness."

Taking a sip, she found that, like her first bowl, it was now stone cold. The substance left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth, but she tolerated it and managed to finish Fluttershy's soup. Rising from the table, Luna was about to put her dish in the sink when she caught the sight of several strewn papers underneath the table. Setting the dish aside, she levitated the papers to her face as she returned to her seat. They were the first pages of Twilight's translation of *Triumph of the Sun Goddess* and exactly what she had wanted to discover. Anxious, she began to read the text that was strangely lacking any of Twilight's usual notes. This had been her last translation.

*In the 1010th year of the reign of our princess, the Era of Darkness began. It was at this time the jealousy and ambition of the moon goddess allowed a great demon to enter and poison her heart against Princess Celestia. In the shadows of the court at Canterlot, the corrupt goddess consolidated her support among the cruel and greedy nobility who sought only to place a yoke on all ponies. From the palace throne room of her domain at Everfree, the Nightmare Moon declared open rebellion against her sister's rule. Thus those loyal to the sun goddess took up arms to defend their country from the unholy onslaught the personal armies of the unified nobles under the banner of the Demon unleashed upon Equestria.*

Luna skimmed through the remaining pages to see if Twilight had translated the passage concerning the titular "triumph" of Celestia. She was

not surprised to turn up empty-hoofed. Sighing, she found her mind straying back to that fateful day, the day she lived over and over during her imprisonment...

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From the balcony of her castle, Luna stood beside her sister in anticipation as they prepared to usher in a new night. As her sister set the sun, her moon rose to shine its pale light upon the night goddess' personal domain of Everfree. Luna had named it thusly for good reason: it reflected the boundless freedom she valued above all else. She had resisted her sister's pressures to bring the natural law of her forest into accordance with Celestia's weather system for many years until the sun goddess finally relented under the condition that it house Equestria's more dangerous beasts. Luna consented willingly; Celestia's proposal only enhanced the libertarian image of Everfree she sought to cultivate. But above all, she wanted to demonstrate to her sister how superfluous Celestia's intricate and complex social systems really were when compared to the harmony one finds in the state of nature. Two hundred years had passed though, and her sister did not even bother to see how well the ponies on her lands lived. Granted, not many dared to live in her forest, but those who did had unprecedented freedom to express themselves and innovate undisturbed. She had brought up Everfree's development with Celestia before, but she only laughed lovingly and said "Little sister, you can't build a city with only bards and lyres!"

She had missed the point clearly

Luna had grown weary with Celestia's obsession with order and how she had drawn Luna into it. She was charged not with just the upkeep and administration of Everfree, but a third of the lands of Equestria. Everyday she had to deal with court politics she didn't like or care about, sign a bunch of Celestia's decrees, and mix with the insipid nobility among a mountain of other duties. It seemed nearly everything she did was for her sister. She did not resent Celestia, on the contrary, she loved her dearly, but Luna was often frustrated. When it came to politics and reforms, Celestia largely wrote off her ideas as "ideal" at best and "cute" at worst. At the same time, Luna could see her sister consumed by tedious policy formulations, class interest balancing acts, and endless pomp and ceremony.

But this would end today. Today, Celestia would learn that Luna did not need her approval. She would save both Celestia and herself from this soul crushing labor and return them to those early days of creation when things were far simpler, more beautiful, and innocent. Again they could play among the stars untroubled by the petty squabbles of their subjects. It was what was best for the goddesses.

Their duties complete, Celestia turned to her pensive sister and spoke with an amused, though slightly nervous curiosity.

"Luna, I think I've been more than fair with you in indulging your desire to keep a secret. Would you finally mind telling me what this banquet is about?"

Luna lightly smiled, and responded cheerily enough.

"Sis, are you still trying to apply rhyme and reason to my behavior? Dear sister, I felt like it. I fancied good company, good music, and good drink so I'm throwing a spectacular feast in the honor of, well, merriment I guess."

"...this is all very well, but the 'company' you speak of happens to be a horde of nobles. I know for a fact you would rather go out to some lucky bard's hut and dance and sing the night away. Am I wrong?"

Luna just managed to stop herself from blushing.

"...Well, yes. I would. But I'm trying something different, and I want you to be there. Doesn't it, you know, make me look good to those stuck-ups as well? There you have it! There's your reason Celestia."

The sun goddess continued to eye her sister with suspicion as they entered the castle, but Luna kept her disposition. Over the millennia, she had done her best to learn how to lie to Celestia, but she would be a fool to think she could completely deceive the sun goddess, especially when politics were involved. All Luna could do was delay the revelation.

It was a miracle in itself that her advisor, Night Star, had garnered such support for Luna's plan among much of Equestria's nobility without being arrested and tried for treason. Luna knew her sister had been increasingly wary of the Court at Everfree, once even going so far as arriving unannounced to the palace with a hundred of her elite Royal Guard. It was



a show of strength that was otherwise largely uneventful, Celestia merely asked Luna if she wanted to attend the jousting tourney at Canterlot and left. Still, it was incredibly distressing to the moon goddess, she hated keeping her sister in the dark, but Luna knew that, left to her own devices, Celestia would never cede control. She had to have it imposed on her.

Entering the throne room, Luna was impressed with the décor the artisans under her patronage succeeded in preparing for the banquet. Black, blue, and purple tapestries stretched across the hall, each embroidered with diamonds to reflect Luna's night sky in the most minute detail. Several banners running along the columns depicted the creation of Equestria, the early struggles with the Dragon Gods, and the foundations of Canterlot and Everfree. They were all so beautifully crafted that Luna was ashamed of the fate she had planned for the lavish designs, but if it was one thing Luna had learned from Celestia it was that political theater worked. Appearances were everything; it was this reason that Celestia insisted she always assume her grandiose form when performing her courtly duties. Today was different in one respect; she would use her intimidating divinity to further her interest, not Celestia's.

A pegasus guard donned in silver approached the pair of goddesses, bowed and saluted.

"Your majesty Princess Luna, we have word that the noble's caravan has neared Everfree Castle. They should be here shortly."

His message delivered, the guard returned to his post. At the news, Luna summoned several servants to begin setting the several long tables and finish preparations with the food. Looking back to Celestia, Luna could see that her sister was equally struck by the opulence of her hall.

"I have never seen your castle as grand as it looks now, Luna." Celestia said distantly, "This promises to be quite the feast..."

"Oh sister," Luna replied happily, "I promise you that we will long remember tonight as one of great joy. Come, help me greet the guests and I'll show you the crowning pièce de résistance of Everfree Castle."

Luna knew she had caught her sister's intrigue. Guiding Celestia down the winding staircases to the foyer, Luna turned to her surprised sister and pointed to the centerpiece of the room. It was a large stone relief of the

moon, and from its base outstretched five pedestals, each one bearing a fragment of the most powerful force in Equestria: the Elements of Harmony. The five jewels shone brightly from their perch while the moon radiated with the magic of the sixth element. It was an awe inspiring sight, even for the immortals.

"Luna, I entrusted you to safeguard the Elements, not put them out on display!" Celestia said, not amused by the prospect of such legendary power in the presence of corruptible ponies.

"Oh, relax Celly! If we cannot use its power, no mortal could ever even have the hope to touch them; I don't think their frail bodies could handle it."

"The opulence of your banquet seems to be...over the top. What do you wish to accomplish with placing the Elements in front of everypony?"

"Oh, I don't know, they're quite the sight, don't you think? At least we have a use for them now."

Luna noticed her sister looked uneasy.

"Don't worry Celly; my guards will keep vigil watch over them. I'll have them moved to the dungeons tomorrow, but please, can we keep them out, for me?"

Celestia's frown turned to a smile.

"Oh all right Luna, your little showcase can remain here tonight. I have to say, it really is magnificent to behold."

The two sisters stood in silence before the Elements. Though their words were pleasant, the tension between was becoming steadily more apparent. At length, Celestia spoke.

"...Luna."

"Yes Celly?"

"You know you can tell me anything, right?"

"Of course, that's never been a problem, sister."

Celestia paused before responding again.

"Luna, we were meant to rule together. I want you to know that you're not alone, that I'm here to listen to you. Waste no words on your advisors, if something troubles you, write directly to me."

Luna repressed the urge to cringe at her sister's familiar line. She hated when Celestia said they were "meant" to rule as if they were fated to endlessly toil to keep everypony in line. Luna scoffed at the very notion of destiny, it was an idea propagated by both the elite to justify their standing and the destitute who could not help but resign themselves to mediocrity in despair. In her heart, the goddess knew that fate was not some abstract cosmic force, but the sum outcome of one's choice.

"Yes sister, I know."

"No, I don't think you do. Luna, don't believe Black Star's presence in my court went unnoticed. Sister, do not trust that snake..."

Celestia was interrupted by the heralding of trumpets. Relieved momentarily from her sister's scrutiny, Luna called to her guards to open the castle door and walked over to meet her guests. It was Celestia's custom to personally greet every guest, thus Luna knew it to be an excellent way of shaking off her sister without appearing evasive. Well, too evasive.

The nobles of Equestria, having traveled together through the wild of Everfree under the protection of mercenaries, arrived as one massive entourage. Greeted by the goddesses, they were directed by Luna's servants to the great hall. It took more than an hour to welcome everypony before the goddesses themselves returned to Luna's throne room.

As they walked, Luna could feel her sister's stare on the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, collected herself, and turned to Celestia.

"Is there a problem, Celly?"

"No, not yet, Luna. I pray there will be none, but secrets harbor both little faith and unwanted consequences."

Luna shuddered at her sister's words. She knew she had been caught, but she would not be persuaded from her path. Resolved, Luna decided to move forward with her plans. There would be no time for feasting tonight.

As the two sisters entered the hall, everypony in the hall arose. Their names and titles were announced by the herald and trumpets sounded as they processed side-by-side to the throne. Awaiting the goddesses was Luna's advisor, Black Star. Celestia gave the black mare a piercing stare before sitting upon the regal, gilded chair made precisely for the occasion of her visits to Everfree. Black Star recoiled and turned quickly to Luna. The goddess heard her whisper the usual political assessments and suggestions into her ear, but Luna cared not for details or Black Star, at that matter. Her moment of liberation drew ever nearer. Though the anticipation bearing down on her was crushing, the moon goddess fought to keep a level head.

Taking her place at her throne, Luna faced the large audience of Equestria's elite. Ideally, she wanted to wait until after the feasting before she made her announcement. Then at least Celly's fondness for fine wines would temper her reaction. Or make it worse. Luna shook her head; she was getting tired with this ceaseless and drawn out planning, she hated constantly living outside the present in preparation for the future.

And now was her moment to do so.

"Mares and Gentlecolts, thank you all for traversing so far from your homes to Everfree. I am sure many of you had your doubts and fears as you entered the forest. Rumors of beasts, poisons, and the oft unforgiving and indomitable spirit of the forest are not born from simply the drunken musings of yeoponies. Yet, despite all the evils that lay before you and the warnings of your kinsmen, you marched forth unwavering in your stride or purpose, dutifully answering my summons. But what did you encounter in the forest? Did you smell the fragrance of the summer rain couple with the aroma of exotic flowers? Did you hear the river serpent's tranquil song or the mantichore's majestic roar? Did you see your anxieties dispelled, the words of your fellows proven to be nothing but hyperbole? In good faith you embarked into the heart of the unknown, abandoning the securities and predictability of the mundane that daily we take comfort from."

Luna paused and collected herself, the breath before the plunge

"Since the dawn of the world's making have my sister and I watched over you with gentle care and great love. But a day must come when the foal must fly and master the skies by the strength of its own wings and the fortitude in its heart. On this day, you affirmed what I have observed for the past century. The hour has come for me to free you, to allow you to reach the potential my sister and I endowed upon each and every one of you, our most cherished creation!"

Luna heard Celestia stir in her chair and arise.

"With great pride, I abdicate the throne of Equestria! No longer shall you call me 'princess'! Rather, you shall know me as the night mare! For I am the moon, I am the goddess of the night, I am Luna, and I shall be forever free!"

At those words and a sudden flash, Luna assumed her azure, diminutive form. Removing her crown, she cast it to the floor and crushed it under her hoof. As it smashed to pieces, the regal tapestries and banners ignited in blue flame, incinerating instantaneously. Confused shouting erupted from the courtroom floor, but Luna cared only to see her sister. Turning back to her throne, Luna saw Dark Star deliver the letter to the stupefied sun goddess. Reading it with mouth agape, a powerful wrath soon cleansed Celestia of her shock. Burning the paper, she confronted the black pony before her.

"What madness have you wrought, you foal! You ignorant wretch, you and your masters know not what you've done!"

Black Star smirked and replied, but Luna did not hear her words.

Her horn glowing, Celestia gripped the black unicorn by the throat and raised her into the air. Worried by her sister's unusual temper, Luna sought to intervene.

"Celly stop! Put her down now!"

Celestia turned to Luna, her anger now mixed with anguish and her words filled with concerned love and fear. A single tear rolled down her face.

"Luna, she used you! She used you to hurt me, to undermine and destroy everything we made! I can't let this worm free to sow more dissent and ruin across our lands!"

"Celly, don't! I will never forgive you if you take her life! Don't have her blood be on your hooves!"

A look of doubt washed over Celestia's face, but she did not lessen her grip the slightest. In vain Black Star tried to counter the sun goddess' magic, but a mortal could never hope to contend with such power. Seeing her sister unresponsive, Luna made a fateful decision.

"Forgive me, sister..."

With a brutal kick to the side, Luna knocked Celestia to her knees. Black Star fell to the ground and scurried into the rabble of nobles who continued to debate and argue loudly. Celestia looked betrayed as she stared at her sister.

"Why Luna?" she coughed, letting the air back into her lungs, "Why did you lie to me? It didn't have to come to this if you just talked to me!"

"As if you would listen with any sincerity! No sister, this was the only way. The sun sets on our rule; come, let us at least leave gracefully into the night."

Rising to her hooves, Celestia replied; the love in her voice now punctuated with a sober seriousness.

"Luna, you have thrown Equestria to the wolves! And for what? Do you not understand what you've done? You hate the nobility and yet you've blindly entrusted them to rule our subjects with free reign! A corrupt republic will serve only their interests!"

"Don't lecture me, Celestia! Yes, I hate them. I hate them with all my being, but only they can take my place. It is not like they can hope to oppress the ponies forever. Time is not static; their rule will come and go as ours' has."

"How long will that be, Luna? How many starving must waste away on the streets while the gluttonous bastards binge upon the finest foods and revel in decadence! And then what? Must a bloody revolution claim more lives!"

"This is not our concern Celly! Ponies live, ponies die, it is all part of the cycle of harmony. We cannot pretend to save everypony from an unhappy end!"

From the courtroom floor, a chalice of wine was chucked with magical force at Celestia, beaming her across the face. It was the straw that broke the pony's back. Enraged, she faced the mob.

"Be gone, you miserable, depraved lot!" Celestia cursed, accentuating her words with a terrifying wrath. With tremendous power and a deafening thunder, Everfree shook from its foundations as a white light consumed the room. Luna shielded her eyes from the sheer intensity of the blast. As she opened her eyes, she saw everypony in the court had been spirited away by Celestia's will. Luna was impressed that her sister, though a goddess, could be capable of such complex feats of magic. Looking to her sister, Luna found Celestia again on her knees, spent and weary. Breathing heavily, she met Luna's gaze.

"Luna," she huffed as another tear streamed down her face, "sister, please! We can fix this still, I promise! Please, please, come back to me!"

Luna closed her eyes and shook her head.

"No sister, there is no turning back. Come with me; let me free you from your fears so that you may find peace at last."

Luna descended from the throne, and walked the long length of the hall. The eerie silence of Everfree was broken only by the sound of Luna's hooves upon the stone floor.

Celestia was not following.

Nearing the stairs, Luna heard a loud, solemn voice echoing across the empty room.

"Don't you dare turn your back on me, Luna."

Looking back to the throne, Luna saw Celestia stand to her hooves, her head lowered in contemplative thought.

"I can't permit you to leave Everfree."

"You can do nothing to stop me, Celestia." Luna shot back in defiance, "No prison can contain me!"

Celestia rose her head, a cold resolve evident in her expression.

"Again, Luna, you're hopelessly mistaken."

With her horn brightly glowing, Celestia stomped the floor beneath her, lowered her head, and prepared to charge. Luna could hardly believe that her sister was challenging her to a joust. Though conflicted, Luna decided she had to answer in turn; she herself had told Celestia there was no turning back. Assuming her grandiose form, she mimicked her sister's movements and charged. As they ran, the sisters cast the tables aside with little effort or care. Clashing in the center of the hall, a massive burst of white hot energy radiated from the point of impact, sending a destructive wave to shatter every window and ignite every overturned table. As it subsided, the two sisters could be seen locked in struggle, their horns crossed and their bleeding heads pressed together.

"Give up little sister!" Celestia shouted, pushing Luna back.

"I...will...not!" Luna grunted in response, managing to throw Celestia off balance.

Not wasting a second, Celestia took to the sky before Luna could strike. The moon goddess was quick to join her sister midair, just narrowly avoiding Celestia's horn. Like sparring raptors the two exchanged blows upon succession, colliding repeatedly in the air and grappling before retreating to renew their assault. With each contact, a burst of fiery sparks illuminated the castle. Below, the hall was filled with the cackle of flames and a plume of black smoke.

As the battle wore on, Luna finally saw her chance to gain the upperhoof. When the sun goddess dove to strike her from above, Luna veered to the side and gave Celestia another sharp kick to her side, felling her from the air.

Grounding herself, Luna saw Celestia shed her empowered appearance. No longer did her mane channel the mighty solar wind, it was but a simple pink. Luna stopped, a single tear escaping her eye as she beheld her beloved Celly in her natural state. It had been centuries since Luna had



seen her like this. The flood of memories of the two frolicking in the young, open fields of Equestria tempered her anger.

"Celly...it's over. You've exhausted your strength and magic. You can't defeat me."

Panting, Celestia once again arose to her hooves. Despite being dwarfed by her younger sister, the sun goddess' voice lost none of its authority.

"No, sister. As usual, you have failed to see the greater picture. I'm two steps ahead of you."

With a glow of her horn, Celestia vanished with a bang. Baffled, Luna was at loss what to think. She had Celestia at her mercy, yet her older sister expected the moon goddess to lose? That was improbable, the two were equals and Luna had bested her in a fair fight.

Could it be Celestia wanted to use the Elements of Harmony? The two sisters had tried to wield its power before, but failed in each attempt with catastrophic results. Luna never had much interest with the artifacts' potential, but Celestia did. If she had figured out how to harness the Elements, the sun goddess could defeat her. It was the only way possible.

In haste, Luna teleported to the foyer to be met with a frightening sight. Before her, Celestia was wrapped in a purple light. Levitating, five of the elements swirled about her while the last, manifesting itself as a bejeweled tiara, rested upon her head.

"No, no, no!" Luna shouted, losing all other words in the process.

"Little sister, I discovered long ago that this power cannot be diluted with that of a god's. Mixed together, the forces negate one another, often producing a volatile reaction. So to use it, I depleted my strength so that I could channel and unleash its magic. As I'm sure you can see now, I let you win."

Luna was dumbstruck. Even when cornered, her body spent of energy and bleeding, Celestia had been in control the entire time. Luna never had a hope to win.

"Luna, repent." Celestia said with an assertive tough love, "Dear sister it's not too late. I will always forgive you."

"No!" Luna shouted with righteous anger "I did nothing wrong, I only wanted to escape this infernal cage you put me in! I don't want to play castle with you for all eternity, Celly! I will not have it, I refuse it! It was never my purpose; you thrust this life on me!"

Celestia sighed, and looked at Luna with a pained regret.

"...I'm sorry Luna. This is the best I can do for you...and Equestria."

A magnificent rainbow blast emanated from the Elements, engulfing Luna in a brilliant flash. She was dazed by the vast range of colors before everything suddenly faded to black.

"Umm, Princess Luna, are you all right? Here, I'll go fetch some tissues."

Luna opened her eyes, a single soft tear streaming from each one.

"No, Fluttershy," Luna sniffed, "I'll be quite fine. Thank you."

Sighing, her thoughts turned back to her memory. It was so vivid; she could hear every word, feel every pain and emotion, and see Celestia's every expression. Yet, it was incomplete. The nobles were but phantoms, their words and deeds that night she had largely forgotten. Even Dark Star, her advisor, was but a faint blur...

Luna snapped back from deep thought as a seismic turbulence shook the house, throwing the goddess to the ground. Fluttershy quickly dashed to the window to see the trouble.

"...Oh my..."

The pegasus darted out the door into the cold night. Curious to find the source of the shockwave, Luna followed Fluttershy, hoping dearly that it was Celestia's doing.

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Twilight froze not from the sight of the red plumage of the guard's helm, but from the soft words muffled by the loud winds. More than anything she desired it to be anypony but the soldier approaching her.

"Get back!" the unicorn shouted, shaking with weariness, "Don't take another step closer!"

The figure ignored Twilight's warning and advanced until his physical features became more visible and the truth undeniable.

It was her former guard and friend, Lightning Strike.

"Sparks..."

"Don't call me that, don't *ever* call me that! You have no right!" Twilight threatened, but her intent was offset by her emotional fatigue, making her appear only more vulnerable and pitiful. Twilight wanted to cry, but the harsh wind had dried her eyes. She felt so alone and exposed, she just wanted to disappear. Curling up and closing her eyes, Twilight wished the guard would just be swept up by the wind and blown back to Canterlot.

"Twilight Sparkle, please listen to me. I never wanted to hurt you, I love you too much..."

"How can you expect me to love you, as if you didn't break my heart when you tore my books and terrorized my friends? When you *beat* me? You're dead to me, you hear *Lieutenant*? Dead. Now just go away and leave me alone! You're nothing but a soldier; a heartless, mindless brute and...and...I hate you!"

"Sparks, you don't really think that." Lightning Strike replied calmly, though audibly, "I can prove it."

"You could never be more—"

Twilight abruptly stopped as she heard the rattle of armor. Opening her eyes, she saw the yellow pegasus remove the golden suit and casting off his helm, revealing his long, purple mane. Blazed across his flank was the image of two lightning bolts crossing over a long sword, the mark of a respected military pony. Twilight was at loss what to think, she had rarely ever seen the pegasus without his armor (a trip to the beach immediately

came to mind). Though the warm memory was pleasant, it only distressed Twilight more. If the Royal Guard was composed of good pegasi like Lightning Strike, how could they be capable of trampling civil liberties and subduing the population within hours of Celestia's departure? How could they abandon their virtue and dignity for one second and reassume them the next? Again, Twilight withdrew, turning away from Lightning Strike.

"Sparks, don't be like that. I'll explain myself in due time. Just give me a chance?"

As he spoke, he approached Twilight and moved to brush her mane. At his touch, the unicorn recoiled and shook her head.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, her breath becoming ragged, "I don't want your love, I want to be alone, I want Celestia back, I, I, I..."

Lightning Strike gently hugged her by the neck and ran his hoof through her mane.

"Shhh...It'll be all right Sparks." Lightning Strike said sympathetically. As he held the unicorn in his hooves, he continued to whisper tender words of comfort against the raging howl of the north wind, but they were not lost. Every one of his simple words resonated in Twilight's heart; all the confusion and angst impelled by the hopeless complexity of the brave new world before her dissipated as her adamant resistance melted in the warm embrace.

"...Fate is cruel, Sparks." said Lightning Strike, "It doomed me to my lot; to live by the sword. As soon as my mark appeared, I was recruited into the military academy. The training was harsh and merciless, both physically and mentally. Punishment for disobedience was swift, and I constantly feared the prospect. At the same time, I, still a small colt, saw my civilian peers play, study, and laugh as they explored and developed their talents...and..."

Lightning Strike paused and tried to maintain his professional disposition, but it cracked under his words.

"...I resented them.

Again, he paused.

"No, that's not quite true. I *hated* them. It wasn't fair, everypony demanded me to be an obedient lamb, a sacrifice for the good of Equestria's security and Celestia's glory, while they basked in the freedom I was denied. As I grew up at the academy, I outwardly mouthed oaths and obeyed orders, but my heart was bent on escaping my prison. I had just the plan too, Sparks."

Lightning Strike gave a soft chuckle at the memory.

"The day Celestia arrived to inspect my company, I was determined to be discharged, honorably or not. Lined up with my comrades, I waited nervously for her to reach me. I had never had the honor to meet the princess before, and when she stood before me, I was awestruck. She was fairer than any dragon treasure, her grace and power more radiant than the sun itself. My amazement, however, did not go unnoticed. Celestia saw my composure degenerate into the wonderment of a filly, and she *laughed*."

Twilight smiled, the memory of Celestia's sweet laughter warming her cold body.

"But I kept my ground and voiced my desire to leave her service. Speaking out of line, I knew that I risked banishment or imprisonment. Oh, but did she turn it around on me, Sparks. Instead she simply smiled and looked at me with an ancient wisdom gleaming in her eyes. Later that day, my superior notified me that I had been assigned to serve as the personal guard to the princesses' new pupil."

A gust of wind blew, silencing the guard briefly.

"That's when I met you, Twilight Sparkle. You were such a strange little filly; a curious little rascal, and yet so shy. You were brave but timid, constantly finding yourself in frighteningly awkward situations or being barraged by the media and politics of Canterlot, a world totally alien to you. It was a full time job protecting you, but you were brilliant, so brilliant and beautiful."

Twilight felt the light thud of a tear hit her mane. She looked up to see the starlit tears in Lightning Strike's eyes scatter not by will, but by the fierce winds.

"You were my beacon, Sparks; through you Celestia's wisdom became clear to me. Seeing you grow in the safety I provided showed me that my

purpose was not a sacrifice, it was fundamental to the well-being of all, it was the greatest honor!"

Lightning Strike's pride then drained from both his expression and tone as he continued.

"After I realized this, I never questioned an order given by Princess Celestia or my superiors...I'm not at liberty to tell you the things I've seen or done in their name, but every tooth, claw, and bolt that pierced me and every enemy I struck down was in defense of our land, our princess, and you, Twilight Sparkle!"

The guard's voice shook as he made his case; Twilight knew he was not as absolute in his conviction as he wished to convey.

"...But fate presents endless dilemmas, rarely does it allow blissful simplicity to reign. When I was ordered to search your library Sparks, it required every disciplined fiber in my being to carry out my duties. It was my most difficult assignment...until our meeting at the farm."

Twilight looked up at the guard, a pained expression painted both faces.

"Sparks...I know not why you protect Princess Luna, but I saw in your eyes an indomitable spirit bent on resisting my demands. The swift nature of the extraction mission did not permit me the luxury to reason with you, my only hope was to subdue you...by force."

Lightning Strike sighed heavily and muttered.

"...Cruel...fate is cruel...to protect you I had to hurt you. Is it an irreconcilable paradox? I disciplined you in your youth for petty intransigencies...but such an analogy is unfitting for adults and the tragedies that afflict us. Who was right, I do not know, but Sparks, I cannot say I'm sorry."

Stunned by his words, Twilight freed herself from Lightning Strike's grasp and shook her head in disgust and confusion.

"No, no, no! Don't you think for a second you were right! Your fellow pegasi invaded the home of a free citizen without a permit, destroyed his property,

and nearly beat him to death! Not only that, your brutish, despicable, manticore of a captain shot him with a crossbow!"

"Do not speak of what you do not understand, Sparks." Lightning Strike rebuked with a fierce loyalty, "Captain Braveheart is an old blowhard; this is for certain. But when we were being briefed that our mission was to somehow capture and detain a living goddess, my company was filled with dread until the captain arrived. His smug confidence, though crude, inspired us to complete our objectives and dare to hope. Under his leadership, we nearly succeeded twice in what everypony thought to be a doomed mission."

"I don't care if you were arresting Princess Celestia herself," Twilight countered "Your captain used excessive force! Did he at anytime not resort to violence and intimidation to accomplish his goals? Not once did he try to parley with Princess Luna!"

Lightning Strike stepped back and looked to the sky, his mane blowing wildly.

"...I find it amazing you can trust her after what she did last year. I'm aware you defeated her, yet you place the same faith in her as you have for Princess Celestia..."

Twilight was about to respond indignantly, but the guard cut her off.

"That night was a living *hell*. Princess Celestia had taken only a small contingent of the guard with her to Ponyville, an incompetent bunch, may I add. The rest of the Royal Guard had been tasked with keeping a high alert; for what only the general knew. When the sun didn't rise, panic broke out in the streets of Canterlot and much of the country; we did not have the comfort of knowing Nightmare Moon's return as your folk in Ponyville had. Captain Braveheart did his best to pacify the riots, but he was powerless to stop them all. I was with him when our battalion managed to disperse a nasty one off of Gallopfrey Street. In its wake we found the bodies of several foals, the life trampled out of them. We were all repulsed, but the captain was utterly incensed. He did all he could to revive the fallen young, but when he failed, he cursed the moon. He swore and shouted, stomped and fumed, but in the end he could do little for anypony but carry on with his duties...but he did not forget, and neither did I. Over the past year, Princess Luna not once apologized publically for her crimes, she was only

been a shadow on the periphery of Celestia's court. For what reason should we trust Luna?"

"Because Princess Celestia did." Twilight replied sternly.

The guard winced, he had not expected such a quick, simple yet potent reply.

"Lightning Strike, Celestia's disappearance is not Luna's fault. You have condemned her from a place of ignorance, your argument being composed of only plausible conjectures. You have not a trace of physical evidence, eye witness reports, or solid lead."

"...and what would you have us do, Sparks? Sit idly by as the world dies?"

"I know how you feel, but if you cannot trust Princess Luna, I'd ask you to trust me, Strikey."

Lightning Strike's brow furrowed, his frustration and doubt cracking through his stern discipline.

"Sparks, I'm aware of your capability and knowledge, but you're still so naïve."

Twilight was hurt by the guard's words, but not surprised. He was a military pony after all, his loyalty resided primarily in Celestia and her institutions, not the unicorn he once babysat. Still, she had hoped beyond reason that he would abandon his post and aid her. Turning away from Lightning Strike, Twilight spoke with cold words.

"Fine then. I see we have nothing else left to say. You can arrest me now, take me to your captain."

The two ponies were buffeted by a cold wind as the pegasus pulled a report from his rumpled armor.

"...at 0900 hours, the garrison at Canterlot was notified of a disturbance at an exotic dance club off Hayseed Lane. The establishment was closed for business. Upon arrival, Captain Braveheart was found destroying property. When arrested, he babbled only of 'purifying the wicked sin pit' and 'that wicked moon witch'. General Hawkeyes promptly suspended the Captain



for abandoning his post and inappropriate behavior in a public place. In his stead, General Hawkeyes has appointed Lt. Lightning Strike to serve as temporary Captain of the Royal Guard..."

Twilight looked at the new captain in astonishment. He was the field commander, he wasn't disobeying any order in meeting with her. This whole discussion could have been a mere trap, a distraction to his grander scheme. Twilight stood and looked nervously around her to see if she had been surrounded. Captain Lightning Strike placed the scroll down and noticed the unicorn's discomfort.

"Don't worry Sparks, this was an exploratory mission. My pegasi are busy enforcing curfew in Ponyville, per my orders. To carry out an arrest would require substantial back-up, if our last clash taught me anything."

The pegasus turned his back to Twilight and began putting on his armor.

"It will take me awhile to assemble the guard, many are flying reconnaissance now. If you truly know the whereabouts of Princess Celestia, I pray you move quickly away from this place."

He looked back at her with a weak smile as he crowned himself with his golden, red plumed helm.

" My dear little Sparks, it wasn't hard to track you. I wasted no time searching the town, I knew you would run off to some secluded spot. Unfortunately for your efforts, you chose the residence of a high profile fashion model. Not the smartest move there, Sparks."

The teasing remark fell flat as he stared into her eyes affectionately. At length, Lightning Strike unfolded his wings and rose into the air.

"I will not shirk from my duties to Celestia and the state, Twilight Sparkle. Be assured, I will continue to pursue you and your friends." the captain spoke with a new flare of authority and strength, " But do not waste this time I'm giving you. Find Princess Celestia, prove me and the Royal Guard wrong. I have no greater wish..."

With that being said, Captain Lightning Strike flew off towards Ponyville.

Twilight was conflicted. Neither did they reconcile, nor depart in hate. Very little had been resolved, both would continue on their respective, opposing paths. Yet, the captain affirmed his love for her when everything in the world came into question, not only through his words but through his gift of that most precious necessity: time.

Despite his words, she knew he had faith in her.

Now was not a time for contemplation, action was of the utmost essence. It seemed unlikely that Applejack had managed to round up Rarity and Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash was running late, so Luna's immortality would have to take a back seat to finding Celestia. It would be far more expedient...

A thunderous boom shook the earth, shocking Twilight. She looked up to the sky to find an explosion of colors burst forth across the dark night canopy. A look of terror on her face, Twilight was paralyzed with a mixture of anger, fear and concern. The Sonic Rainboom was unmistakable, it was obviously Rainbow Dash's work, but what danger drove her to pull out her best move?

"Oh no!" Twilight thought, "Even if she's all right, she's given away our position to every pony in Equestria! Even under Lightning Strike's leadership, the Royal Guard will descend on this spot in minutes! We've got to move, and quick! Even the Everfree Forest looks inviting now..."

Her concentration broke as she saw the rainbow end a few hundred meters before her. Running with all haste, she suddenly froze when she saw Rainbow Dash doing what appeared to be a victory dance.

"Rainbow, what have you done!"

Turning to face the unicorn, the cyan pegasus gave a sheepish smile and an awkward chuckle.

"Uh, well...Ooops?"

# Chapter 6

A change from the typically hay-thatched buildings dotting the layout of Ponyville, the ornately decorated Carousel Boutique drew the attention and admiration of many visitors to the village. Its superb architecture and beautiful purple marble left the impression that the structure was a royal retreat rather than the home of a tailor. Even in the dark of night, its magnificence could not be hidden; the smooth marble reflected the soft moonlight while the stars illuminated the dazzling array of jewels lining the windows of the second floor, behind which peacefully slept the famed fashionista herself, Lady Rarity Unicorn.

Well, in truth, she lacked the aristocratic title "Lady" and her last name "Unicorn" revealed her more humble origins, a past she had worked diligently to suppress, opting to be referred to as simply Rarity in all matters from business deals to her most intimate of relationships. Nonetheless, there was perhaps no pony dedicated to high society and culture as her; though an artistic visionary she was extremely disciplined in all things regarding etiquette, fashion, and class. Tonight, however, Rarity allowed herself to relax for even the most rigidly regimented pony required a reprieve from the extremes of their own personality. It had been a tough few weeks for Rarity; she had received a slew of commissions for suits and gowns for the occasion of a royal banquet. Though envious and a tad hurt for not receiving an invitation from Celestia, the pressing demands of her trade and bitter memories of Prince Blueblood quickly chased such sentiments away. Toiling all week with little time for friends, family, and, most importantly, herself, Rarity was relieved beyond words to see her last (extremely satisfied) customer exit her boutique. Immediately afterwards, she promised to close shop for the weekend and pamper herself.

Such was her exhaustion that she went to bed without her usual curlers and face mask, justifying the choice by "letting Aloe and Lotus do their job" at the spa. As sleep took her, thoughts of a tranquil morning brought a faint smile to her face. The gentle touch of the dawn's first rays would awake her and welcome her to a new day. She would then fix herself a cup of tea and read her book, a rare collection of medieval romances Twilight had

translated for her. Though not of royal cloth, Rarity yearned to be part of those tales, to be the fair princess in the tower. Her dreams did not deny her this pleasure tonight, and Rarity was swept away to a land rife with greedy dragons and maidens, noble stallions and valorous deeds...

"FUCKING WITCH! YOU FUCKING TRAITOR, TWILIGHT SPARKLE! I'LL SEE YOU BURN AT THE STAKE ALONG WITH THAT SOULESS DEMON! FUCK YOU! CELESTIA DAMN THEM!"

Rudely torn from her slumber, Rarity's eyes bugged at the sound of the coarse words penetrating her home. Her shock, however, quickly faded and was replaced instead with an unbridled rage. If it was one thing Rarity held more sacred than fashion and art, it was the sanctity of the Equestrian language and its proper use. Not only were this scoundrel's words an utterly feeble attempt for a lazy mind to express itself effectively, they were beyond crude and wholly indecent to the ears of true ladies and young children. This injustice to the Ponyville community could not go unpunished; hell hath no fury like Lady Rarity.

Shooting out of her bed, she quickly left her house to find the source of the string of obscenities. She did not need to travel far, as she soon came upon the host of the Royal Guard awaiting orders from their frustrated captain who continued to swear sporadically and loudly. Rarity paused for but a moment, she knew she was dealing with Celestia's elite soldier but that was ever more the reason to chastise their commanding officer from departing so clearly from chivalry. This is not to say his high status did not have an impact, for it reminded Rarity to regain her composure and keep a level head. Like a proper lady should. Calming herself, she boldly approached the captain as he had his back turned to her.

"Excuse me, good *sir*." She tried at gaining his attention, but the brown pegasus ignored her.

"Ergh," he growled, "Lt. Nightshade!"

"Yes sir, Captain Braveheart, sir!"

"I want you to lead a small reconnaissance around the perimeter or Ponyville! I doubt they got very far, so I want a report in 15 minutes! Put those lazy wings to use and get going!"

"Yes sir!"

"Good pegasus, I can always count on you to get shit around here done, now do me proud!"

"Uh-hem!" Rarity cleared her throat, "Captain!"

Responding to his rank, Braveheart turned his head to his side, saw Rarity, snorted in contempt, and brought his attention back to his troops. So appalled by the captain's behavior, Rarity was at loss of words. This was Celestia's best knight? It had to be an imposter; there was no way under Celestia's good heavens that this brute could possibly be heroic or honorable, and certainly not chivalrous! However, at that thought Rarity was instantly reminded of Prince Blueblood, and suddenly it seemed pretty plausible that this ruffian "knight" was in fact of Celestia's court.

As she stood in silence, Captain Braveheart continued to address his pegasi in an agitated voice.

"All right, we failed in our objective to apprehend the renegade Princess Luna, or more accurately Nightmare Moon, within the desired time allotted to us by General Hawkeyes. It's just about 0700 hours meanin' ponies will be wakin' up pretty soon."

Sighing heavily and removing his helmet, the captain's face turned solemn. Eyes cast downwards, he continued.

"Pegasi, we're dealin' with a national crisis the likes we've never seen before. This will make last year look like we were babysitting a bunch of foals; at least last year, in her great wisdom, Celestia had set in motion a plan to stop her wicked sister. But even under her guidance, we know how many died in Canterlot that day, how many died because of *her*."

Braveheart's demeanor now reverted back to his usual fiery tone, his voice once again that of a barking officer.

"Now, we have only our courage, wit, and determination. Not only must we capture Nightmare Moon, we must do our best to preserve order here. I've sent Private Nightshade to call on the district barracks to send reinforcements here. They may not be elite, but we'll need every disciplined soldier to turn back this tide. I mean, I've had reports come across me that

say this village teetered on the brink of hysteria over a bunch of rabbits running through the town square! This is more than just a skittery bunch, they're damn near crazy, so I want their little panic attack contained and diffused! If there was any good to come from the last Summer Sun Festival, it at the *very least* prepared us for a day like this, so no excuses! We've trained damn hard for this, I don't want any screw-ups. I expect only to see the best from my pegasi!"

Rarity could respect Braveheart's tense situation, even if she didn't quite understand it fully, but it was still unforgiveable to so rudely write her off and repeatedly use such vulgar words.

"Captain Braveheart, I would gladly appreciate it if I could have an audience with you!" Rarity politely requested against the wind, which at this point had begun to weaken.

With another growl, Braveheart turned and gave Rarity an ugly look. He continued to glare at her as he began to speak, but his words were for his pegasi, not the fair unicorn.

"And here I thought the wind was just becoming more obnoxious, turns out it's another loud-mouth bitch here to add shit to my plate."

The captain let out a gruff cackle, as if his insult was actually original. The thing is with insults, however, is that it matters not how creative they are but how potent their impact is on their target, and a stunned Rarity definitely felt it.

Bitch.

The fair unicorn detested the word above all others. Unlike its fellow curses, "bitch" carried the weight of a dismissive, sexist chauvinism that impressed upon its victim a sense of inferiority and servitude. It also reduced her to the level of a faceless, run-of-the-mill commoner worthy of being only a lust object for the depraved.

Her face hardened, her eyebrows furrowed with anger. No lady should *ever* suffer such gross offense!

Rarity could no longer contain herself. This soldier, no matter how impressive his rank or medals were, had not a shred of class; if he was

going to so crudely disrespect her, she was going to treat him like the slime of the Earth he was!

Finished with his little chuckle, Braveheart finally addressed Rarity in an authoritative tone.

"Look honey, I don't got the time to chat with ya about dresses and cupcakes. The best thing you can do for me and my company is to turn your cute little butt and head straight back to your home and stay there. Got it?"

Rarity leered at the captain with a burning hate, his additional words only served to stoke the embers.

"No *captain*, I will *not*." she said through gritted teeth.

"And why the bloody hell not? Now get-"

Braveheart was interrupted by getting a full face of the unicorn as she butt heads with him, her disdainful stare squaring him straight in the eye.

"To imagine Princess Celestia's elite knights to be no more than a degenerate rabble of ruffians! By Celestia's good heavens, the way you carry on, captain! What example of discipline or honor are you demonstrating to your pegasi when you can't even hold your vulgar, maggot ridden tongue in the presence of a lady for but a second! And then to call her a "bitch"! Well, Captain Braveheart, if that is what you think of me, I'll be happy to indulge you in your crude stupidity!"

With a swift swipe of her hoof, Rarity gave the captain a stinging slap to the face.

"Hmph! If there is to be a civil disturbance this morning, you have no pony to blame but yourself, captain. Your rambunctious cursing most likely woke up half the town and did nothing to calm anypony down. 'Burn Twilight Sparkle', the nerve! Such barbarisms Celestia will never tolerate, I have a mind to tell the princess myself of her captain's depraved ruthlessness and astonishing disrespect for the fairer sex!"

Captain Braveheart stood silent, his face burning with a curious mixture of rage and shame. This unicorn had the nerve to disregard his authority and

humiliate him in front of his pegasi, yet at the same time she was in the right to do so. His hot temper and coarse language had gotten him into trouble in the past, the only reason he managed his rank was through an impressive track record in the field. Still, he did his best to make sure it never interfered in a mission, but today was beyond stressful. With Celestia gone, everything seemed to be falling apart, even his own discipline. He needed her, just as the day needs the sun. Nonetheless, Braveheart was proud, and he'd be damned to just let this townie from the boonies tell him how uncivilized he was.

As Rarity finished her tirade, Braveheart spoke through clenched teeth.

"And what makes you think Celestia would care to hear what *you* have to say?"

Rarity grinned, in this question she was happy to oblige in a response.

"Why, don't you know? I'm Rarity, fashionista extraordinaire. Celestia personally commissions me for the royal décor of Canterlot Castle. It helps to have good friends, dear; I'm a master at networking."

The captain's face suddenly lit up in surprise, growing a grin of his own.

"You're Rarity Unicorn, Twilight Sparkle's fashion designer friend?"

Rarity's smirk faded, confused a bit by the captain's question.

"Why, yes, I mean ..."

"Well then, 'Lady' Rarity, you are under arrest for conspiring against the throne."

"—wait what, what?" Rarity stood dumbstruck.

"Don't worry; perhaps you'll see some of your work at Canterlot, though last I recall the dungeons are pretty damn bare. Maybe you can knit somethin' for the dank walls, somethin' bright. It gets so bloody dreary down there; I'm sure Princess Luna will love it! Ha! Sgt. Storm Cloud!"

"Yes sir!" replied a grey mare with bright blue eyes.



"Put Miss Rarity here under house arrest for now. I expect you can handle an interrogation on your own."

"Of course."

"Oh, and sergeant."

"Yes?"

"Do you think I'm a chauvinist?"

"Only a bit, captain, but a little sensitivity training wouldn't hurt."

"Hmm...fine, duly noted, now just take her away."

Before Sgt. Storm Cloud could lead Rarity away, a shrill scream was heard emitting from some corner of the small village soon followed by the unmistakable words of Lilly, a mare with a penchant for alarmist drama.

"The horror, the horror!"

If the captain's curses succeeded in waking up a few ponies around the town square, Lilly's cry awoke the rest of the village. One by one, the ponies peered from their windows and doorways only to find what they thought they left behind when sweet sleep took them: a chilling north wind and a beautiful night sky. As they gazed up at the eerie darkness, a cold terror swept through them; there was no sign of their beloved goddess to be found. All that seemed to change was the moon which remained just upon the horizon, making it seem larger, almost as if it were falling towards the earth.

"Shit, make that quick sergeant, I need you back here." Braveheart growled, "It's starting."

"Yes sir!"

Rarity found herself lifted off her hooves, the female soldier effortlessly carrying her as she glided towards the boutique. Dropping her off, the sergeant gave Rarity a stern warning.

"Get inside; it might get ugly out here. Don't even think about leaving, you're just a suspect now but if you escape you'll be a felon. Trust me, it's best if you just cooperate."

Without waiting for a response, Storm Cloud bolted back to her company. Rarity complied with her orders; she didn't want to get mixed in with a dirty bunch of rioters after all. However, the whole situation was, well, so thrilling, like one of her romances! Though Braveheart was far from charming, it did not mean him incapable of exciting deeds. Rarity quickly ran up the stairs to the highest level of the boutique so she could get a decent look of the town square. And then she heard it, faint though it may be against the wind.

Murmurs.

"The sky...it..."

"Can it be...?"

"I knew it; I knew she shouldn't have been trusted..."

And then the prophets emerged.

"Nightmare Moon has returned to cast her vengeance upon us! Pray that Celestia may deliver us from her wicked onslaught! Repent, we must all repent!"

And the spark that ignites a firestorm.

"Doom, doom! What hope do we have! Everypony for themselves!"

For Ponyville, it took only three minutes to escalate to this point, much to Captain Braveheart's chagrin.

"Return to your homes!" the captain shouted, his helmet fixed firmly back on his head, "By order of Celestia's Royal Guard, return to your homes or we will not hesitate to use force!"

Not surprisingly, his warnings fell on a crowd deafened by both the wind and their own hysterics. All ready the mob began to scurry aimlessly about the square, screaming and damaging property along the way.

"I knew that wasn't going to cut it, words are worth nothing in the end." The disgruntled captain said to himself before turning to his pegasi, "Form up! Form up! I want shields and nightsticks ready! Now fall in and follow my lead!"

With that, Braveheart took to the sky, leading his pegasi to encircle the panicking villagers in the town square and swiftly land.

"Shields!" Braveheart ordered, "Shields!"

The guards raised their golden shields in concert, the sound of clattering metal sounding like a symphony to Braveheart's ears.

"Company advance!"

As the guard began to box in the rioters, a few dozen Earth ponies crashed against the lines trying to break through.

"Stand your ground, hold them!" Braveheart barked, planting his hooves firmly to the ground. It was a grueling test of physical strength; an average lot of pegasi would have easily been trampled down by the much stronger and sturdier Earth ponies. But the elite earned their keep; they managed to rebuff the charge and continue to press inwards. After fifteen minutes of steadily gaining ground, the frightened villagers had been rounded up, their reckless stampeding put to an end.

"Lt. Lightning Strike!"

"Yes sir!"

"You're good with words, calm these hicks down and send them on their way home!"

"I'll do what I can, sir."

Lightning Strike broke rank and file to speak with the scared residents of Ponyville. Removing his helmet in an attempt to look less intimidating, the lieutenant calmly addressed the crowd.

"Citizens of Ponyville, her highness Celestia's Royal Guard..."

"Where the hay is Princess Celestia!" a voice interrupted.

"...in conjunction with the district militia have declared a state of emergency..."

"Who gave you thugs the right to tell us what to do?"

"Yeah! We want to see authorizations from parliament!"

"...curfew will be in effect until the crisis is managed. We remind you to keep calm and keep heart, the situation is under control."

"Lying pig! Control this!"

Flying from the crowd, several rocks soared through the air. Most clattered harmlessly against Lightning Strike's armor, but one managed to smack the side of his exposed head. Dazed, the lieutenant's vision blurred and his knees grew weak. Suddenly, he felt a push and fell to the ground. Reorienting himself, he saw Braveheart standing defensively before him with outstretched wings. Several more enchanted rocks were hurled, the captain enduring each blow without so much as flinching. Turning back to the crowd, Braveheart snarled with disgust.

"Get the fuck off the streets! I don't have the time to protect you foals all day, so get movin'!"

"Protect us from what?"

"Yeah, let us go!"

"From yourselves, ya bloody stinkin' idiots! Where in Celestia's name do you think you dumb foals can escape to, huh? If you haven't noticed, that won't do anything but make ya end up hurtin' yourselves and give me a splittin' headache! Now go home!"

Another rock flew through the air, but the captain's keen eye caught sight of it and dodged the projectile.

"Fine!" Braveheart growled, "We'll have it your way then. Pegasi, nightsticks drawn!"

"He's bluffing," a gutsy young stallion shouted, "He'd never get away with hurting any of us."

"Boy, you have no idea how wrong you are. I'll make an example of you!"

As he raised his nightstick to strike, something quite unexpected caught the elite veteran completely off guard.

"Hiya captain!" shouted a cheery voice from behind.

Braveheart froze comically in place, a wave of confusion evident in his blank expression. Slowly he turned his head to behold a familiar pink pony.

"Captain, Captain!" She chirped happily, "Remember me, Pinkie Pie? It was, like, all dark and cold and stuff outside, and I saw you fly into town and I had never seen you before! Well maybe at the Grand Galloping Gala, but never in Ponyville, so I thought, 'Hey, what's really good on a cold night? Duh, silly, hot chocolate with marshmallows of course!' So then I made some and when I came outside there were, like, thirty of you and I was all sad because I only had one cup of cocoa to share but then I realized 'Hey, know what else warms you up? A party!' And then you were all 'Please ma'am we have important royal stuff to do blah blah.' And then we all danced! Well, kind of, I mean, I totally was but you guys were just shuffling around all nervous! What's up with that? You should really get them on some dance lessons, or something. Then again it must be really, really hard to dance with all that clunky armor. Oh wait a second captain, what d'ya got there? A baton? Were you doing tricks and stuff for everypony? That is so cool! Let me try!"

Yanking the nightstick from Braveheart's grasp, the pink pony proceeded to twirl it and toss it up into the air, following up with several summersaults before catching it. The nightstick didn't stop twirling as the acrobat spun it around her body, neck, and legs, until she once again released it into the air, this time doing three back flips before it came back down. Faster and faster she spun it about, biting her tongue in stern concentration. Guard and town pony alike stood in amazement, both forgetting their fears and anxieties as they watched the pink pony's movements flow like quicksilver.

Then she tripped on a rock.

Falling on her back, the enthusiastic ball of energy let out a merry giggle. The crowd of ponies (and some of the guards) cheered and stamped to show their approval.

"Oh wow! That was really fun! But I guess I'll have to practice a whole lot more to get as good as you are, huh captain?"

Braveheart was almost at loss as to what to say.

"...err...sure kid. But if you don't mind, I got to get these folks off the streets. It's too dangerous for all you to be wandering about town, and I have more pressing objectives to tend to."

"Oh I can help with that, no problem!" Pinkie Pie replied. Giving a shrill whistle, she gained the attention of the crowd of ponies. "Listen up everypony! Captain Braveheart needs us all to get back inside so he can do his job and get things back to normal around here!"

"But Pinkie," a stallion spoke out, "that pegasus is power crazy!"

"Are you kidding me, Caramel? He may be a grumpy pants, but he only wants to see you all safe and sound. Hey! I know, if everypony goes back home, they can expect a free basket of muffins tomorrow morning! My treat!"

There was a brief silence as the crowd thought it over.

"Well, if Pinkie Pie trusts this guy, he can't be all bad."

"Yeah, there's no point fighting..."

"Muffins!"

To Captain Braveheart's great relief, the crowd dispersed and calmly returned to their residences without there being a single casualty or death. Even damage to property was kept to a minimum. For the first time since Celestia's disappearance, Braveheart smiled and gave a genuine, joyful laugh.

"Now that's the Braveheart everypony should see!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, giving the rough soldier a big hug. The captain could hardly believe how

infectious, nay, intoxicating the bubbly young mare's joy and love was, just being around her made him want to break out the ale and celebrate. However, that had to wait. Only when Celestia sat again upon her golden throne and Luna thrown in the depths of Canterlot's dungeon would he rest and be merry.

"Your assistance, was...appreciated, Pinkamena Pie. A bit unconventional for this old soldier, but I don't complain as long as it works. Good job."

Breaking away from the pink pony, he broke the files of his pegasi and returned to the town hall to await Lt. Blackmane's report. Pinkie Pie turned to Lt. Lightning Strike who was still on the ground rubbing his head.

"Lightning! Ouch! That's a nasty bump you got on your head!"

"Heh, yeah, well, I deserved it." The lieutenant chuckled in reply.

"Baloney! You meant well, but what the hay was with your speech? Borrrringgg! It was all like 'Look at me, I sound like I'm reading an instruction manual for mixing paint.' Of course they weren't going to listen to you, silly; they needed to hear something from the heart, but you-soun-ded like-a-ro-bot." Pinkie Pie said, giving her own impression.

"Well that's fitting, because I feel like one." Lightning Strike said getting back on his hooves, "I had to hurt somepony I love tonight...I can't bear to show any emotion right now. Not when our mission is so critical to the well-being of all."

"Don't say that Lightning," Pinkie said with a look of concern, "It's never a good thing to bury your feelings. If you do that, you lose what makes you special! Today, you gotta do what you gotta do, you're totally right. It'll be tough, but don't hide who you are to keep the pain away. Have courage. The pain will always be there, whether you like it or not and it *will* get in the way of your mission if you don't deal with it. I know what it's like to hurt your friends, everypony does, it's something really cruddy we wish we could laugh away."

Pinkie leaned in close to Lightning Strike and whispered.

"Want to know a secret?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"You don't have to *wish*, you just *can*."

Lightning Strike gave her a puzzled look.

"Hmm, well, maybe not exactly, but the point is that you can't let the past get you down when the future is yours for the making! If she truly loves you, she'll forgive you, silly, don't ever forget that! It takes more than a midnight book raid to lose the love of Twilight Sparkle."

Smiling and giving the surprised lieutenant a wink, Pinkie Pie left him with a final word before bouncing off.

"Remember Lightning to speak from the heart...Oh, and wait! Stop by Sugar Cube Corner next Thursday! It's cheesecake day! I mean, yum, am I right?"

Lightning Strike gave a faint smile, but as she trotted away, he lowered his head in despair. The burning question remained, one that even the gods had no answer for.

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Braveheart looked to the sky, searching for his lieutenant to return. He was running late, and the captain was growing impatient.

"Nightshade, I sent you out a half an hour ago because you're my best flier. Where the—"

"Captain Braveheart, sir!"

Turning away from the skies, Braveheart saw his best soldier entering the square on hoof...with a prisoner in tow.

"And here I was thinking that this old Wonderbolt was just growing rusty around the wings." The captain grinned.

"Far from it, sir, though excuse my lateness." The lieutenant replied, saluting his officer. The captive simply left her head hanging low.

"So who's the hick you found rollin' around in the mud, lietenant?"



"Captain," Nightshade beamed with pride, "this is Applejack, known friend of Twilight Sparkle. The report noted her for her honesty, but I didn't expect a simple run-in with her would give us the intelligence we needed."

"So she's been questioned already? Good pegasus!"

"Well, there was a bit of a chase, first. She's fast for an Earth Pony, I'll give her that, but running only showed her guilt and catching her was hardly a problem. When I subdued her and began the interrogation, she wouldn't lie, per say, but she'd do her damn best to beat around the question. But I know how to play that little game. In the end she let it slip that there had been magical activity in her orchard that morning."

The lieutenant paused and smiled.

"Captain, I believe Princess Luna and Twilight Sparkle are hiding at Sweet Apple Acres. I'd recommend we move quickly."

Braveheart grinned.

"Excellent, but the militia hasn't showed up yet. I want a garrison maintained here to enforce curfew, but if we do this right, I shouldn't need more than ten pegasi to arrest Princess Luna. Anymore would just weigh us down. If things look hairy, I'll send for reinforcements, so I want you on standby just in case."

"Uh, sir," Nightshade frowned, "Am I not a part of the extraction force?"

"Lieutenant, I need you here to keep the peace. This is an important task; don't underestimate its worth to Celestia or me, for that matter. Don't worry Blackmane, the princess will know it was you who found her devil of a sister. I'll make sure to tell her myself."

At that moment, Pinkie Pie bounced by. Catching Applejack from the corner of her eye, she stopped mid-air and turned to see her friend tied up and in the custody of the two guards.

"Applejack! Hey, Applejack!" she called out, prompting Applejack to raise her head. Eyes now wide, the farm pony tried mouthing the word "run" in the hopes that the guards wouldn't arrest her too.

"What's that? 'Fun'? Okay!"

As Pinkie Pie approached, Applejack face hoofed at her friend's density.

"Hey Braveheart! Practicing rodeo with Applejack now? Silly I thought you had a job to do! I have to admit though, if you want to learn, you learn from the best, and Applejack is the greatest most best rodeo cowgirl in all of Equestria!"

Braveheart and Nightshade ceased their planning and just stared at the eccentric Earth pony. Applejack just sighed in exasperation.

"Captain," Nightshade whispered, "Isn't that Pinkamena Pie, Twilight Sparkle's friend who commandeered the music at the Grand Galloping Gala? Why isn't she in custody?"

Braveheart blushed in embarrassment.

"Yes, lieutenant, it is. I'll tell you that she proved key in pacifying the village mob, but keep in mind that I don't need to justify my decisions to you. Remember who you're speaking to, damn it!"

"What'cha talkin' 'bout, Cap'n?" the pink partier inquired.

"Hush, Sugar cube," Applejack whispered, "Ah'm under arrest, get outta here."

"That doesn't sound much fun at all." Pinkie said, her spirit deflating. "Why Captain, why arrest Applejack?"

Braveheart muttered under his breath, refusing to look at the pink pony.

"...You foals don't have the faintest clue how anything works, do you? Celestia spoiled the lot of you and now you can't even respect what we're trying to do."

Turning to Pinkie, he gave a wicked glare and raised his voice.

"You're friend conspired with Princess Luna, a traitor to both her own sister and Equestria. If you want to join in the grand plot, just say the word and I can arrange a nice dank cage for you in Canterlot!"

A bit thrown off by the Captain's harsh words, a look of hurt washed over Pinkie's face.

"F-fine! I'd rather sit in dark, dirty cell with my friends than listen to you being a big meanie to everypony!"

The captain's eye twitched; he would never admit it, but the young mare's words stung a bit. But he quickly shrugged it off; he was used to being hated and feared. His job demanded it at times, and he was really good at his job.

"...So be it. You heard her, Nightshade. Slap some cuffs on her and get her the hell out of my sight! Damn I need a cigar and a stiff drink..."

"Pinkie!" Applejack shouted as the lieutenant restrained the pink pony, "What are you thinkin' girl? Gettin' caged up with me ain't gonna help a darn thing!"

"No way José! It's always better to stay together!"

Nightshade proceeded to lead them to Rarity's home, which, granted its central position in the town, was now serving as a makeshift prison. Upon arrival, the lieutenant was saluted by Sgt. Storm Cloud.

"More of Twilight Sparkle's friends, lieutenant?"

"Yeah, but make sure to watch these ones carefully. I've got a runner here," he said, pulling the rope on Applejack who gritted her teeth and growled in response, "and I've got a...Pinkie here."

Pinkie smiled and tried to wave with her cuffed hooves.

"Hi Storm Cloud!"

The sergeant chuckled.

"Huh, well that'll be a challenge. We could hardly keep her away from us last night, drove the captain a bit mad at the time, too. You think we can really contain her in here?"

"Are you telling me you're not up to the task sergeant? I can always get Private Lighthoof on the job."

"Pardon me, but don't make me laugh, lieutenant. You know we're too spread out as it is, and I'll be Celestia's nephew if you switch me out with Lighthoof."

"Watch duty is the only thing that guy knows how to do right, and I don't want him hiding under my wing when I'm coordinating with the district militia. I'm surprised Braveheart hasn't kicked him off the guard yet, I think he likes having an incompetent coward around to vent off on."

"Hey, as long as it's not me, I can't really complain, sir."

"Well, since you think guarding Twilight's friends will be hard, you can use another soldier. Namely Lighthoof. No complaints!"

"Yes sir, of course..." the soldier sighed, not bothering to resist the suggestion in the slightest.

Sgt. Storm Cloud led the two inside, only to meet a happy Rarity dashing down the stairs to greet the Earth ponies with big hugs.

"Oh, girls! I was so worried! I saw everything! Well, the wind was messing up my beautiful mane, so perhaps not *everything*, but I'm so glad to see these brutish stallions didn't hurt you!"

"Who are you calling a stallion, *princess*?" the annoyed officer spoke up, removing her helm to reveal a sweaty, matted silver mane scrunched up in a ponytail. Her face was reddened by the cold wind so much so that the skin began to crack, pushing up a bit of blood to the surface. Rarity couldn't help but show her distaste in her appearance.

"My, I've never seen such a disaster in all my days! Why, you make Applejack look, look, well, look like me! A proper lady!"

"Thanks a lot, Rarity." Applejack sarcastically droned.

"Sorry dear, it was the most obvious and clear cut example I could come up with." Rarity said, then turning back to the unhappy soldier. "Armor? You

poor, deluded mare. You have so much potential for fabulosity, yet you squander it like Applejack..."

"Rarity, stop it, you'll only get us into more trouble!"

The fashion-inclined unicorn ignored her friend and inspected Storm Cloud with an inquisitive look.

"Oh yes. I can definitely salvage this piece of work. Dear, leave these boys to their filthy dirt play and allow your feminine side some much needed air. It's such a sin to let beauty go to waste..."

"Uh, sergeant..." Applejack tried to cut in before being interrupted herself.

"That's enough!" shouted Storm Cloud, "I don't know whether you think I'm stupid enough to fall for a half-assed escape plan like that or you honestly believe what you're saying."

"Umm..."

"Ergh!" the sergeant growled, "My Celestia! Our land is ruled by a goddess, yet it's always a big bucking deal if anypony sees a mare in the armed forces. It's ponies like you Miss. Rarity, that reduce our entire gender to nothing but trophies only to be polished every once and a while with new dresses, jewels, and pedicures. Gah! What's worse is that this superficial crap is what young fillies aspire to do instead of giving back in a way more in line with their Celestia given talents. I can tell you, I'm not the only mare with a cutie mark like this."

Removing the plate protecting her thigh, Rarity saw the image of a golden spear blazed across the soldier's flank.

"What is rare is a pony skilled enough in the arts to reach your professional stature and 'culture', yet you expect them to be when it's not even remotely in their personality. Stop putting us in a box; you're no better than Captain Braveheart in that respect. And *don't* pretend to know me."

Though a bit flustered by Storm Cloud's last accusation Rarity, kept her cool.

"Pray tell, sergeant, what do you think my cutie mark means?"

"Three jewels? It's obvious you're involved in fashion."

"Well, you'd be dead wrong. At its base level, it means I'm good at finding gems, nothing more. Do you believe that I should've taken up mining, despite my utter distaste for all things...ugh...dirt? That would be the more sensible, direct path to success, but I think it safe to say that I would not be happy, no, not the slightest! Instead, I took my talent and applied it to something I love. And you know what? I became one of the most sought after designers in Equestria. I wasn't born into class or fashion, dear, I dedicated myself to their pursuit!"

Rarity paused, closing her eyes.

"Perhaps you're right; maybe I'm not the model feminist. Perhaps it's wrong for me to expect every filly to behave like a lady all the time. But don't you find it a tad hypocritical to tell me that I'm 'putting us in a box' (as you so quaintly put it) when you base one's entire destiny on a cutie mark? That's rather rigid, don't you think?"

After another brief pause, Rarity opened her eyes.

"Don't pretend to know me, either, sergeant."

Storm Cloud blushed; she had not expected the tables to turn so quickly. However, she quickly regained her professional composure the best she could.

"I'll be sure to update the report on you...that's for sure"

"Thank you. Now, if you excuse me, I have some work I must take care of."

Rarity moved over to the other side of the boutique but remained within the eyesight of the three other ponies. Taking some black and blue fabric, she began to stitch with her machine.

"I was gonna let ya know, sergeant," Applejack said, "The way Rarity was sizin' you up? Yeah, that's how she says 'howdy, nice to meet cha'. That's all."

The soldier did not respond, rather she put her helm back on and assumed the famous stoic disposition of the Royal Guard.

"Oooo! We're playing the statue game again!" Pinkie Pie said, looking Storm Cloud over, "Not bad Stormy, but check this one out!"

Sitting herself down, Pinkie arched her back, brought one hoof under her jaw, and narrowed her eyes in serious concentration, a spitting image of Rodin\*.

"Applejack." Pinkie said dully and slowly through clenched teeth, accentuating each syllable "what do you think this means when I do this?"

"Pinkie, this ain't the time for foolin'! We need to talk, and talk quick like!"

"It means that I am thinking." Pinkie replied, disregarding Applejack's urgency and slowly pointing her hoof at her, "What am I thinking about?"

Applejack shook her head in slight frustration at her friend's eccentricity.

"I dunno hun, a par—"

"A party!" the pink pony shouted enthusiastically, breaking from her mold and leaping into the air.

"No more talking, get in the corner where I can see you and be quiet!" shouted Storm Cloud, unamused with Pinkie's play.

Applejack shook her head in disappointment and frustration; she had so many important things to tell the others, but through a combination of her friends' quirky behaviors and the Royal Guards' strict orders she wasn't getting anything important across. Walking over to where Rarity was working, Applejack and Pinkie sat themselves down in silence, waiting for a bit of good luck to come their way.

And it did, not but a half an hour later.

It would perhaps be the only time in his life that young Lighthoof would be considered "lucky" to anypony (except, perhaps to his enemies on the frontline). Bursting through the doors of the Carousel Boutique, the nervous dark blue pegasus dashed over to Storm Cloud, panting heavily.

"Sergeant! Urgent news! The raid failed, Nightmare Moon and Twilight Sparkle have escaped again! And the captain, he's he's..."

"Out with it private!" Storm Cloud ordered, his news thus far being unwanted.

"...he's gone."

Storm Cloud's stern discipline was put to the test, but the grief in her voice could not be so easily concealed.

"Braveheart is dead? That witch murdered him!"

"Uh, no ma'am, what I meant is that he vanished."

"Damn it Lighthoof, could you try to be a little less vague?"

"Umm, reports from the wounded say Nightmare Moon used her magic to send him back to Canterlot, and you know how General Hawkeyes treats those who leave their post for any reason..."

"Not quite, but I'm sure you do."

"Immediate suspension, possible dismissal."

Storm Cloud's brow quivered with anger, she was now visibly upset.

"That stupid old coot and his unbending rules! We need Captain Braveheart, there's nopony else that can replace him for something this important! We have to get him back, if we don't this mission is done for, hell, *everything* is done for."

Lighthoof just stood there and shook his head in nervous agreement, but it didn't take a genius to tell that Braveheart's absence was a welcomed reprieve for the whipping boy.

"Another thing, sergeant, Lightning Strike wants to see you. He was injured in the raid, but, uh, he's still next in the chain of command...seniority and all. Umm, also, could we switch posts? I'm getting pretty cold circling this place..."

"Ugh, fine. The world is falling apart all around you, and that's all you can think about: the cold. Whatever, anything to get you off my back, private. Just make sure to keep a close eye on them."



Before leaving, the guard paused and sighed to herself.

"Lightning Strike...he's not fit to command. Not today."

Left alone with the prisoners with nopony to bother him, Lighthoof assumed the outwardly deceptive shell of a guard, but he was far from attentive. Indeed, the lingering effects of Luna's drug made him feel like he was going to pass out at any moment. Unfortunately for him, Rarity easily picked up on this. She was sensitive to any form of insincerity, be they through actions or words.

"Ladies," she whispered, "if we are to get ourselves out of our current predicament, I suggest we start now."

"But Rarity..." started Applejack hinting her head towards the guard.

"Oh, pay no attention to him. See how glazed his eyes seem? He's hardly awake let alone watching us."

Applejack smiled in relief, now they could get something done and hopefully reach Twilight before anything truly horrible could happen. Continuing to speak in a hushed tone, Applejack was finally able to deliver her message.

"All right then. Rarity, Pinkie Pie, I know this is a might hard to understand, but this morning I found Twilight..."

"Yes dear, with Princess Luna. The guards let the whole village know, but I believe Twilight must have had good reasoning to follow her. Not for a second do I think she would ever betray Celestia."

Applejack was a bit annoyed by Rarity's interruption, no matter how accurate it was.

"Okay Rarity, if you think yer so in the loop, then why d'ja think I risked my neck to come lookin' for you two, hmm?"

"Ooo! Ooo!" Pinkie Pie said, "Because you need the Elements of Harmony to help Twilight and Princess Luna!"

Applejack looked at the pink pony in disbelief.

"Uh, yeah, but how in the hay d'ja know that?"

"Oh, easy! My Pinkie Sense kicked in yesterday! Twitchy left hoof, itchy back, and three winks from my left eye! That's why I have this!"

Reaching into her puffy mane, Pinkie pulled out her element to show to her friends briefly before putting back in the curly tangle.

"Why, that's swell Pinkie!" Applejack said, happy to see that their escape plans didn't include infiltrating Sugar Cube Corner, "But Pinkie, how'd you get out of those cuffs...?"

"Oh silly! When you've partied as hard as I have, you know you're way around a pair of dumb ol' hoovecuffs."

"Okay...how 'bout you Rarity? You have yer element?"

"Don't worry, I have it stored with my other valuables, it won't take long to retrieve."

"Good, now that that's all sorted, let's find a way outta town." Applejack said, her smile quickly turning to a frown, "But that's just what we can't do. I bet ya the farm that the militia reserves have arrived by now. The town might as well be a big ol' fort, we won't be able to put two hooves on the ground without a guard breathin' down our backs!"

"Oh, please do cut the drama, Applejack," Rarity said dismissively, "it doesn't suit you at all, dear. What you need to do is think bigger."

"Darn it Rarity, if you have a plan, just out with it all ready! I don't want to be led around the barrel to a conclusion you made an hour ago!"

"Very well," Rarity said, drawing the other two together in a huddle, "let us gauge our position first. We are located near the town centre, possibly the worst spot to be imprisoned. Therefore, we will require something drastic, something potentially dangerous to achieve our ends. Applejack, you noted that Ponyville is now overrun with guards, this is true. Their sheer numbers may hinder an escape, but in this instance it is a crippling weakness for the guard. Did you not hear the sergeant? Captain Braveheart, the central commander of their operation, the force binding the guard together and directing its actions, is gone. We also know that the town is overwhelmed

with fear and confusion, the guard being no different; their leader has just been defeated by the unknown terror of 'Nightmare Moon' after all."

"Uh-huh, it's true. They were pretty edgy when I came out to see them last night." said Pinkie, "Especially Lighthoof, he's such a scaredy cat!"

"Is he now?" Rarity said giving a wry smile, "Then we are doubly fortunate. I propose we take advantage of his cowardice, cause a deafening public uproar and sneak away into the night."

"How Rarity?" Pinkie asked.

"Simple my dear, I will become that which they fear most. I shall be Nightmare Moon! I have already prepared a rough design for my disguise, but it will be magnificently majestic, I assure you. I just need a couple hours, so it would be wonderful if you two could keep Private Clueless out of my mane while I work."

Rarity turned to see Applejack's eyes leveled in annoyance.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Rarity, Ah've told ya a dozen times an' all tell ya again: I ain't impressed with yer undergraduate degree in Equestrian from Bale," Applejack said, prompting Rarity to blush and quickly overturn a certificate hanging on her wall, "You say a bunch more words then ya need to, a good plenty of 'em flew o'er my head completely. You could've saved a lot of breath if you just got to the heart of yer plan instead of muddlin' the issue by flashin' fancy words at me an' Pinkie."

"Pardon me Applejack, at times I just get carried away..."

"Don't worry 'bout it sugar cube, I got the gist of yer plan an' it sounds pretty sound."

At this time, Private Lighthoof was starting to regain a bit more of his wits and noticed the chattering trio.

"Hey, quiet down over there! What're you mares talking about anyway?"

"Oh, nothin' hun!" Applejack replied.

"Only you know, feminine matters." Rarity added.

" Uh-huh, like what?"

"Err, um dresses?"

"Parties!"

"And certain sexy stallions."

"Oh well then, carry on ladies." The private said suavely, giving Rarity a wink.

With that Lighthoof returned to the warm beaches of the tropical fantasy holiday he was playing out in his head. A white unicorn was there to greet him, as well.

"Ugh!" Rarity shivered, "That worked a bit too well, I feel violated. Never the matter, I have work to begin. Pinkie Pie, if you could get my Element, it's in the safe just under the reception desk over there. The combination is..."

Before she could finish, Rarity noticed that Pinkie was already at the safe.

"...you'll figure it out."

Returning to her sewing machine, Rarity began with the first stages of her costume. By noon, she had made good ground, allowing her take the time to eat one of the hay sandwiches Pinkie Pie had prepared (with the non-supervision of Lighthoof). Under the pretense of a commissioned gown, Rarity's labour attracted little attention from the guard who simply wrote it off as commonplace in a boutique. Applejack and Pinkie Pie simply sat, at times speaking to each other about nothing in particular, hoping that if the guard was truly attentive that he would focus on them and not Rarity.

It was around 4:30 when the final touches were being put. Rarity beamed at her creation, which was currently severed into several parts as not to draw the attention of Lighthoof. Like the twisted alter ego of Princess Luna, all the pieces were jet black save the headpiece which Rarity managed to replicate the shining starry mane by placing her finest diamonds into a finely weaved cluster of blue feathers. The serpentine eyes were etched into the hood that completely covered the wearer's face. The body was a

skin tight black leather which Rarity had replicated the moon goddess's cutie mark on. The leggings were quite long so to imitate Nightmare Moon's tall stature. Rarity had in her possession two pairs of platform shoes, though ungodly tacky, would help her costume to be that more convincing. Ready to set her plan into motion, Rarity called her friends over just to be interrupted by a thunderous shock wave that shook the very foundations of the boutique.

"What in Celestia's green earth was that?" a stunned Rarity sputtered.

"It couldn't be, she wouldn't..." said Applejack

"Yes-sir-ee-bob! That's a sonic rainboom!" chimed Pinkie Pie.

Looking over to the door, they saw the guard was peering out the door in amazement at the eerie moonlit rainbow explosion.

"This is it girls, quick, help me into the costume!" Rarity ordered, seeing that Rainbow Dash had unwittingly provided them an ideal window of opportunity.

Hastily the two managed to dress Rarity, both of them thankful that the fashion designer had kept the costume simple. In less than a minute, the white unicorn was ready for the debut of her latest creation.

"Hit the lights, Pinkie!" Applejack whispered.

"Okie-dokie-loki!"

With that, the building went dark, freaking out the young private as he turned back inside.

"Hey you three quit that and get back to where I can see you! D-don't test my good will!"

Out of the shadows, Rarity stepped forward into the patch of moonlight emanating from the doorway.

"No, you sad, pathetic worm." She said coldly, her voice sending a chill not just down Lighthoof's spine, but Applejack's as well so perfect was her mimicry, "It is you who should not test the good will of me, Nightmare

Moon! Tell your commanders you have witnessed the true power of Princess Luna! Now be gone you perverted runt before I send your sinful soul plunging into eternal darkness and despair! "

Shouting and screaming in fear, the guard dashed out of the boutique not looking back for a second. Perhaps if he did, he would have noticed that "Nightmare Moon" was only being supported by three legs.

"Applejack!" Rarity cried "Why didn't you buckle my boot?"

"To make it easier to take that get-up off! Now c'mon, now's our chance!"

The three friends carefully exited the boutique and slid into the shadows of Ponyville finding the best possible route to escape the village.

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"Where the hell is Lightning Strike?" Sgt. Storm Cloud shouted at Private Blackmane in the middle of the town centre, "He's been gone for two hours on some 'exploratory mission' when he's supposed to be our captain! Lt. Nightshade's been looking for him for an hour now, and he hasn't reported back either. Now it's almost 4:30, and we're nowhere near closer to finding Princess Celestia or Nightmare Moon! This would never happen under Braveheart's watch..."

"I'm sorry, sergeant, what was that?" Captain Lightning Strike said behind her back causing the mare to quickly face him, "That sounded like insubordination! I can have you court marshaled, remember who you're speaking of!"

To Lightning Strike's surprise, the soldier didn't back down. Instead, she only got in his face.

"No. I don't care. Do it. Because you know what, Lightning? It won't matter, because we're all going to be dead anyway. You haven't gotten us a step closer to solving this crisis, all you do is walk around like a ghost, giving us token orders while your mind is a thousand miles away. Oh, and *captain*, I know where it is. It's with the traitor, Twilight Sparkle. You can't bear to see her hurt anymore, do you?"

"Seargent! I will not tolerate this, give me the respect you would Braveheart!" said a flustered Lightning strike.

"Lightning, you were a good lieutenant. Maybe you will be a great captain in your own right someday, but you don't have anypony's respect on the guard now. Even with the additional garrison, you're having us babysitting when we should be capturing Nightmare Moon. C'mon Lightning, I'm not stupid. You know it and I know it, you're not up to this task. Deep down, you know we need Captain Braveheart back."

Pulling a scroll from her armor, she continued.

"Here's a petition from the entire guard demanding that Braveheart be sent back to lead us. We've made it quite clear that this is a life or death decision on the General's part, all it needs is your seal and he can't refuse us. There's a dragon at the library, you know, he can get this back to Canterlot in seconds."

As Lightning Strike hesitated, a mighty shockwave through the two off balance. Looking up to the sky, Sgt. Storm Cloud knew exactly what its source was.

"A sonic rainboom! Lightning, sir, only Twilight's friend Rainbow Dash, winner of the Young Flier's Competition, can pull off such a feat! No doubt she's going to meet with Nightmare Moon and Twilight Sparkle. Now's your chance to prove me wrong, Lightning! Lead us! Remember who you are, who you owe your loyalty and service to!"

Lightning Strike paused for a minute, but before he could reply a startling cry rung throughout Ponyville.

"Nightmare Moon! Nightmare Moon is here! Everypony flee, flee for your lives!"

Dashing through the town centre, they saw Private Lighthoof running madly and screaming his warnings. Soon the doors opened, and citizens flooded the streets; no way would the promise of muffins send them back inside again. At the sight of a royal guard running from his post, some in the district militia dropped their arms and joined in the panic.

"Royal Guard! Form up, defensive positions! Encircle the square!" the captain yelled.

"Lightning!" Storm Cloud shouted, "We don't have enough pegasi! Too many have been wounded."

"Damn it, get me some good militaponies out here to help us!"

"..."

"Do it!"

Storm Cloud did her best to gather some well disciplined soldiers while Lightning Strike did his best with the pegasi he had to hold back and control the crowds. The riot lasted an hour, but the captain made sure to limit any physical beatings of civilians. After the crowd was dispersed and sent home, Lightning Strike smiled. No pony had been seriously hurt, and the damage had been contained. Sure it had taken him a lot longer than what Braveheart could accomplish, the veteran captain's shock and awe strategy generally paid off at the cost of a few injured ponies. But efficiency had not been Lightning's goal. Everypony's safety was at the forefront of his mind, but in the back was a more personal reason, one he was ashamed to indulge but did so nonetheless.

His desire to keep his promise to Twilight Sparkle.

As the cold breeze blew the settling dust away, however, a small shape caught his eye.

His heart froze, his breathing stopped. All he felt was dread and the unforgiving winds.

Approaching the figure, he shook his head in disbelief. He thought he had done everything right, he even avoided Braveheart's brutality, yet a still corpse now painted the ground red. No matter what he tried, he could not turn his gaze away from the lifeless light blue colt before him, that is until a shrill cry pierced the air.

Eyes wide with confusion and despair, Lightning Strike saw the foal's mother collect him in her hooves. She wailed and gnashed her teeth in sorrow and bitterness, her tears cleansing her young son's blood-stained



and dirt-matted coat. Looking furiously at the captain, she cursed him, but the only word Lightning Strike heard was "monster". Now he could truly understand the full force of Braveheart's agony.

No longer able to take the scene, he turned around only to see Storm Cloud with a grim face and her scroll in hoof. Looking deeply into his eyes, she said nothing but offered him the scroll.

The former captain did not hesitate a second to accept it.

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At this time, the three escapees finally found themselves approaching Fluttershy's cottage.

"Excellent, it's about time we arrived." Rarity sarcastically sang "Good work guiding us Applejack."

"Oh, Ah'm sorry Rarity, Ah guess when you two pieced together darn well near everything Ah had to tell ya, Ah guess Ah didn't get mah word in that we were supposed to get to Fluttershy's" Applejack replied, "Anyway, there was no way in Celestia's good name that we were gonna get a straight shot to her house. We had to walk around town no matter which way you spell it."

Looking at Rarity, Applejack noticed the third member of their company wasn't in step with them.

"Pinkie? You all right?"

Pinkie sat staring past her friends with big eyes. At last she spoke in a subdued tone.

"Everfree is burning."

# Chapter 7

Standing just outside the small woodland cottage, Luna and Fluttershy beheld with awe the tremendous array of colors that, for the moment, had dispelled the utter darkness that enshrouded Equestria. Luna was enthralled by its beauty, the way the moonlight touched the precipitation created a faint, ghastly spectrum that permeated across the welkin. It was not often that she had a rainbow grace her night sky, and certainly none as magnificent as the one now illuminating the heavens in concert with the light of her shining stars. Together with the moon they wove a wondrous tapestry that brought joy and inspiration to Luna's heart. The spectacle invoked memories of the Aurora Borealis she was fond of painting into her nightly masterpieces centuries ago, and suddenly her cares melted away with the sprawling burst of color. Feeling a jolt of exhilaration take her as she marveled, Luna desired above all else to tame the rainbow blast and scatter its beauty across the heavens.

"Isn't it just incredible, Fluttershy?" Luna asked.

Hearing no response, the goddess turned to her side to find nopony there.

Obviously, Fluttershy did not share in Luna's enthusiasm. Recognizing Rainbow Dash's signature Sonic Rainboom, the young caretaker immediately worried for her friend's safety and disregarded the stunning sight. Compelled by her fears, Fluttershy took to her wings and flew as fast as she possibly could against the chilling gusts. She was a naturally weak flier, but such was her love and determination that the winds soon found a worthy adversary in the usually meek pegasus.

However, the winds posed little challenge to the moon goddess as she effortlessly sailed through the air to catch up with the struggling pegasus.

"Fluttershy!" Luna shouted against the current, "Let me know when you take off next time, the last thing we need is to split up!"

"Oh, umm, sorry! I, uh, saw you were enjoying yourself, so..."

"I can't hear you dear!"

"Uh, well, you see..." Fluttershy sputtered; a bit flabbergasted that Luna felt it necessary to carry on a conversation when she was putting all of her heart into just remaining airborne.

"Hold that thought, Fluttershy, I think I can make out Twilight and another pony in the distance."

"Oh thank goodness!" the pegasus thought to herself as the pair descended on hoof and dashed over to the moonlit figures before them. It didn't take long for the two newcomers to see that not all was well with their companions.

"Rainbow, I told you to make sure to *avoid* the guard!" Twilight fumed, "Not *race* them! What were you thinking?"

"Well, to be fair Twi, there was only one..." Rainbow Dash said nonchalantly, hoping her casual attitude would compliment her 'no big deal' defense.

"Only one? *Only one*? There are going to be fifty armed elite guards on our tails pretty soon because of that *one*."

"Okay, okay, *my bad* Twilight..."

"Oh Rainbow Dash, I'm so glad you're okay!" Fluttershy said, interrupting the bickering ponies. "I was sooo worried!"

Rainbow Dash smiled and gave Twilight a condescending look.

"Well at least somepony cares about how I'm doing after barely besting one of the greatest fliers in Equestria. Thanks Fluttershy."

"Indeed, what a truly impressive performance!" Luna said emerging from the shadows, a fiery joy still evident in her words, "Such a rarity it is to see a mortal outdo a goddess, and on her own canvas at that!"

What was just as rare was to see Rainbow Dash blush at a complement. Even the praise of her heroes, the Wonderbolts, paled in comparison to the deity's words.

"I guess it was kinda great..." Rainbow Dash said, rubbing the back of her head. Twilight rolled her eyes; she knew Rainbow was now just angling for more of the princesses' flattery.

"Oh, Rainbow Dash, there's no need to play humble with me! I insist, we must fly together under the midnight sky and play among the stars someday..."

"Princess Luna," Twilight broke in, annoyed that the goddess had seemingly lost all sense of urgency because the sky looked pretty, "now isn't the time for talk. We have to get moving, but I just don't know where to..."

Luna's spirit drained as Twilight brought her back down to earth, all of her cares, fears and doubts returning to the front of her mind. Once again, she was astounded by her own irrationalities. Celestia remained missing, the guard belligerent, and their situation hopeless and without direction yet she could not help but get lost in her passion at a crucial juncture that required an astute, decisive decision. The worst part in the whole matter was that Luna had failed to lead her little fellowship; instead she relied on the plans of others despite her own reservoir of ancient knowledge and experience.

No more. Now was her chance to fulfill her duty as a princess of Equestria.

"It seems, Twilight, that we have little choice but to enter Everfree Forest." Luna said sternly.

Twilight's eyes widened at the suggestion.

"No princess, I thought of that too but it's just too dangerous! I don't want anypony else hurt today."

"What should we fear from Everfree?" Luna said as if Twilight had insulted her, "There are dangerous beasts, yes, but that same dread the forest inspires in you will also shield us from the Royal Guard. At the moment, it is far more dangerous to linger around Ponyville than to enter the wood."

Twilight bit her lip. She had made the mistake of belittling the dangers of the dark forest before and nearly died in a coffin of stone because of it. However, Luna was right; the Royal Guard posed more of a direct threat. As she at last consented with a silent nod, she could only hope that Luna

would be able to protect them if things became awry. Yet Everfree was unpredictable and Luna still mortal. One wrong turn could very well spell the end of the world.

"Excellent," Luna said, "let's waste no more time here, follow me."

"Umm, princess," Fluttershy spoke up, "I think it's best that I just go back, uh I can't just leave Applebloom alone and Big Mac is still in need of care..."

Luna frowned. Once again she failed to take into account the entirety of their situation, and again that somepony else would have to solve.

"...we don't have time to argue." Twilight sighed in frustration, "For the moment, Luna, Rainbow Dash and I need to hide. If the other three are coming, they'll need to know just where we're going: Everfree Castle. Fluttershy, I need you to wait for them, it's pointless to throw another pony in harm's way when we don't have all the Elements. The guard still views you as innocent anyway...I think...but hanging around us will do you no good. Everypony understand? All right, let's go."

Luna looked at Twilight with a mixture of envy and curiosity; the way she quickly calculated, interpreted, and directed their current situation was reminiscent of Celestia's own ability. Yet it was imperfect. Surely Twilight did not seriously expect that her friends had managed to escape Ponyville when they were already so many hours late. It seemed that Celestia's pupil was taking a leap of faith into the unknown where cold rationality was of little use.

Luna smiled. Twilight was learning.

As the company broke up and the trio passed under the dark boughs of Everfree Forest, Twilight was both relieved and terrified. On one hoof, she was now certain that Lightning Strike was holding back the guard, there was no other reason that they weren't currently under arrest. On the other, she had let Fluttershy return to her cottage. The pegasus had an inexplicable mastery of the wildlife and had saved Twilight's life in the past because of it, but Twilight knew it was pointless to try and tear Fluttershy away from a patient. Now she was gone, and, even in the company of a goddess, Twilight could not shake off the foreboding sense that something terrible was about to happen.

Rainbow Dash, too, had her doubts, but for different reasons. Now that the thrill of her race with Nightshade had begun to dissipate, she questioned Princess Luna's intent and innocence. It was her unshakeable loyalty to Twilight that kept her from seriously questioning the goddess. Then again, the princess was quite the fan of her flying...maybe she wasn't so bad...maybe she was even cool.

Following Luna's lead, they walked in silence, until another question came to Rainbow Dash.

"Uh, Twilight, I know you're usually pretty good at comin' up with solid plans, but uh, why Everfree Castle? Couldn't we just go to Zecora's, it's a lot closer to Fluttershy's..."

"No Rainbow," Twilight quickly responded, "I don't want to drag Zecora into this mess. We don't need any more Big Macs today..."

"Uh, what exactly is that supposed to even mean?"

Twilight sighed and prepared to fill all the gaps for Rainbow Dash. As the unicorn informed her friend of their various trials, Luna was on high alert. Like Twilight, she had felt uneasiness upon entering the eerie wood that was unusual for the goddess. Naturally she loved to wander Everfree during the night, but something was just not quite right, the forest just felt...off.

Nearing the gorge that had once tested Twilight's faith, Luna stopped to gather her bearings and soothe her misgivings.

Suddenly, the earth below them began to writhe and convulse, throwing the three to their knees. Looking up, Luna could not help but feel fear grip her as a tremendous dragon arose from the pit before them. The blood red beast eyed the shocked group, angrily glaring at Twilight and Rainbow Dash. As his gaze reached Luna he paused, the ferocity in his eyes melting into a pensive contemplation. At length he grinned, revealing a row of beautiful obsidian teeth.

"Чтобы думаю, что моя Немезида должна невольно вхожу в свой притон и спаси меня боль найти ее. Наконец-то мы встречаемся, проклятый и поносил демона. Ты пришел, чтобы искупить свои грехи?"

It had been centuries since Luna had spoken Wyrnish, but it was a simple, chilling question.

"To think my nemesis should unwittingly enter my den and save me the pain of finding her. At long last we meet, accursed and reviled demon. Have you come to atone for your sins?"

Gathering her courage, Luna did her best to reply in the dragon's tongue, but it came across sounding like this:

"Dragon, no quarrel have I had of you. Never have my eyes seen you, go back home and sleep on your treasure bed."

Much to her dismay, the dragon erupted into laughter.

"Ha! This is the tongue that enslaved so many of my brethren?" the dragon roared in perfect Equestrian, "Surely your words are fairer in the language of your own kind, demon? Or has a millennia of banishment utterly drained the Nightmare of her potency? "

The dragon's insolence infuriated Luna, her voice now shaking with fear and rage.

"I don't need to prove anything to you, *dragon*. It's not wise to taunt a goddess who has defeated so many of your kin in ages past, now be gone and leave us in peace!"

The beast ceased his laughter and stared indignantly at Luna.

"Leave *you* in peace? Do not speak to me of "peace", Nightmare! I shall never know it because of you. For centuries you have haunted my sleep, mocking me from beyond the surreal rift between truth and dream. No, I will never be at peace, the most I can hope for is the satisfaction of seeing you face the justice her highness spared you from. Only when you feel the same suffering your shadow left upon Celestia shall I return to my slumber."

"Dragon!" Luna cried out, taken aback by the beast's unwarranted vitriol, "You don't understand, Celestia imprisoned me before the war had even started, I'm not responsible for the evils you accuse me of!"

"Huh, a tale I heard a thousand times over from the mouths of the enemy." the dragon snorted, "But you cannot deceive me ,witch, I saw firstclaw what you did daily to blessed Celestia!"

The dragon's reverence for Celestia struck Luna as very unusual since his race had a very contentious relationship with the sun goddess that was characterized by conflict and distrust. The dragon's accent also prodded her curiosity, not only was it much more refined than the deep growling sounds that usually emanated from the mouth of dragon, it was tinged with a ring reminiscent of the noble accent commonly heard at the medieval court of Canterlot. As her observations coalesced, a very simple question came to mind.

"Who exactly are you, dragon, to know my sister so intimately as to know her daily struggles?"

Once again, the dragon snorted in contempt.

"Do not pretend that you have never heard my name. It was I who broke the siege of Canterlot, I who decimated your forces outside the gates of St. Ponyburg, I who routed and crushed your griffon allies in the high passes, I who slayed my own kind so yours could finally find peace under Celestia's sacred heaven!"

"You're Blackteeth!" Twilight interrupted enthusiastically, her fear being replaced by her natural scholastic curiosity, "You were one of the legendary heroes of the Lunar Wars! You were only a drake at the time, yet you managed to lead the Royal Guard and Celestia's army to victory!"

Luna gave Twilight an ugly look, causing the exuberant student to blush. The dragon, however, smiled at her, bearing his toothy grin proudly in response.

"Ha, that one so young should know while the eternal should plead ignorance! You are close unicorn; "Blackteeth" was but a name my soldiers would often call me, relying on that trait to tell me apart from enemy drakes."

The dragon paused, his voice lowering to a solemn growl.



" No, when she hatched me, Celestia named me Ajax. She was a mother to me in those earliest of evil days when the sun did battle against the moon and the fires of war burned across her land. Though day and night became impossible to distinguish, it mattered little to Celestia. She toiled without end trying to curtail the severity of the famine, suppress the rebellion, and restore order in the heavens. Despite this hell, rarely did she neglect me. Celestia loved me dearly and saw to it that I was at her side whenever she was at Canterlot Castle. Growing up among the military commanders at her court no doubt trained my body and mind for war, but it was you, *Nightmare Moon*, who gave me cause."

At the mentioning of the hated name, Ajax's anger and fury rekindled, a change that startled Twilight, but the anxiety she now felt was of a different nature. Celestia had always been reluctant to tell her anything about the past, insisting that she rely on her own scholarly abilities and do the research herself. Suffice it to say, this dragon had told her more in a few sentences than her teacher ever did. Not only that, it seemed that Celestia had reduced "Blackteeth" to nothing more than an old mare's tale, much like she had done to Luna. What drove Celestia to erase the names of those she loved most from the annals of history?

"For hours at a time, Celestia went out to push back your fell shadow so that the light of the sun could warm the land and supply the pony folk with at least a meager harvest. But your cruelty knew no bounds, for as she gained the upperhoof, you would refuse to usher in the night so that the sun would scorch the earth and undo all of Celestia's efforts. Through this way, you embittered her ponies and turned them against her, turning rebellion into a total civil war."

Ajax paused once again, as puffs of black smoke began to escape from his mouth and nostrils.

"But even this was not your greatest crime! No, not only would you not give Celestia a moment of peace as she struggled against your armies and black magic, you plagued her every dream, the one place we should have been free of you! Every time I slept by Celestia's side I was awoken by either grief-ridden mutterings of "Luna" or her tortured shouting. She would later apologize to me, saying that it was just a nightmare and not to worry, but I knew. It was *the* Nightmare. For two decades you slowly sapped

Celestia of her strength and will to resist the evils you unleashed, and eventually her responsibilities became too numerous for her to bear alone."

With a deafening roar and a burst of flame, Ajax made it clear to Luna that he wasn't just storytelling; his words served to awaken a wrath that had lain dormant, festering deep within his mind for centuries. He was working himself into a frenzy.

"It was when I came of age and alleviated her from the command of the armed forces that Celestia could at last focus her efforts at purging you from the heavens and bring harmony back to the land. I gladly accepted the task, honored that I could at last smite Celestia's enemies from the earth, and smite them I did! A thousand souls perished by my sword alone, hundreds more incinerated and turned to dust at the touch of my flaming breath! And you know what, demon? I feel no remorse for those pathetic ponies, for every one of their deaths was not just of *your* own making, but a necessary sacrifice to Celestia's ultimate triumph and glory!"

The dragon lowered his mighty head to meet Luna's gaze. The goddess, however, remained undaunted and stood her ground in pensive silence.

"When the war ended and you were banished, Celestia sent me here to guard the forest. Faithfully I have done so with the promise that someday you would return to your accursed wood and I could at last exact my vengeance!"

Ajax spat another jet of flame into the night sky, filling the forest with an ominous fiery light.

"Now you can no longer deny your sins! It's time you faced judgment!"

Preparing his claws to strike, Ajax felt a sharp kick strike him across the temple. With an annoyed grunt, he turned away from Luna to see Rainbow Dash hovering before him.

"Hey pal, that was a pretty stuffy story! Ha! What a real snooze-fest geez! Could you possibly talk anymore? I think I got two naps in during your little intro alone! Someone really needs to take himself a little less seriously."

Staring at Rainbow, Ajax released a puff of black smoke from his nostrils, engulfing the gutsy pegasus in a suffocating black cloud.

"See that's, what I'm talking about." Rainbow coughed, "What's the deal with holding a grudge against Princess Luna anyway? It's not like you can even beat her."

"Hmm," the dragon said, looking the pegasus over, "this gnat must be the one the birds are chattering about, Rainbow Rush."

"...it's Dash..."

"Yes, you're the pegasus who thrice awoke me with your incessant "trick". Normally I would snap your wings, but I suppose I should be grateful. You alerted me to the stillness of the earth, something I have not sensed since last Nightmare Moon walked upon it."

Turning his sharp gaze back to Luna, Ajax continued to address Rainbow Dash.

"As for 'beating' Nightmare Moon, it matters not if I fail to defeat her. My only wish is to make her suffer as much as what is in my power! If that demands my death, so be it. I shall die happy!"

With his intent clear, the mighty dragon slashed again at Luna. Having anticipated such a move, Luna evaded the strike with a quick duck and sprung into the air.

"Ajax!" she shouted, "What would Celestia say if she could see you now! Do you honestly believe you honor her name with bloodshed and battle?"

"Silence demon!" he shouted, slashing wildly at the evasive deity, "Everything I have ever done was for her! You will not poison me with doubt, seductress!"

Ajax unleashed a flaming spiral that consumed Luna, but it was quickly repelled, revealing the goddess protected by a magical barrier.

Seeing this, Rainbow Dash cheered.

"Yeah, show that dumb lizard who's princess...uhh...princess!"

Turning to Twilight, it was clear that Rainbow Dash still did not understand the gravity of their predicament.

"Twi, did you see that? That was so flippin' awesome!"

Twilight shook her head in exasperation, but in doing so, she noticed a disturbing new development. Not far from where Luna had been standing, several trees were alight with the dragon's fire.

"The forest is on fire! Oh no, no, no, no! What do we do, what do we do?"

Unlike Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash was no genius, thus over thinking was rarely a problem for her. She liked her facts straight and forward, with very little dressing on top. This much she did know though: water puts out fire.

Saluting Twilight, Rainbow Dash gave a proud smile.

"Ponyville's weather officer reporting for duty! No prob Twi, I got this!"

"But Rainbow," Twilight cut her off, "You can't tame the weather here, this is Everfree, it's unenchanted!"

Rainbow brought her hoof to her chin and thought for a few seconds. Wetting it, she tested the direction of the wind and smirked once again.

"You worry too much Twilight. It won't take me long to reach the border of the forest, and the precipitation in the air is fine for a good downpour, but it's cold so don't blame me if we get snow instead. Anyway, even these stupid freak winds are in our favor..."

No sooner did she say this, a gust of wind fanned the flames, igniting the highest branches of the tree next to them.

"...more or less. I can use 'em to send a storm headed this way pronto!"

With no better alternative, Twilight hurriedly agreed.

"Okay, okay! Get going and be safe!"

Rainbow Dash nodded and bolted off as quickly as she could back to the forest edge, leaving her signature rainbow trail in her wake.

While the two friends planned, the battle between goddess and dragon continued furious and unabated. Deftly Luna dodged the beast's flaming

blasts as she spiraled down into the canyon in the hope of keeping her companions out of harm's way. Ajax followed her closely, stretching out his claw and smacking her against the rock. A rush of pain ran through her body, but Luna endured. Using her magic, she returned the favor and crushed Ajax directly into the bedrock below them headfirst. The dragon roared in pain. He quickly arose and blasted the princess with another wave of flame. Again Luna shielded herself, but her response was not quick enough, allowing a tongue of flame to leave a small but nasty burn across her the left side of her face. When the stream of fire ceased, Ajax saw Luna grimace in pain, his handiwork clearly marring the goddess' complexion. At the sight, his eyes lit up and laughed with a twisted joy.

"Never have you looked so beautiful to me, Nightmare! Now you shall never be free of me, a fitting penance for your sins!"

Ajax's heated words angered Luna, but her heart was conflicted. She had listened to the dragon's story intently, and though she learned through him that Celestia had openly demonized her, it had become clear that Celestia did not have a firm handle of the war and very nearly came close to losing it. Luna was deeply disturbed by this fact, this idea that her sister was not at the helm of history. Rather, she was just like everypony else: a victim of circumstances outside her control. Then was all that suffering Ajax described really Luna's fault, had Luna's simple abdication really brought about so much death and destruction that even Celly could not abide?

"*No, how can that be?*" she contemplated, doing her best to avoid Ajax's claws, "*How could my sister ever be at the mercy of mortals?*"

Unfortunately for the goddess, her distracted mind dulled her reflexes. Among her twist and turns, Ajax had managed to bring his claws down upon her. Luna escaped the worst of it, but they still tore at her left foreleg. Through the pain, Luna responded in turn by binding the dragon to the earth, bearing down upon him a greater gravitational pressure. In vain Ajax resisted the inescapable force, but Luna's magic soon had him on his knees before the moon goddess.

"No!" the dragon growled through his clenched jaw, "I will not be defeated by some cheap magic trick!"

After a brief struggle, Ajax managed to open his jaw and release a torrent of flame, just barely catching Luna off guard. Again, the goddess shielded

herself, but Ajax did not relent in his assault; he was pouring all of his energy into the circling inferno that now engulfed the goddess. Already having endured the extreme temperatures of several spurts of flame, her mortal body could not handle the scorching heat. Before her barrier could crack under the strain, Luna burst through the wall of fire, only to be greeted by a sharp blow from Ajax. Flying into the side of the canyon, Luna's magic had managed to soften the impact but a searing pain still ripped through her body. At last though, Luna had enough distance to concentrate and focus her power in order to finally subdue the dragon. Again, she manipulated the gravitational forces around Ajax, this time however she made sure to pin the dragon on his back and drive his head firmly into the ground. Ajax tried to flail, but the goddess was far too powerful for the ancient war hero.

As an agonizing roar filled the air, the promised storm arrived on the breath of the wind. A downpour of cold, heavy rain extinguished the flames threatening the forest of Everfree and cooled the fatigued goddess. Luna panted in exhaustion, the beads of sweat once trickling down the side of her face were now washed away by the cleansing rainfall. Her flesh was burned and torn, but nonetheless she stood victorious over her foe. Flying above Ajax, she descended, landing upon his chest as a conqueror would her victim. At her touch, the dragon renewed his attempts to strike her, but Luna held him down fast.

"Ajax, stop!" she pleaded with shortened breath, "It's over!"

"No! No! Not until you die can the war end!" the dragon's voice quivered in frustration.

"Ajax, you know that is a hopeless dream. If I were to die, this world too would perish."

Thrashing beneath her the dragon roared with a terrible suffering.

"Then this war shall never end! But I shall fight it until Celestia's golden sun turns black, I swear it! I swear upon my undying love for her beauty, her wisdom, her majesty!"

Watching from atop the ravine, Twilight could not help but feel compassion for the defeated dragon. His loyalty to her teacher reminded her of her own little dragon's constant quest to earn Twilight's approval and admiration.

She saw in Ajax the same love, obedience, and protectiveness Spike had for her. A tear rolled from her eye as she waited for Luna to free the dragon from his excruciating torment.

Ajax's unbridled zeal and tragic life, too, moved Luna to pity. Looking into his eyes, she saw the serpentine stare of Nightmare Moon. Like Luna, Ajax's hate made him willing to destroy all of creation just to achieve his vengeance. Yet they differed too, for this creature's hate for her was dwarfed by the love he had for Celestia while Luna had loved only herself in that darkest hour. In her heart, Luna felt inferior to the dragon. She could not kill him for she was guilty of much greater sins.

Plucking a feather from her wings, Luna transfigured the plume into her sleeping powder and spread it across the dragon's face.

"Sleep, Ajax. For once I will leave you in peace..."

As the tranquilizer took its effect, the dragon stopped his struggling. His heart slowed and his eyes grew weary. Closing them, he found himself surrounded by a dazzling white light. As he focused, he saw a radiant Celestia emerge to greet him with a loving smile. A single tear escaped his eye as her sweet laughter filled his ears and soothed his spirit.

A loud snore signaled to Luna that Ajax had been at last subdued. Flying back to the top of the valley to meet Twilight, Luna faintly smiled to the unicorn. However, the act only served to highlight her fatigue and injury instead of assuring Twilight she was all right.

"Princess!" Twilight shouted, trying to help support the weakened goddess, "I knew you'd push yourself too much! You're still not used to being mortal, yet you seemed as eager to fight Ajax as he was to fight you. You hardly bothered to reason with him at all! Princess, you *need* to be more careful, I was really scared for you."

"Twilight," Luna panted, "You can never understand us, you will never know hate so deep as ours. We kept our wounds green for a thousand years and daily we drank deeply from our bitterness. No...a few words would have never deterred Ajax from his desire to punish me. You should understand this better than anypony: did you try to reason with me on that fateful summer day? Twilight, I *know* you know that this world isn't dictated by reason alone."

Suddenly, Luna heard chattering voices coming from down the path before them. Her keen night vision caught sight several ponies running towards them, and sure enough, they were Twilight's friends. With a light chuckle, she faced the unicorn again.

"See Twilight, your friends came." Luna said with ragged breath, "Despite everything, they came. Don't be afraid to follow your feelings, in the end ...reason...is...you know...feeling..."

"Luna, Luna!" Twilight shouted as the goddess trailed off, her eyes becoming glazed and unfocused "Look at me!"

Feeling her knees buckle underneath her, Luna collapsed to the wet earth, finding herself once again in utter darkness.

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"Whoa nelly!" Applejack exclaimed "You ain't kiddin', Pinkie, there's definitely a mighty big fire out there, just look at that smoke!"

As the three escapees looked past Fluttershy's cottage, they could see large black plumes of smoke billowing above the foliage. It was dispersed across the night sky by the wind, but the fume faintly lingered, blotting out the stars. A bit worried, Applejack ran to Fluttershy's door, hoping that her friends were still within the safe confines of the humble abode. Knocking wildly on the door, she was greeted by a meek voice.

"Umm, just a second, uhh, may I know who this is please?"

"Fluttershy, it's me Applejack! Y'all might wanna come out here, the forest is a blazin' somethin' fierce!"

The door creaked open as the timid pegasus popped her head out to check out Applejack's claim. It didn't take the naturalist long to notice the faint glow of the flames in the distance.

"Oh my, oh no!" Fluttershy nervously stammered, her face turning pale.

"What's the matter there sugar cube, I know yer worried 'bout them critters in..."



Suddenly, Applejack was interrupted by a loud jubilant cry from a small but very brave little pony.

"Applejack, Applejack! Yer okay!"

Dashing past Fluttershy, Applebloom threw herself at her sister and hugged her tightly. Applejack was caught completely off guard as her sister's love tried to suffocate her.

"All right there Applebloom, you can let go now..."

"Oh, sorry sis."

Released, Applejack took a deep breath before addressing Applebloom with a stern voice.

"Applebloom, what in tarnation are you doin' at Fluttershy's! You should be mindin' the farm with Big Mac!"

The young filly's smile immediately vanished and was replaced with a troubled expression.

"But Applejack, the farm was attacked by Princess Luna's guards. Ah dunno, the princess explained it to me but it still don't seem to make much sense at all..."

As her little sister spoke with chilled words, a wave of dread ran through the sturdy laborer. In Ponyville, she was thrilled to hear of the raid's failure and had expected that Twilight and Luna, two of the most powerful beings in Equestria, fought off the intruders with little effort and little damage to her property. But if Applebloom was here that meant that not all went well at Sweet Apple Acres...

"I don't wanna hear that lyin' Luna's story! I wanna hear it from mah brother, where's Big Mac?"

At his mentioning, Applebloom's eyes welled up and turned away from her big sister. Deeply disturbed, Applejack turned to a catatonic Fluttershy and shook her.

"Where's mah brother Fluttershy? Where's Twilight an' Luna!" she yelled angrily, "Darn it, somepony give me some answers!"

"Calm yourself Applejack!" Rarity said, pulling the cowgirl away from the stunned pegasus "This is no way to treat a friend. Will you please keep a cool head dear, we have many problems on our hooves and shouting is hardly going to solve any of them."

Fluttershy blinked several times at her friends before responding the best she could.

"Umm, I'm sorry Applejack, but your brother has sustained severe trauma, broken several ribs, and received a nasty injury from a crossbow but Twilight and Luna..."

"A crossbow!" Applejack replied with a mixture of shock and indignation, "Lemme see him! Lemme see what they did to mah brother!"

Pushing her way past Fluttershy, Applejack quickly ran up the stairs and entered Fluttershy's room. The sight of her recovering brother, though encouraging, did little to pacify the brew of emotions swirling around Applejack's heart. She felt hatred, confusion, sorrow, and fear but she could hardly channel them into words. All she could do was give a few frustrated stamps, toss her hat on the ground, curl up and cry. As she became absorbed in her emotional struggle, she hardly heard the hoof steps of Rarity come up the stairs.

"Applejack, dear. It's all right. Fluttershy says he's on the mend and should be fine in a month or two." Rarity said trying to comfort her friend the best she could. In all honesty, she too was appalled by the state Big Mac was in and found it disgusting that Celestia's guard would so mercilessly brutalize somepony over a crass assumption. However, she had to be strong for Applejack, especially since they were needed elsewhere.

"Applejack, I know this will be difficult for you, but we need to help Twilight and Luna. They're stuck in the Everfree Forest, and Fluttershy believes that the fire is in some way connected to them. Based off the adventure we've had to day, I'd say she's probably right. Now come on, we haven't much time."

Applejack turned from her grief and angrily glared at Rarity.

"No! No! No! Ah ain't helpin' Twilight or Luna again today! Y'all can go, Ah gotta take care of mah family first."

"Applejack, reconsider what you're saying." Rarity pleaded, "Twilight needs the Elements of Harmony to help find Celestia, she needs you..."

"That ain't what they're for! If ya jus' listened to me in town ya woulda known! It's jus' for Luna, that's why we need 'em, to help her be immortal again. Ain't got nothin' to do with findin' Celestia." Applejack railed standing to her feet, "an' right now I don't give one darn apple 'bout Luna or her stupid god drama! She was ready to sacrifice mah brother jus' to escape arrest. Nah, I ain't doin' one more thing for her. I'm stayin' here with Big Mac."

"Applejack, perhaps you're being unfair..." the unicorn replied, trying another stab at it before being interrupted again.

"I don't care Rarity! If y'all say you don't have the time to diddle daddle, get yer hides goin'!"

"Please dear, try to be reasonable..."

"LEAVE!"

With that, Applejack shoved Rarity outside the bedroom door and slammed it. Immediately, she heard the bed stir behind her, followed shortly by the gentle voice of her brother.

"Uhh...AJ..."

Hearing Big Mac, Applejack's anger at her friends gave way to the concern she had for his well-being. Rushing to his bedside, she quickly responded.

"Yeah Big Mac? What is it?"

"Whenever folk say Ah'm too quiet, Ah always remind 'em that yer plenty loud fer the both of us."

Both siblings chuckled, but tears now slowly streamed down Applejack's face.

"Ah Big Mac," she sniffled, "why ya gotta tease me now when Ah can't even fight ya back?"

Looking over her brother carefully, Applejack could see more clearly the injury her older brother had endured. Though Fluttershy had done her best to redress the wounds regularly, the earth pony's blood still imprinted a crimson stain on the white cotton wrappings. As she gazed into his peaceful eyes, she noticed the many stitches and bruises covering his face. It was becoming painfully difficult to keep a stiff upper lip as she turned her attention to where the bolt had pierced his flesh and bone. Tears welling, she lovingly hugged her brother.

"Big Mac, look at what that witch's done to you!" she cried aloud, "We shoulda never have trusted Luna, she jus' ain't right in the head!"

"AJ," Big Mac replied in a firm voice, "You can't go on blamin' the princess for what happened to me. Ain't fair at all, ya hear?"

"But Big Mac, if she never scuffled with Celestia and came to our farm, the guard would never have bothered us!"

Big Mac sighed heavily. His sister was so headstrong at times.

"Sis, that bit o' logic just don't add up at all. It makes no sense to blame folk down the chain, pretendin' that they know jus' how things are goin' to happen. Nah, in the grand scheme of things only Ah can be responsible for what happened to me. Ah chose to protect the princess. Ah suppose Ah could've let the guard take her, but I thought that wrong and downright cowardly. So Ah fought 'em and they fought back, jus' as they should."

"Big brother," Applejack replied with another sniffle, "ya don't need to be noble, ya don't need to protect her, why can't ya see that?"

Thinking her own question over for a bit, Applejack's eyes lit up.

"She charmed ya with her pretty little face, didn't she?" she accused "That's it, it's gotta, she enchanted you stupid!"

Big Mac shook his head in disappointment but kept his silence. However, a conflicted look appeared in his eyes which Applejack immediately picked up on.

"Ah ha! Ah'm right, Ah knew it! Her black magic done ensnare mah brother hook , line, and sinker!"

"That ain't it all, AJ" Big Mac responded, "There ya are jumpin' to conclusions without even lettin' me get a word in. How'd you like it if a friend did that to you?"

Applejack blushed at her brother's question and held her tongue as she waited for Big Mac to tell her what just then was on his mind. After a few minutes of silent contemplation passed, the red stallion at last spoke.

"Ah guess there ain't no point tryin' to keep this from ya. Yer a grown mare, an' you should know the truth."

Applejack was worried to hear her brother's words. He had a secret she didn't know? They shared darn well near everything with one another.

"About what?"

"About pa."

A brief silence descended upon the room before Big Mac continued.

"What Ah told ya 'bout him dyin' in a farm accident is true, but Ah never told ya the whole story 'bout that day."

The memory of the incident clearly pained the stout pony, but his voice remained strong and firm

"You were a real young filly at the time. I was out with pa just gettin' in the swing of harvestin' the crop. Back then, the farm made enough bits to afford several farm hooves to help us with the orchard and some of 'em would bring their colts along to do odd jobs 'round the place for an extra few bits. Anyway, one of them, Muddy Banks, was jus' 'bout my age an' we'd usually pal about the farm. But that day I was workin' with pa an' Muddy was a might hurt that I was too busy to play with him. But young colts are a spiteful lil' bunch, an' instead of workin' himself he spent the whole day followin' me 'round and tauntin' me whenever pa wasn't lookin'. Now Ah bore the brunt of his insults pretty well, but 'bout midday he started pokin' fun at me by sayin' that I was weak an' would never make my pa

proud. Now, I wanted nothin' more in the world than pa's approval an' love so I really wanted to show Muddy that he was chalk full of apples."

Big Mac paused and gave a deep sigh before he continued his story.

"As I kept on buckin' I finally found an opportunity to shut Muddy up. Now Ah was about to harvest the apples from a younger tree when I heard Muddy shout that he'd bet his day wages that I couldn't buck all the apples in one kick. Ah was happy to accept his challenge, but Ah wanted to make sure pa would see me do it so I called out to him. As Ah saw him approachin', Ah kicked that tree with all the might I could muster."

Once again, Big Mac closed his eyes and collected himself. It was obvious to Applejack that her brother was accustomed to swallowing the pain he felt.

"Sure as hay, all them apples came falling outta the tree. What Ah didn't know at the time was that the roots did not run very deep, and not seconds after Ah kicked it, Ah heard the tree crack. Before Ah could do anythin', it crashed to the ground. Ah rushed to see the mess Ah made only to find Muddy half scared to death. Ah looked 'round but, Ah didn't see Pa anywhere. Fear grabbed hold of me. Ah turned to the felled tree and couldn't believe mah eyes."

Another pained sigh escaped his lips.

"Pa had been crushed under the tree after jus' managin' to push Muddy outta the way" he said, his deep voice now reflecting a trace of anguish, "Ah killed him."

Applejack shook her head in disbelief.

"No, no, Big Mac. It was an accident, you didn't want it to happen, it jus' did."

"Let me finish, AJ." Big Mac replied, "There's far more to it. Pa's death devastated Ma, an' you know she fell into depression an' refused to eat anythin' or care for Applebloom. It got so bad Granny Smith had to come an' take care of her and our baby sister. But ma just got worse. Every day she sat in her room wallowin' in her grief an' slowly wastin' away. Eventually ma had her wish and reunited with pa, but she left behind a

family and a farm that was tearin' at its seams. No more could Sweet Apple Acres afford laborers to keep the orchard goin' an' we had to sell a good chunk of it to just meet ends meet. Not too long after, you left home to live with Uncle and Aunt Orange in Manehattan 'cause you 'grew tired of farm life'. But Ah know deep down ya jus' wanted to escape, 'cause Ah felt the same way."

A tear rolled down Applejack's face, her brother understood her better than anypony. At the time she wanted nothing to do with the orchard, she just wanted to forget her past and be reborn into the society and culture of the big city. But fate wouldn't allow her to, it pressed her to face it dead on and return home to revive the farm. Her cutie mark had made that infinitely clear to her.

"All this time, hardly a day past when Ah didn't torment mahself with questions and vain attempts to put the blame on somepony. But everythin' bad that happened to us had hinged on mah decision to kick the tree."

Big Mac paused again, trying to keep a grip on his emotions.

"Ah tried to blame Muddy. Not only did he holler and push me to do it, he didn't move away. He made pa have to rescue him...but still, Ah was the one who kicked the tree. Then Ah blamed pa. Why'd he have to save Muddy? Why didn't he jus' let it happen? I knew pa was brave and a hero, but did he think of us when he sacrificed himself? But in the end Ah was the one who kicked the tree."

Big Mac took in a breath of air and exhaled peacefully.

"Ah spent days an' days listin' everypony who was at fault for pa's death , but I got nowhere closer to forgivin' mahself for mah own role. However, the day you came home from Manehattan filled mah heart with such joy for the future that it made me rethink the past. Soon after Ah came to realize two things, sis. First, when Ah blamed others, Ah took comfort in the idea that somepony was in control, that mah pa didn't die 'cause of a random act of fate. But that wasn't fair to anypony, I had to accept that there were a whole bunch of factors that led up to his death that no one pony was in control of. The second thing Ah learned was that all we can do as individuals is to respond to a bad situation the best we can and do what we think good an' right. Jus' like what pa did for lil' Muddy, not like what ma did to us."

The truth of her father's fate had Applejack sputtering with tears. She had never inquired deeply into the past as it was a very painful subject for her, but Big Mac's part in pa's death did not drive her to hate her brother. No, it drove her to love him more. Despite all the confusion and hate he suffered daily, Big Mac had stayed strong for the family and sacrificed so much so that his sisters could enjoy an education and a happy home life that he himself only briefly had.

"So you see Applejack," Big Mac continued, "Ah did what Ah did fer Princess Luna 'cause it was mah choice, it's what pa would've done."

Sobbing heavily now, Applejack embraced her older brother.

"Ah'm sorry Big Mac, Ah am, but I still can't trust the princess, not after this. She's a liar, ah know it in mah gut. She's coverin' up somethin', but I jus' don't know what."

"Applejack, listen to me." Big Mac said, wiping the tears from her face, "Perhaps yer right, she might be lyin' 'bout somethin'. But AJ, ya gotta understand that not all lies are born from evil. Likewise, honesty is good and all, but it can cause some pretty bad things too. Let's just think back, Ah wasn't too honest about pa with you. I knew that if Ah told you when you were a filly that you'd only hate me for it, for ruinin' our home."

Applejack sniveled, she knew her brother was probably right. She had wanted to blame somepony for their ills too, but she just couldn't grasp what was all going around her at the time. She was just a filly after all.

"That lie was born from mah love fer you, Applejack. Ah didn't want to burden you with the past, Ah only wanted you to be mah hope for the future."

Applejack smiled through her tears and held her brother's hoof tighter.

"But as I said AJ, honesty can hurt just as much as an evil lie. Think of the informant that told the guard where Luna was, don't ya think that it would have been better for everypony if she had simply lied?"

A look of horror passed over Applejack's face. Big Mac was right, she had unwittingly triggered the chain of events that led to the brutalizing of her brother.



"Ah'm sorry Big Mac!" Applejack cried, "Ah did it! Ah got tricked into tellin' the guard who arrested me, I didn't mean it to happen! But I couldn't straight up lie to a soldier...it was jus' too hard!"

"Shhhh, Applejack, it's okay." Big Mac said, nuzzling her lovingly, "It was a risky move to send ya into town. But please, lil' sis, don't blame yourself. By that logic, it was Miss. Sparkle that should take the blame, but as Ah said, that'd be just unfair."

Ceasing his affections for the moment, Big Mac stared deeply into his sister's eyes.

"AJ, there's no way fer us to understand exactly Princess Luna's motives or goals. She's a goddess after all, so much depends on her. She's powerful beyond our knowin', so she has to be careful with what she says, one word could mean the difference between life and death. All we can do is have faith in her, jus' as we have faith in our friends. When it all comes down to it, that's all we've got."

Straightening up in his bed, he continued.

"Now, you know what ya need to do AJ. Go, go an' help your friends like ya should've when Miss. Rarity asked ya. They need you."

"But Big Mac," Applejack replied with concern and doubt in her words "Ah can't leave you an' Applebloom alone. Ah have a responsibility to y'all too!"

Big Mac gave his sister his usual gentle smile and stirred in his bed. Using all the strength he could gather, the giant red pony arose from his bed and slowly limped to the cowboy hat Applejack had tossed on the floor. Taking it into his mouth, he turned to his surprised sister and crowned her with it.

"Ah'm fine Applejack, I can watch over Applebloom. Now go to yer friends an' wear pa's hat proudly. Think of his sacrifice an' remember that even though you might find yerself trapped in a mess of events outside your control, you have the final say in how you react to it all."

Applejack smiled warmly at her brother and gave him a big hug.

"...one more thing AJ."

"Yeah, big brother?"

"Looks like you'll be finishin' up harvest by yerself again this year!"

Both siblings erupted into joyful laughter.

"Ahh you lazy rascal!" Applejack responded jokingly, "Now how'd ya get hurt again? Did ya piss off the Royal Guard last year too?"

"Eh-yup! But it darn well took fifty of 'em to take me down then, AJ. Ah think Ah'm gettin' too old for brawlin'!"

"Ah, hush! Yer filled with rotten apples Big Mac!"

"Ha! Anypony ever tell ya how honest ya are AJ?"

As the two continued teasing one another, they were unaware that they were being watched from the doorway by Rainbow Dash.

Yes, as soon as she had whipped up a host of storm clouds to fight the wildfires of Everfree, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie had found the weather officer. They had told her that Applejack was being her usual stubborn self and was refusing to help Twilight and Luna. Rainbow was always ready to accept a mission, especially if it came with the challenge of butting heads with her favorite sparring partner. However, as she reached Fluttershy's hut and found the two siblings dealing with some hardcore issues, Rainbow Dash's zeal deflated rapidly. This was especially true when she caught a good glimpse of Big Mac when he got up from his bed. Far more than that wordy dragon, his mangled and broken body at last drove home the seriousness of Twilight and Luna's predicament. As the two laughed and cried, Rainbow Dash was deeply moved herself, and suddenly even the too cool for school pegasus was having a hard time keeping a check on her own tears. When at last it seemed appropriate, Rainbow Dash entered the room.

"Uh, hey Applejack, Big Mac. How are you guys doin' now?"

"Rainbow!" Applejack shouted in surprise, "How'd ya know I was here?"

"A few birdies told me."

"Did they also tell ya to collect mah sorry selfish hide?"

"Uh, yeah. Pretty much, I mean if it's cool with you. Twilight and Luna could really use your help, I mean, the last I saw them Luna was fighting a dragon."

"A dragon! Well what're ya waitin' for? C'mon, we just sent a bunch of our friends into a dragon's nest without a good bit of muscle to back 'em up! Let's go!"

"Uh, sure AJ, but what about Big Mac?" Rainbow Dash asked, a bit thrown off by the sudden change of emotional pace in the room.

"That big ol'lug? He'll be fine, won't cha' big bro?"

"Eh-yup!"

"You heard the stallion, now lead the way Rainbow!"

Her friend's spirited call to action was not lost on Rainbow Dash. Immediately the rainbow mare was invigorated by her uplifting words. Smirking, Rainbow's excitement was clear.

"You got it, chief! Hey, you wouldn't mind a race, would ya?"

/

Hastily the three mares ran through the darkness of Everfree. The fierce downpour that was pounding them had done much in extinguishing the blaze that had threatened to consume the forest, but it also made the path before them extremely muddy, much to Rarity's chagrin. Nonetheless, they pressed onward undeterred by rain, fire, or the dreaded muck. Rainbow Dash had assured them that Twilight and Luna were not too far deep into the forest and that the dragon the goddess was fighting was a "nerd" dragon that would be no problem to defeat.

"Hey!" Pinkie exclaimed, "I think I see Twilight...and no dragon!"

"Really?" Rarity asked, "Thank Celestia, hopefully we can leave this dirty mud pit quickly then!"

"Hmm, oh wait ! I see Luna's outline now too!" Pinkie chirped "She's with Twilight, and still no dragon!"

As the three approached Twilight and Luna, they could tell not all was well. The princess was leaning against Twilight in a slump, and the dying embers revealed that she was also bleeding.

"My heavens!" gasped Rarity, "How could the princess be in such a horrible state?"

No sooner did she say those words, Luna hit the ground.

Seeing this, Fluttershy sprang forth ahead of her friends to check to see what injuries Luna had received in her battle.

"Fluttershy, thank goodness you're here!" Twilight greeted her friend, "Can you tell what's wrong with her? It can't be from her cuts, right?"

Extremely worried, Fluttershy at first said nothing to Twilight but instead analyzed her patient, checking for any signs for serious injury.

"Was the princess exposed to fire for long periods of time?" Fluttershy asked, still examining Luna closely. Thankfully for her efforts, the embers provided just enough light.

"Yes, she was exposed to *a lot* of fire for a *very* long time." Twilight confirmed.

Fluttershy quickly arose and faced Twilight with a grim look.

"The princess is suffering a combination of heat exhaustion and shock. Her body's homeostasis is confused right now, she needs to get to shelter and be warmed up to a proper temperature."

Rarity and Pinkie Pie now present, Twilight was forced to make a decision she had wanted to avoid.

"Help Luna on to my back Rarity, we're going to have to go to Zecora's."

# Chapter 8

Wrought from white stone and arrayed with all the precious metals and gems under the earth, Canterlot Castle jutted precariously from the mountainside in utter defiance to natural law. For two millennia the enchanted foundations grounded the edifice firmly in place, weathering the unforgiving elements, the onslaught of war, and the steady passage of time. Long the bastion of Princess Celestia, goddess of the sun and sovereign queen of Equestria, it was the indisputable architectural marvel of the world, attracting foreigners from all the corners of the globe to simply bask in the light of its majesty. Canterlot's stunning beauty was only outmatched by its impressive functionality, not only in terms of defensive capability but also in the organization of the city that grew in its shadow. Several lairs spiraled down from the citadel forming the orderly outlay of the capital from which sprawled forth both the ancient and the modern; smithies, open markets, and beer halls stood alongside night clubs, fashion outlets, and hotdog stands. This mixture of old and new blended together to create a dynamic, cosmopolitan culture famous the world over for its art, academics, music, food, and athletics. Like all urban areas, the city had its slums and cramped housing projects, but even they shone like pearls in the light. Yes, Canterlot, the eternal city on the mountain, was the shining diamond in Celestia's imperial crown; an inescapable manifestation of her right to rule. All the nations of the world revolved around its influence, just as the earth around her sun.

Now its streets were alight with flame and filled with the sounds of shouting rioters and the rustle of marching armor.

For hours, the Equestrian Armed Forces had patrolled Canterlot dispatching looters and forcing citizens to accept the curfew put into effect by their commander, General Hawkeyes. Riot control had been messy and casualties were had, but the army was better prepared for the crisis than it had the year before. However, Canterlot was large and the army had been spread thin across Equestria. It was thus a ceaseless and tireless effort to maintain order among the city's population of doomsayers, opportunists, and the majority just caught up in the wave of hysteria.

From the high towers of the castle, Braveheart listened on to the turmoil engulfing the city below him, but he could not bear to look out the barred window of his cell. No, instead he continued to hang his head in dishonor and defeat. He had failed his mission, his pegasi, and himself.

But above all, he had failed her royal highness, Princess Celestia, his sole commander and dearest friend.

Braveheart flinched at the thought. Twice he had Nightmare Moon in his grasp and both times he had allowed his arrogance to get in the way of apprehending her. Their first encounter was forgivable; Braveheart had little idea what exactly to expect from either the goddess or the unexpected traitor, Twilight Sparkle. The second plan was at first orchestrated perfectly, but came apart at the hooves of a monstrously powerful country yokel. At the thought of the red behemoth, Braveheart growled and spat on the cold cobblestone beneath him. With minimal provocation, he had assaulted Braveheart's soldiers and sent them flying across the room, possibly to their death. The anger that Braveheart now felt was not directed towards his nemesis, but at his own decision to risk his pegasis' safety just so the earth pony could have the chance to back off. It was a grave mistake; the bastard didn't know when to quit. Braveheart should have shot the hick at the first sign of aggression and extracted Nightmare Moon before she had time to come to her senses and humiliate him.

He shook his head furiously and growled at her cruelty. Braveheart had been ready for death, even if it meant he could not complete his mission. But he never asked from his pegasi of something he would not sacrifice himself. In that moment when he was pinned and at the Nightmare's mercy, Braveheart was certain that several of the guard had already respected and heeded his call. Now too was his turn to die honorably in the service to both Celestia and the state.

But it was not so. Instead he found himself in a dark, musty strip joint masquerading as a dance club in Canterlot's notorious red light district. His rage boiled at the cruel lot cast his way. The moon demon did not even have enough respect to end his life; she instead decided it better to destroy it.

Just the thought drove him to an unbridled rage that melted any sense of rationality into pure dissonance. In his mind, the only way he could restore

even a shred of his former honor was to purge this cancerous sore from the commonwealth. Rarely did Braveheart question Celestia's wisdom, but as he smashed chairs and barked at the staff, he could not help but wonder why the goddess would permit even this small stain of gross hedonism to taint her holy seat on earth.

When the armed forces arrived, they were at first at loss as to what to do with the famed captain. In the end, they agreed he was creating an unjustifiable disturbance and had him restrained and sent to the castle to await an audience with General Hawkeyes.

And so he sat for seven hours reflecting on his weaknesses. How could this happen to him? He was Celestia's greatest soldier, a modern legend among those in the military. Now he was stripped of his armor, and, perhaps soon, his rank. At the thought, Braveheart's mind quickly turned back to his pegasi. How would they fair without him? Who was in command? Lightning Strike would normally be the best choice; the pegasus had a natural ability to articulate a plan well and carry it through, but Braveheart knew that the lieutenant was compromised by his relationship with Twilight Sparkle. When he had woken Lightning from his cursed slumber and told him of the unicorn's role in the goddess' escape, his composure cracked a bit. Of course, the guard was trained to be subtle with their emotional expression, but Captain Braveheart was no idiot. Twenty years of command had taught him how to pick up on his pegasis' feelings, particularly shock, disbelief, fear and pain. Lightning exhibited all four in his brief lapse. He was clearly unfit to command.

Braveheart could only hope that Nightshade had stepped in to take the job, but even if that were the case, he had his doubts. The former Wonderbolt performer was indeed an excellent soldier, but not an extraordinary leader. That only left one exceptional candidate. It was an unlikely prospect, but Sgt. Storm Cloud was perhaps the best pegasus for the job. She was only a three year veteran of the force, but she had skyrocketed through the ranks through incredible initiative and results, much like himself. The grey mare was also the captain's private confidant, she understood him better than any soldier on the guard. He counted on her to call him out at times, even if he found some of her criticisms unsavory. He knew she had the mind, the body, and the guts to pursue Nightmare Moon to the far edges of the globe. Unfortunately, she wasn't yet a lieutenant, meaning that their sensitive mission was in great danger of falling apart.

As he pondered over the options available to his pegasi, he heard the creak of his cell opening.

"...Captain, sir, as you may know you've been court marshaled."

"Heh," Braveheart dismissively huffed, "doesn't old Hawkeyes have anything better to do right now than to hound me?"

"No sir, he's quite occupied right now." The pegasus said firmly, looking Braveheart in the eyes, "He sends only his severe disappointment and hopes that you receive any punishment you deserve."

Captain Braveheart growled at the soldier's words. Hawkeyes was the supreme commander of the Equestrian Armed Forces, which was a separate institution from the Royal Guard and served as the bulk of the military. Usually the elite corps answered only to Celestia, but in her absence they were incorporated into the EAF and subject to its command structure. General Hawkeyes had always been skeptical of the amount of autonomy Braveheart was permitted and had tried to reign in the captain when the Royal Guard was under his control. Conversely, Braveheart was proud of the trust Celestia put in him and resented being placed beneath Hawkeyes when they were typically equals. Despite this minor conflict, the two commanders shared a healthy rivalry based on mutual respect and good personal relations. Due in part to this and a conviction that his pegasi would vindicate him, Braveheart didn't expect the general to dismiss him. Though the old pegasus was a strict follower of code and regulation, Braveheart knew that the general had a pragmatic streak when faced with a crisis; to purge Celestia's best soldier would hardly help his efforts to restore order. But since he wasn't overseeing the trial, Braveheart didn't know what just to expect.

"Well then private, who in their right mind has the time to try me right now? The city is burning for Celestia's sake!"

"I'm sorry captain, but I don't know. I'm just following orders. If you could just follow me..."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard ya kid. What's your name anyway; you seem like a good enough recruit. Firm, unintimidated, you're made of good stuff. Most of these prissy AFs are damn near shakin' in their boots when they just look at me."



"Uh, it's Blizzard Freeze, sir." The private responded, making sure not to show how thrilled he was to receive a compliment from the Captain of the Royal Guard.

"Tell you what, kid. If I make it out of this with my head, I'd like to see you fly with my pegasi. I have a spot I've been meanin' to fill for awhile, and you might just be it."

"Thank you, sir, that would be an honor!"

"Heh, don't thank me. I know a good soldier when I see one." Braveheart chuckled, taking comfort from the great respect the young soldier had for him despite his tarnished name. Interacting with his comrades-in-arms, no matter their rank, generally put the volatile captain in a good mood even in the darkest times.

"Now I'd love to chat some more, but I've got my day in court. Mind leading on?"

The young, light blue pegasus escorted the captain down the winding stairs of the tower into one of the castle's many hallways. In normal times, it was a quiet passage way from the foyer to the library, but now it was overrun with the shuffling of soldiers, bureaucrats and ministers.

As the two walked calmly irrespective of the sea of haste surrounding them, Blizzard still couldn't believe his luck: Braveheart, the very sword of the sun goddess and the hero of a hundred battles thought he had what it took to be elite! It was his greatest dream to join the Royal Guard, so it was extremely disappointing when he was appointed to the armed forces after military school. Now was his chance!

"Just lock down those emotions, follow through with my orders, and remain constantly alert." Blizzard thought, "He'll pick up on it no doubt..."

"Hey, hey, Freeze! Hold your butt right there!" an enthusiastic voice shouted from behind him, "That is you under all that armor? Yeah that's definitely you."

Blizzard shook his head in defeat. He was so close to delivering the captain and securing that try-out, but she had to come and ruin it all...

His marefriend, Ruby Blaze, that it. Why of all times did she decide to pop up at Canterlot Castle?

The energetic red mare jumped in front of him and looked him in the eyes with both excitement and nervous anxiety. She only got that look in two situations: a moment of passionate intimacy or when she wanted to talk about politics.

Yes, the love of his life was a hardcore, card carrying member of the Labor Party of Equestria. She worked tirelessly as an aid to some MP, (a thankless and shrewd earth pony) over at his office not too far from parliament. Her high spirited democratic idealism complimented his military brand down-to-earth realism, and the two had fun poking fun of their respective institutions. But today was not a day for such light-hearted exchanges, and the private could see she was dead serious. But still, he had a job to do...

"Ruby, really, I gotta take Cap..."

"Oh no, Blizzard. You have to listen to me, this is really, really bad." Ruby interrupted, her voice quivering, "The coalition has fallen apart! The government is in shambles!"

Seeing her distressed troubled Blizzard, but he had his own duties to attend to.

"Whoa, slow down there dear. Just give me a few minutes, I need to take Captain Braveheart here to his court marshal..."

At the mention of the guard's name, Ruby turned to the brown pegasus.

"*The* Captain Braveheart is facing charges?" Ruby said, quite surprised "At least some good is coming out of this nightmare. His record of abuses has been ignored for too long."

"Ruby, shut up..." Blizzard whispered through gritted teeth, embarrassed beyond belief at his marefriend's boldness.

"No private, let her talk." The surprisingly quiet captain at last spoke up in a gruff voice, "I wanna hear how those stooges in the government fucked themselves over."

Ruby grimaced at the captain's harsh words. She had a natural revulsion to Braveheart, but she was never the one to turn down a request to discuss politics.

"Well, even a brute like you can understand, I guess." She sneered "If you must know, the coalition itself was a miracle, the Pony's Popular Front, the LPE, the Greens, and the Celestian Democrats were all in it. But when this crisis broke out, the government tore itself apart. The Defense minister, a member of the CD, drafted a plan filled with a heavy handed militarism you would respect, *captain*, that we on the left found unacceptable. Without a swift response, parliament was in an uproar and passed a near unanimous vote of no confidence."

"Ha! So much for that little rabble of mouthy do-nothings!" Braveheart jeered, "I know more than you think, lass. Princess Celestia was the only thing keeping that dead horse running, you're a fool to think miracles happen on their own."

"Huh, I guess you really can't get it." Ruby replied, shaking her head whilst smiling, "What, didn't they teach government at the military academy? Celestia may be a goddess, but she hasn't had an ounce of real political power for two centuries. She's just the head of state and does little but goodwill missions and throw banquets."

Braveheart couldn't contain his laughter.

"Haha! Kid, you've gotta be pulling my feathers! You honestly think a textbook can teach you how shit works around here? Let me tell you something about politics: ponies don't know squat about them until they sit down at Celestia's bargaining table. Trust me, I've seen more political action standing guard than you ever will with your campaigns and slogan shouting."

Ruby glared at the captain, not quite sure to make of his words. He had to be mistaken, Celestia would never intrude into politics...then again there was no written accord saying she wouldn't. The red unicorn had paid little attention to the court life of Canterlot Castle, thinking that it was just a vestige of the past clinging on to the back of the present to feed off the future. Perhaps it played a greater role in government than she thought.

"No," she thought, "the captain's militaristic bent towards authoritarianism and hierarchy makes him think Celestia is at the top of the ladder. He's hopelessly ignorant, he could never dream of understanding democracy; the complexity would blow a fuse in his little mind."

Ruby smiled as she came to her answer. All those years at university weren't for nothing.

"Think what you will, *captain*, if I can call you that for much longer." Ruby said, turning away from the two pegasi, "Perhaps when Celestia returns to her throne she can have the power to keep you from your destructive moral crusade through the red lights district. Take him away, Blizzard, let him face justice."

Braveheart winced in shame and dishonor at the unicorn's departing remark, not due to its content (he was far from sorry for wrecking the place) but how it served as a reminder of Nightmare Moon's victory over him. He wanted to shout Ruby down, but he was in no place of authority to do so. Without his armor he felt naked, weak, and awkward like a dragon without its teeth or treasure. Even his cutie mark, one he had diligently hid was now exposed. The anatomically correct heart was of little surprise, what troubled Braveheart was the significance of the two arrows that pierced it. Did it speak of his valor or did it predict the manner of his doom? Was a sudden dishonorable death from afar his fate?

Seeing Braveheart clearly perturbed, Blizzard Freeze went into damage control.

"Captain, I'm sorry my personal life leaked in there. She's usually really good at respecting my duties to the state, honest, today has just thrown everything out of place, you know?"

"...yeah, kid, I know," Braveheart responded solemnly, "but don't sweat it. Mares are an aggressive bunch when you light a fire underneath 'em, and their apt at throwing you into it afterwards. Your Ruby is a fighter, that's for certain. Good luck keeping up with her kid, you'll need it. Now c'mon, whoever has the time to judge me must be growing bored to death, the slacker."

As the two approached the chamber, Braveheart's familiarity prompted him to burst through the doors without the escort of the private. The room he

entered was fairly small and decorated only by several of the nation's banners. Before him sat several ponies behind a long oak bench, all of whom he had never met, save one. As soon as he caught sight of the unicorn chairing the commission, Braveheart snarled in disgust and contempt. The welcome he received did little to change his expression.

"Well, well, what do we have here? A lost commoner? I dare say, I was certain I was judging the trial of the Captain of the Royal Guard, not listening in on some lowly beggar's petition for the scraps from my table."

Sitting in a regal chair at the head of the commission's table was Prince Blueblood. The noble was dressed in a naval uniform that was adorned with several hundred medals and badges, most of which Braveheart had never even seen before on any officer. If the captain wasn't so mad, he'd be laughing at how awkwardly decorated the prince looked, but he had much more pressing things on the mind.

"The hell let you out of your cage, *your highness*? I threw your sorry stupid ass in the slammer myself!"

"Hmph! You need not remind me, your assault left my body quite bruised." Blueblood replied, "But your efforts to incarcerate royalty were for naught, especially since I, Prince Blueblood, so valiantly smote the horrid Nightmare Moon in defense of dear Aunt Celestia! You see, I'm far more the hero than you are, *pervert*."

Braveheart lunged forward towards the prince, but Blizzard Freeze held him back.

"You fucking son of a bitch, you probably smacked the evil back into her! But hell, after sitting next to you for ten minutes, I'd probably want to destroy the world too!"

"Hm, normally your lazy, peasant tongue would get the better of me." Blueblood responded snidely, "After all, so few have the gall to treat me as you do, Braveheart, even Celestia's petty bourgeois pupil knows to keep her distance. However, seeing you squirm helplessly before me is such a treat that I don't mind your coarse words the slightest. Indeed, it will make it that much more satisfying when I strip you of your rank and banish you from Canterlot! How is that for an assignment, captain?"

Braveheart's face burned as he shouted his response.

"You have no authority," the captain sneered, "your titles mean nothing to the armed forces, you're only a gullible tool!"

"Oh, but captain, I'm the admiral of my own fleet. Why, I'm more a part of the EAF than you are."

"The bloody hell you are!" Braveheart shot back, "Your rank is only another bloated, useless honor you throw around whenever you want something, you snobby little brat!"

At his remark, Blueblood laughed.

"Of course, captain. Pulling strings is hardly a problem for those of royal blood, especially now with Aunt Celestia missing. You know the peasant expression, Braveheart, 'when life gives you...something or another...you, uh, take advantage of it'. Well it goes along like that, I can't be bothered with the details of their little proverbs."

"Don't think for a second you have the power to get rid of me!" Braveheart growled, "As soon as Celestia returns to her throne, I'll be back! I'm her best soldier, she'd never put up with your trumped up charges!"

Once again, Prince Blueblood's haughty laughter filled the chamber.

"Ha! Surely you jest! You think Celestia will take you back under her wing after you failed your mission to rescue her from Nightmare Moon and soiled your name with irreparable dishonor? No, you military pegasi are easily replaced. You're a fool to think your anything special."

The force of Blueblood's words struck Braveheart at his core. The captain had always been unquestionably loyal to Celestia, would she so easily forsake him?

"No you stinkin' bastard, that's not true..." Braveheart growled, but gone was his usual bite, "I gave my life to her service and in return she has been my greatest friend and support...she has always been there when I needed it most."

The captain's feeble words only served to make Blueblood laugh louder.

"My captain, still such the dirty little orphan! What, I suppose you think of Celestia as mommy dearest, don't you? How quaint!"

"Shut up!"

"What captain, does the truth pain you? Then consider this: no matter how hard you toil, no matter how many battles you've won, and no matter how much power is at your disposal, you will always be that same worthless, thieving street scum from your past!"

After giving pause, the prince continued to gloat over the troubled captain.

"When I heard that you had been arrested outside of a whorehouse, I wasn't surprised at all. The urchin was simply returning to his filthy roots, nothing more."

"No," the captain weakly growled, "I would burn that whole sinful district to the ground if I could."

"Ha, it's likely you'd have Celestia's blessing, she's been angling to ban such decadent clubs again, politics and all that messy what not. But don't think yourself too noble, Braveheart, clearing up an item on auntie's agenda is hardly enough to redeem you. Now before I send you trotting off to whatever unhappy sad lot you've been dealt, tell me something captain."

"..."

"Did you enjoy your little peepshow at all? I hope it was worth deserting your post so disgracefully."

"That's bloody untrue, I would never desert and you know it!" Braveheart shouted, Blueblood's words stoking the fading embers of his pride and rage, "After Nightmare Moon defeated me, the witch used her magic to send me to that seedy sin pit. A report must've been filed, my pegasi would never slack off!"

With a knowing gleam in his eye, the noble responded coldly.

"I have seen no such document. Your story sounds both implausible and fantastical."

Blueblood's lying words sent Braveheart over the deep end, unleashing a powerful frenzy of curses from the captain's mouth.

"You inbred, degenerate punk! You pompous little piece of shit! You're nothing more than a hedonistic parasite on Celestia's back! Your whole life is a fucking sad excuse with no meaning other than being a major pain in everypony's ass! I hope that burn on your face never heals, so every mare will know how fucking hideous and demented you really are!"

Blueblood simply listened and smiled.

"Are you done with your little tantrum, Braveheart?"

With beads of sweat pouring down the side of his face and breathing heavily, the captain couldn't think of anything more to say. There was nothing he could do to hurt Blueblood or save himself.

"Ha! The legendary Braveheart has finally run out of words, truly an event worthy of commemoration. It's about time the knave learned to shut his mouth and listen to his better."

Arising from his chair, Blueblood walked over to the captain and began circling him.

"Oh I've waited for this day," the prince spoke with venom on his tongue, "There's perhaps one thing I despise more than being talked down to by some illegitimate son of a whore. It's those ponies who champion that bastard as a hero, the "self-made" pony. Bah! It's nothing more than luck that let society's refuse become Captain of Celestia's Royal Guard."

Blueblood stopped and stared into Braveheart's eyes. The two glared at one another, neither backing down one bit.

"For years you've lorded over Canterlot Castle, belittling me at every passing chance, thinking that your hardships had given you the right to say as you pleased. But I put up with it, knowing full well your power was a false one. As soon as you were stripped of your rank, you'd be nothing more than the slimy rat you've always been. I, on the other hoof, will always be regal, majestic and influential. Celestia's holy blood flows through my veins, her strength and authority are at my disposal no matter what evil winds may blow my way! No amount of work or magic can ever change



that. Do you understand the difference between us now, Braveheart? I'm the wielder of an infinite, undying power. You are nothing but an insecure worm doomed to a wretched existence!"

Defeated at last, Braveheart sighed heavily and broke eye contact with the prince. He had lost this battle of wills, but before he could wallow in shame, a familiar voice graced his ears.

"I'd have to disagree with you there, your highness. He's more along the lines of being the greatest captain to ever lead the Royal Guard destined to live forever in song and legend!"

Turning around, the captain was overjoyed to see Sergeant Storm Cloud standing in the chamber doorway.

"Hmph, at best he'll get a footnote in my biography." quipped Blueblood, "But you're too late to do anything. With the authority invested in me by Princess Celestia, I, Prince Blueblood, dishonorably strip Braveheart of his rank!"

"That power is not yours."

Braveheart felt hope grip him. Good old Hawkeyes had showed up after all.

Joining Storm Cloud at her side, the large white pegasus trotted into the room. Covered in bronze armor and arrayed with several badges, his eyes burned with a stern anger. At his presence, all the soldiers in the room stood to attention and suddenly all of Blueblood's pride and pretention turned to an obvious nervousness.

"All parties not immediately involved in this case must now leave the room." The general shouted, "That is an order!"

As the soldiers filed out, Braveheart grabbed Blizzard, indicating him to stay. Before them, Hawkeyes gave Blueblood a vicious look.

"Out of good will I released you, and this is how you repay me Blueblood? You take advantage of our family name to intercept reports and stage illegitimate tribunals to discharge an honorable pegasus just because you hold a personal grudge? And at a time like this on top of it!"

"Uncle Hawkeyes, I, uh..."

"Don't you speak when I'm talking, boy!" snapped the annoyed pegasus, "You have shamed us, Blueblood. Being an obnoxious, loudmouthed celebrity wasn't enough to dishonor the noble house of Neighrange, you had to abuse your position and power during Princess Celestia's absence! Did she not privy you to the dark realities of the past when such power grabbing and abuse swelled the heads of the nobility? Their callous greed allowed them to be united under Nightmare Moon, the arch-deceiver herself!"

"But...uncle, this, this was just a little spat..."

"A little spat? So what if you did banish Braveheart because of your 'spat', who would you replace him with? Who would you send to save Celestia and cast down the Nightmare?"

Hearing no answer from the prince, the general continued.

"You self-absorbed brat, I would call you wicked if you were any smarter. I admit, though, you nearly fooled me. But thanks to the sergeant here, I know full well of what occurred in Ponyville. Captain Braveheart nearly took the Nightmare into custody *twicewithin* two hours, the second incident proving potentially fatal. It is quite clear to me he is our greatest asset in retrieving the Nightmare and finding Princess Celestia, thus I will redeploy him immediately and grant him whatever power he needs to accomplish his mission."

"But uncle, you can't trust that rouge, he's nothing but a peas—"

"I swear to Celestia, if you say 'peasant' so help me, I will smack you so hard δενάλογο will feel it! Now make yourself useful and go home to make your mother a decent meal. Even a little foal can manage that."

Dispirited and thoroughly chastised, Prince Blueblood lowered his head and left the chamber, mumbling only the words "it's not fair" under his breath.

Turning to Braveheart, Hawkeyes addressed the captain calmly.

"I'm sorry for have doubted you Braveheart, but you must understand. You can be unpredictable at times, and I didn't know if this horrid ordeal had made you crack or not."

"What general," Braveheart smiled playfully, "do you think I have issues to sort out?"

"Braveheart, I know no pony more needing of counseling than you." The general chuckled, "But hell, I don't want those quacks playing mind games with Celestia's best, they'd only ruin you."

His pride and honor restored, Braveheart laughed and gave the general a brief hug and a smack across his bronze armor before stepping back and saluting.

"Braveheart, you know well your orders. I must attend to other matters; the recent break down of the government has forced me to declare absolute martial law. I will rule in Celestia's name until you succeed with your objectives, do not fail us. I'm no politician; I can only try to keep the peace."

As the noble general prepared to exit the chamber, he stopped to give his departing words.

"Oh, and Braveheart, you have an excellent soldier in Sgt. Storm there. A bit strange to have a mare in the guard, but I'm sure both of us could use more soldiers like her. She flew through the worst gale in centuries for a good hour to deliver this to me and save your good name."

Pulling out a ragged scroll and passing it to Braveheart, the general left the room, leaving only the two guards and the young soldier.

Opening it up, Braveheart read the petition his pegasi had drafted to have him return to them. The words brought a warm smile to his face. He nearly even shed a tear when he saw the names of his pegasi, even those he thought he had sent to death's door, scrawled at the bottom. Lt. Lightning's large scribbling signature was especially visible, itself covering over several other names. It was clear he was eager to resign from his post as captain.

Turning to the sergeant, the captain spoke softly and sincerely, a rash departure from his typical barking voice.

"Looks like you've saved my ass again Storm, thanks. I thought for a second there I was sunk."

"Captain, I would never abandon you." Storm responded firmly, and yet her words were lined with tenderness, "You're our strength and inspiration, sir; I will gladly follow you to whatever end. All of us would, especially Lightning. He sends this back for you."

Quickly running back into the hall, the blue-eyed mare returned with the captain's red plumed helm and placed it upon his head. Greatly moved, the captain held back his tears. Masking his true sentiments, the captain smirked and joked.

"Storm, did I tell you that I've been workin' really hard to get ya that promotion you've been wantin'? I just need a few more words with Celestia and it's a done deal."

"I think you should be working a bit harder then, sir, right now that's a tall order." The silver-maned sergeant grinned in response, "But you know, you can just give me your job when this is all over and maybe then we can call it equal. What do you say?"

Braveheart laughed heartily at her words.

"Haha! Bring me Nightmare Moon and it's all yours! But back to the matter at hoof. I want a full status report on our current situation. How is Lt. Nightshade? I did not see his name on the letter.'

At the captain's order, Storm Cloud frowned, but her composure remained intact.

"Sir, Lt. Nightshade has been missing-in-action for hours now. The last we saw of him, he had been flying reconnaissance in the north-west perimeter of Ponyville. The site was also the origin point of the Sonic Rainboom you may have felt. We fear Nightshade may have been involved...but that's not all, sir."

Storm Cloud's words sent a new wave of grief through Braveheart that quashed much of his newfound exuberance. Being who he is, the captain articulated the dread he felt through the best possible channel: anger.

"What more?"

"Sir, we believe the Sonic Rainboom to have diverted our attention from the escape of the prisoners... Twilight's friends. We tried to reach you sooner, but Twilight's dragon refused to send our petition. Not only that, Nightmare Moon reportedly sent the guard tasked with keeping an eye on the prisoners fleeing into the town, causing a destructive panic to break out."

"Who the hell left Lighthoof in charge of them!" fumed the captain, knowing full well the weak link in the chain.

A look from Storm Cloud, however, reminded the captain to watch his temper. Recovering control of his senses, he continued, "Well, no use pointing fingers. It's time I got shit running smoothly again and finally put the squeeze on this demon. C'mon, sergeant, we've got work to do."

Turning to Blizzard, Braveheart's voice rose once again with professional vigor.

"Private! I have several wounded pegasi and a need for extra horsepower. Think of this as a chance to show me what you're made of, *do not* disappoint me soldier!"

Elated, the private saluted and sounded that timeless affirmation of obedience.

"Yes sir!"

"Good," Braveheart barked, "Now fetch my sword and armor. The Nightmare will end tonight, I swear it!"

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Abysmal darkness.

It was rare for Luna to face the utter blackness of the void, the light of her moon and stars assured that Equestria never suffered such suffocating isolation. One would need to travel far into the depths of the earth to experience the hopeless helplessness that Luna now felt, for even the moon offered the solace of sight.

Suddenly, whirls of bright color erupted from the staunch darkness. The spectrum fused to form a solid white light that danced around Luna at a dizzying speed, making the goddess feel fatigued and confused. She had no care, yet she still felt fear. The goddess could contemplate nothing, her mind was enslaved to the swirling lights before her. She found it difficult to focus as the multitude of swirling light joined as one and rapidly approached, enveloping her in a pale curtain. Within that moment, the whole of her life was revealed to her, several millennia flashed before her in mere seconds. In doing so, memories awoke that had been buried beneath both burning hatred and blind love for both Celestia and herself. But as she felt her fear melt into serenity, the light dissipated and Luna felt herself being thrust backwards through the void.

A heavy breath of fresh air brought Luna back from the brink, but her senses remained frayed. Still unable to think clearly, her vision was blurred and disoriented. Wildly her eyes dashed to and fro across the room she now found herself in only to be greeted by terrifying, grinning faces. Luna gasped in fear and confusion, unsure whether her surreal spectacle had truly come to an end or not. Quickly closing her eyes in an effort to collect herself, she slowly reopened them to survey her surroundings with a sound state of mind. It was immediately clear that she was in a small room alit with many candles. The smell of burning incense met her nose and eased her spirits as she looked on at the demons that had haunted her reawakening. She smiled as she realized her fears were simply wooden masks that she discerned to be of Serengeti origin. Luna had once been quite involved in fostering good relations with the many tribes of the region and even struck peace between two warring nations, the Zebra and Gazelle. The vast land lay to the southwest of her former holdings just west of Everfree Forest. It was perhaps one of the few duties she enjoyed as princess, for the vibrant cultures of the many tribes offered beautiful music, exotic dancing, amazing art, and wonderful linguistic diversity that inspired Luna in a way the hollow "cosmopolitan" city of Canterlot could never hope to replicate. The princess of the night found the melting pot of her sister's capital to be very shallow and almost trivial for Celestia was very selective of the elements she actively incorporated into her society. Any hybrid of culture invariably was dominated by characteristics ultimately glorifying Celestia's civilization while downplaying its distinct origins. But, as the sun goddess often told Luna, it was essential to oversee and correct the flow of ideas and technologies emanating from beyond their borders for the sake of their subjects' well being and the stability of her utopia.

Luna had once been cynical concerning her sister's defense of censorship, but her fight with Ajax had shaken many of her most dearly held convictions. The moon goddess still found it difficult to accept that her sister had been so weak and impotent during the war, Celestia was a mighty deity after all. But if for some unlikely reason she truly was powerless, Celestia was perhaps justified in her meticulous drive to influence others and shape minds in her image.

Luna shook her head, the idea was just fundamentally wrong to her. So what if a song with questionable or heretical content is sung? Music does not destroy empires, kings and politicians do. Luna knew this, she had seen several griffon kingdoms collapse on themselves over issues like land, resources, and unchecked tyranny.

Still, Ajax's account of the horrific conflict waged in Luna's name prompted the goddess to realize that war and society were not nearly as straight forward as she had once believed. Furthermore, it made her question her own role in the war's inception. Recalling the past, Luna drifted away from the present once again.

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In the vast hallway of Everfree Castle, Luna sat at the head of her dining table listening weakly to the barrage of words thrown her direction by a visiting minister from the court at Canterlot. Evidently, Celestia was not pleased with the way Luna was running things. If she had approved, she would have appeared at Luna's court herself.

"Your majesty," the fuchsia unicorn spoke in a condescending tone, "her highness Princess Celestia requests you reevaluate and revise your lenient policies on border control and customs. Trade flows from your lands south of Everfree on the Horseshoe Path, yet you have failed to consistently collect tariffs on the goods that are now flooding our market."

"Yes, tell Celestia to excuse my...inconsistency ..." droned the moon goddess, "But please inform my sister that her taxes may be too high and unfair to poorer merchants."

"Pardon me Princess Luna, but that's just the problem." The noblemare replied coldly, "We don't want poor merchants marching into Equestria. Their wares are unneeded as we produce a sufficient supply of

metallurgical products, food, and raw materials on our own. Our ponies do not need the extra competition to drag down prices to an ungodly level, it would be the death of our economy."

Luna rolled her eyes.

"What we do need involves the rich trades," the minister continued, "spices, precious metals, and the sort. Those are valuable commodities the ponies want. Do you understand, majesty?"

"Yes, yes...it's all quite clear to me now." Luna said, pressing her hoof to her cheek while playing with the crumbs on her plate .

"Good. Another thing..."

Before Luna could be chewed out and talked down again by her sister's envoy, a much welcomed voice intervened on her behalf.

"Midday Breeze, the princess wishes to retire and tend to the night. If you have any more pressing issues to discuss, you may take them up with me."

Leaving her chair, Luna smiled at her advisor, Morning Star. The unicorn's coat was white, but her mane was a wild, fiery mixture of red, orange and yellow. She was as beautiful as the rising dawn and as magnificent as the fading dusk; few ponies could match her intelligence, wit or charisma. Naturally, her talent had attracted the attention and love of Celestia, prompting the sun goddess took the prodigy as her student. However, Morning Star was arrogant and often disregarded Celestia's orders and teachings, opting to do whatever it was in the manner she thought best. After years of struggling with her student, Celestia sent Morning Star to the court at Everfree to help Luna rule and administer her lands effectively. Ever since, Celestia had kept a watchful eye on Everfree to make sure Morning Star did her job and nothing else. Despite this, Luna could not help but admire the unicorn's defiance and self-reliance in the face of Celestia's awesome power and made sure her sister's spies kept their distance from the unicorn.

Luna felt beyond relieved as she soared from the parapets of Everfree Castle into the freedom of the open purple sky before her. As the sun sank into the horizon, Luna released a cascade of stars across the heavens before ushering the moon to take its place among them. For hours the



princess of the night flew among her creation, feeling a rush of sublime ecstasy run through her. As she descended back on her balcony, however, the thrill of freedom diminished and she felt a sudden sense of loneliness grip her. Looking eastwards towards Canterlot, Luna wished that her sister could share in her joy and happiness instead of being bogged down with slavish amounts of self-imposed toil.

Sighing, Luna recalled the days before the demon Discord had infected and corrupted the land of Equestria with his tyrannical rule. The sisters had played among the heavens and watched over their beloved ponies from afar, assuring their over-all well-being and easing the difficulty of their primitive, but innocent lives through little interventions, such as Luna's role as the sandmare. After Celestia and Luna had defeated Discord, the sun goddess believed it was necessary to take a more direct role in the affairs of mortals. The evils unleashed by the king of tricksters had left the ponies deeply divided and embittered, thus Luna agreed with Celestia that they needed to guide the ponies back to the light of harmony. Together, they united and organized Equestria, both assuming not the title of "Queen", nor "Empress", but rather "Princess", a calculated decision by Celestia to suggest the impermanent, benevolent, and provisional nature of their rule. At least that's what Luna had thought. One thousand years later, not only were they still in power, Celestia was entrenching herself deeper into the intricate systems of her invention.

Lost in thought, Luna did not hear the hoofsteps approaching her.

"Your majesty."

Wrenched from her reflection, Luna quickly turned to face her advisor.

"Oh, Morning Star. What brings you here, I thought you were giving Midday an audience."

"That was a few hours ago, your highness, and she had little of importance to say. What I do find important is how you are feeling. Not a day passes by that I don't see you bored, miserable, or suffering. Rare is it now to hear your song ring throughout the castle. Tell me what troubles your heart so, princess, that you would cease such joyful verse?"

Luna hesitated for awhile. Normally she would confide in her sister and spare her subjects from her pains, but Celestia did not listen without trying

to convince Luna later about the superiority and necessity of her plans and systems.

Morning Star, on the other hoof, was almost always supportive of her efforts to liberalize her lands and often hammered out the details of implementation herself. She had both Celestia's analytical mind and Luna's love for freedom, a combination that would perhaps make the mare both sympathetic of her situation and able to come up with a solution.

At last, Luna responded.

"Very well, but you mustn't tell a soul, especially Celestia, do you swear it?"

"Unless you say otherwise, I would never dream it, princess. Of course I do."

Pausing and looking away up to the heavens, Luna choked back the pain she felt.

"... I...I can't do this anymore. It's all just...just too much for me to handle."

"What is, my lady?"

"Oh Morning Star, everything!" Luna cried, breaking out into tears, "Everything my sister tells me to do, to say, to act! But I just can't! It's too hard, I'm not like her! I can't do what she asks of me. I don't want to fail her, I try and I try but I never get any better! I hate it!"

Parting Luna's mane away from her eyes, Morning Star looked into her eyes sympathetically.

" Princess, may I speak candidly."

"You may." Luna sniffed.

"Don't blame yourself, please. I know how controlling Celestia is; just being in her presence is suffocating. In some ways, her methods are akin to Discord's; the way she fractures her opposition with cheap ideology or petty interests is taken straight from his book. "

Luna gave Morning Star a troubled look.

"You should tread more carefully on your words. I'm not sure I like what you're saying."

"You may not like what you hear, but you agree nonetheless, am I not correct?" the unicorn replied, prompting Luna to turn her head away in shame.

She did.

"Luna," Morning Star said in a softer voice, "constantly your sister forces you to do her bidding. How is that fair? You are equals, the co-rulers of Equestria, yet only her policies are fitting, only her philosophy acceptable. Rarely does she let you have a major say, and when she does it is either a token matter or an act of appeasement."

Luna closed her eyes, wishing what Morning Star was saying wasn't true.

But it was.

"My lady," her advisor continued, "if Celestia's authority were yours, what would you make of it, what would you change?"

It did not take Luna long to answer with a spirited shout.

"I would free Celestia from her prison on this earth, I would return to the days before Discord when we were extolled as free spirits, not princesses! Not slaves!"

Breathing heavily, Luna paused and shook her head.

"But that is a dream..."

"Do not say that princess!" Morning Star excitedly interrupted, "It does not have to be so, can't you see? Through the structures of her own design, Celestia taught us how to govern, how to take care of ourselves. No longer do we need the sun goddess to reign over us, her task is complete."

Luna closed her eyes.

"What you say is treasonous..."

"No your majesty, it is the *truth*. The nobles of Equestria have long been able to keep their lands safe and productive without the direction or interference of Celestia. They can rule this land if we just allow them."

"No!" Luna shouted, "the nobility is unfit for anything save stealing the hay from another pony's mouth! I'd rather remain princess than let those bastards lord over them unchecked!"

Morning Star frowned at the sudden shift of Luna's tone but kept her cool.

"I thought you were a friend of freedom, a champion of liberty, am I mistaken?"

"Freedom?" Luna said taken aback, "do you think there would be any freedom under the rule of the nobility? No, they would only trample upon the weak with their privilege, denying them any of the "freedom" you speak of!"

Morning Star remained undaunted and determined.

"Are you so blind not to understand what I'm doing?" she asked sincerely, "Freedom will not come on the wings of some holy mandate, it must grow and develop on its own. Look to the griffons, they did not receive any divine guidance yet they have advanced steadily towards a better future. Once fratricidal beasts incapable of tribalism let alone a kingdom, there now exists three griffon empires. One of them is even a republic, a system based on democratic process. It is imperfect and small, yes, but that is where the future lies, princess! Give it more time and it will evolve into something greater, something that will yield a society that embraces true freedom!"

Luna cast her eyes to the stone floor, but Morning Star only spoke louder.

"It is not fair, Luna! Why should Celestia deny us the ability to chart our own destiny, why does she not permit us free will? Celestia must see that mortals can be free, that freedom does not mean the confusion and disorder we suffered under Discord! She must let us join the other nations on this earth and know that we will ultimately forge a better future for ourselves, one of equality, freedom and joy! If Celestia truly loved us, she would not have us be her playthings, her slaves!"

Luna winced at the familiar word. Truly, freedom did not exist for either the goddesses or their subjects.

"Why?" Luna questioned, "Do you know of the dangers of what you ask?"

"I am well aware, Luna." The unicorn responded, "But I will not be cowed by the short-term consequences. Though I shall never see it, my hope is for the future, not myself. I must begin this revolution myself, only I have the vision and ability to ignite it."

"Morning Star, I agree with you, I do." Luna said with somewhat of a subdued excitement, "but I feel that Celestia will never leave her throne."

The fiery maned unicorn's face hardened.

"She will if you leave her."

Luna froze at her words. Never had she thought of abandoning her throne before Celestia did, her older sister was, after all, the politician, the leader, the decider. Did Luna really have the power to sway Celestia simply by abdicating? In her heart, Luna accepted it and believed it with a passion. Her sister loved her, the sun goddess could never tolerate being separated from Luna forever. Even though she was burdened with many duties, Celestia would make brief appearances now and again throughout the week to have a laugh with Luna or talk of light-hearted matters over tea or wine.

Luna's mind, however, harbored doubt and fear.

*"What if she refuses, what do I do? She is still inextricably bound to Equestria, perhaps to it more than she is to me."*

"I see you're conflicted, your majesty," Morning Star said gently, "but I have a plan. It will be a bloodless coup with a peaceful transfer of power. Then we, both goddess and mortal, will be free! Just give me the order and I shall build support among the nobility and set in to motion a brighter future."

Luna shook with fear and nervousness, but in the end she agreed with her advisor and followed her heart.

"You have my consent and blessing, Morning Star. Do what you must."

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Luna sighed as she played the memory over again in her mind. She was so convinced that what she was doing was right she had taken Morning Star's words at face value. Luna did not delve too deeply into her motives, the unicorn had been convincing with her ideological convictions. But another memory now deeply troubled her. During the coup at Everfree, Morning Star's response to Celestia now rang infinitely clearer in her mind.

*"As always with tyrants, teacher. My moment has come. If you wish to avoid bloodshed, abdicate and leave!"*

Had Celestia been right? Had Luna been misled and used by an ambitious mortal to further a hidden agenda she had no knowledge of? Or was she reading too deeply into her advisor's heated words?

While contemplating the list of possibilities, Luna heard the door to the small room creak open and saw a zebra emerge.

"I am happy to see you are in such good condition, it is not long now before you can continue your mission."

# Chapter 9

Pouring down the boughs of the forest, the freezing rain inundated the fertile forest floor, creating a troublesome mire to form underhoof. The leaves of Everfree shivered as the wind passed through the treetops, permitting only a small ray of the moon's light to penetrate the darkness of the wood. Nonetheless, Twilight Sparkle and her friends ran along the forest path undeterred. Numbed by the rain and the wind, Celestia's student pressed forward with only the fading embers of her determination to sustain her drive. Upon her back rested the goddess of the moon, a heavy burden that made her path ever more difficult and demanding. Once again, Equestria's fate was hers to bear, but this time her teacher was no longer there to guide her. The princess would know where to go, what to do, and ultimately remedy the problem, just as always. Though she drew comfort from her friends, Twilight was truly alone in her responsibility to them. She was expected to lead and have a plan, but the unicorn knew in her heart that it was a case of the blind leading the blind. Their entire dilemma was born out of confusion and haste, what hope had she to make the right judgments? Just getting from one point to another posed a thousand troubling questions and possibilities. The best she could do for her friends was to pretend to have a plan, to pretend that she knew the answer to their problems when in all truth she had no idea if the Elements would actually succeed in accomplishing anything save a lightshow. All Twilight could do was continue to take courage from Celestia's first lesson to her those many years ago.

*Twilight Sparkle, my dear student, the world is indeed vast, wonderful, and full of mystery. But little one, even if you studied every leaf, pebble, and straw, you would eventually turn your gaze to the infinite heavens and realize how little you really know. Never cease in your studies, continue learning as much as you can, but remember that if a solution escapes you, do not fear to follow your heart. In such times, this is all we can do.*

Twilight had followed Celestia's instructions but they yielded only frustration and anxiety. Her distrust of Luna, though lessened, was still ever present. It derived from her knowledge of the past, one that was continuously affirmed by Luna's often irrational, unpredictable, and emotionally charged behavior. Initially, Twilight found Ajax's account of Luna to match up perfectly with

her studies, but his extreme hatred and inability to reason discredited the purity of his tale. Ironically enough, Ajax's response to Luna's claims of innocence revealed how true that case may be.

*"You don't understand, Celestia imprisoned me before the war had even started, I'm not responsible for the evils you accuse me of!"*

*"Huh, a tale I heard a thousand times over from the mouths of the enemy. But you cannot deceive me..."*

*The mouths of the enemy.* Twilight never came across a document revealing much about the motivations of "the enemy" other than power mongering. The possibility that the opposition fought not for the demon Nightmare Moon, but rather a banished deity was substantiated and could explain Luna's total ignorance of the past. Even her claims of insanity following her immediate liberation from the moon, too, seemed plausible; one thousand years of solitude could not be healthy for one's psyche. At the same time, Twilight remained convinced that Celestia had good reason behind her actions. She had to; Twilight could not imagine the princess to be so callous and unjust. In her mind and heart, she was convinced that Luna was still guilty of something terribly wrong.

However, now was not the time to condemn; only to act. The road to Zecora's was longer than Twilight had expected, and her sleep-deprived body was growing weary. Suddenly, a flaming glint of light caught the corner of her eye, and immediately Twilight believed it to be the welcoming fire of the forest hermit's hut. A quick blink dispelled the hope for only the familiar darkness greeted her. Disappointed, exasperated and tired, Twilight's front knee gave way to the stress.

Seeing their friend in trouble, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie stopped and helped Twilight back up on her hooves.

"Dear, let me help you carry her," Rarity said with concern, "It's not fair for you to suffer so needlessly when your friends are here to help."

"No, Rarity, it's fine." Twilight replied with conviction, "I appreciate the offer, but I have to do this myself. You all understand, right?"



Twilight's companions looked at each other nervously. In all honesty, they really didn't, but they could sense that Twilight's strength had not yet completely faded. Nodding slowly, they consented.

"Well then," Twilight said with heavy breath and a grin "Come on, it can't be far now!"

Indeed, only ten minutes more and the company reached their destination. Relieved beyond belief, Twilight banged furiously on the door.

"Zecora! Zecora!," Twilight shouted, "Please help us, it's an emergency, please!"

Discouraged by the zebra's slow response, Twilight banged harder.

"Zecora, we really, really need your help! Let us in, please, it's me, Twi-!"

The door at last unlatched and opened, revealing the forest healer.

"Twilight Sparkle, Celestia's student. Your arrival is most imprudent..."

Upon seeing the injured goddess on Twilight's back, Zecora paused, a look of disbelief washing over her.

"Can it be? Is this a deity I see? Bring her inside with haste , not a moment should you waste!"

Ushering the ponies into her home and shutting the door, Zecora quickly retrieved several towels and blankets to dry and warm her soaking guests.

"Umm, Zecora," Fluttershy piped up, "If you could help me tend to Princess Luna, I fear she's suffering from shock..."

"Why of course Fluttershy, on an herbalist you may always rely."

As the two healers treated Luna for her injuries and condition, Twilight took a moment to close her eyes and relax before contemplating their next move.

For now, she had to hope that Rainbow Dash had succeeded rounding up Applejack and that they were on their way. Still operating on the belief that

Lightning Strike was holding back the guard, Twilight at last felt a great deal safer.

Pinkie Pie and Rarity, too, were happy to be in the warm confines of Zecora's home. Rarity took the opportunity to wipe the filthy mud from her beautiful white coat and dry her purple mane...and then helped the indifferent Pinkie do the same.

"Dear...if you could...just hold still...for a second!" Rarity said, struggling to contain the bouncing pink pony, "You have a bit of mud on your face, let me...let me get that!"

"Sorry Rarity!" Pinkie chimed, "It's just so cool being at Zecora's! I mean, at first, it was all creepy and spooky, but then it was all, well, Wow! Totally neat-o stuff from some place maybe a thousand, billion miles away that nopony's ever seen! I mean, even Nightshade is here to check it out, and he's a bit stuffy..."

Rarity and Twilights' ears perked up at the name.

"Pinkie," Rarity said, her voice lowered, "Braveheart's lieutenant is here?"

"Oh yeah! Didn't you guys see?" Pinkie said in her usual, bubbly manner, "He's right over... here!"

Bouncing across the room, Pinkie pointed to a black pegasus wrapped in a blanket. Not too far from him was the standard golden armor of the Royal Guard.

Frightened by the presence of the guard, Twilight joined Zecora and Fluttershy at Luna's bedside in the other room.

"Zecora," she whispered, "what is a member of Celestia's Royal Guard doing in your house?"

The zebra blinked, a bit perplexed to why Twilight was so upset.

"When I found him, many wounds covered his body and his wings broken." Zecora responded, "So I took him in with little question, no words were spoken. Why you fear the fellow so, I do not know."

Opening with a heavy sigh, Twilight told Zecora the many hardships she had endured, from the sacking of her library to the fierce battle against the mighty dragon Ajax.

"Your words explain the stillness of the stars and why you fear the guard," Zecora said sympathetically once Twilight's tale had come to an end, "such a terrible course of events has surely left you scarred."

"Please, Zecora," Twilight replied, "we need to do something about the lieutenant. Normally, I'd use my magic to send him away, but I'm afraid to use complex magic in Everfree. It's...too natural. Things never seem to work exactly right."

"What do you suggest I do? In my land, throwing out a guest is taboo."

"But, if he wakes up..."

"No Twilight Sparkle, my patient I will not dismiss, even if it bring you bliss. To do so for a medic would be greatly remiss."

Frustrated, Twilight turned and left the room. She did not know how long it would take Luna to recover and Applejack and Rainbow Dash were probably wandering the wood looking for them. At the very least time seemed to be on the unicorn's side. Even though the guard posed a possible threat, he was clearly too weak to put up a fight. Nonetheless, Twilight felt it a good policy to simply keep quiet until they could move on. As she entered the main room and saw Pinkie trying to draw a pair of green rimmed glasses on the black pegasus, Twilight brought her hoof to her face as she realized how hard the feat would be.

"Pinkie!" she hissed, "stop that!"

"Oh, sorry Twilight," Pinkie replied, "It's just, well, I thought everypony could use a good laugh now, especially Nightshade..."

"No Pinkie, do not wake him up!" Twilight instructed, "This is serious, we can't afford to be so careless!"

The unicorn's criticism did not extend only to Pinkie as she turned her gaze to Rarity. The fair unicorn was busy looking into a mirror while brushing her lush purple mane.

"Rarity! I thought you were keeping an eye on Pinkie!"

"Pardon me, Twilight," she blushed, "but all this wind and rain has been atrocious for my mane, I couldn't ignore it for much longer. I suppose I was a tad distracted..."

Growling softly, Twilight addressed both her friends.

"Okay girls, we're all going to play that honorable pastime, the quiet game. Think you can manage?"

Rarity nodded and Pinkie zipped her mouth in symbolic gesture.

"Good. Now, we sit and wait."

A half an hour they past in silence. Twilight wanted very much to rest, but she feared that if she split her attention for just a second, Pinkie would wake the unconscious soldier. The perceptive student noted that Pinkie had begun shifting uncomfortably, which was not a good sign to see from the undisciplined pink puff of energy. The warm hut and quiet atmosphere, however, dulled Twilight's resolve. Her eyes dry and heavy, Twilight at last gave into temptation and closed them but before the pleasant relief of sleep could take her completely, she was awakened by a loud clatter of metal pots.

Turning to the kitchentte, Twilight saw Pinkie covered in pots and pans. Apparently she had opened a thoroughly stuffed cabinent to get a bowl to sample some of the food from a large black pot.

"Who's there? Where am I? As a lieutenant of her majesty's Royal Guard, I demand an answer!"

The three froze as the black pegasus rose from his mess of blankets on the floor. Fear gripped Twilight as Nightshade's turned his gaze directly at her. Ready to fight, Twilight's horn began to glow.

But the pegasus said nothing.

Puzzled, Twilight looked deeply into the soldier's eyes to find the pupils covered by a misty sheet of opaque fluid. Instantly, Twilight knew.

Nightshade was blind.

Thinking back to her studies, she recalled having read of cataracts before, but she never thought they could induce blindness so quickly. The lieutenant must have suffered exposure to some serious radiation.

"Hello!" the pegasus shouted loudly, as if he were in a large cave, "Anypony there? Please, I can't see a thing."

Twilight pitied the soldier, the faint quiver in his voice was exactly the same as the one that had clenched tightly to Lightning Strike's words. It was the sound of years of tightly instilled discipline struggling against a sudden, unimaginable fear.

Rushing from the bedroom, Zecora heeded Nightshade's call as the three friends kept their silence.

"Worry not and rest my friend, on I, Zecora, you can depend."

"Where am I? Why can't I move my wings?" Nightshade responded anxiously, his face turning unintelligibly in the direction of the zebra's voice, "Why do you speak in rhymes, are you a witch of some sort?"

"No witch am I, despite what my accent may imply. I learned your language when I was quite young, but Zebric syntax clings thickly to my tongue. In my hut in Everfree you now dwell, but, brave soldier, you are far from well. Your bones I have set back into place, but you are still in need of a sturdy brace. I pray you lay down and relax your wings so that I may find it easier to fit these things."

"And my eyes? Will I ever see again?"

"Of this matter do not fret, of permanent blindness there is little threat. An ancient practice of my people will restore your sight, is that not a happy delight?"

As Zecora helped the pegasus to lie down, the guard responded with a hint of relief.

"Thank you Zecora. Please, forgive my accusation, I should know better. I was stationed in the Serengeti for peacekeeping operations when I was in the EAF. As I hear, things have been shaping up there."

As she bandaged the soldier, the zebra replied in a low, somewhat distant voice.

"Of this frozen war I do not wish to speak of. Long have I waited to see the olive branch arrive on the wings of a dove."

"I'm sorry, forget I mentioned it. But Zecora, my company is sorely lacking leadership right now, and our objectives extremely dangerous and sensitive. If you could perform that procedure you mentioned, I can be on my way..."

"I'm sorry, but this I can't permit, you would be most unfit." Zecora replied sharply, "Once done, your vision will remain blurred for a time. To let you walk alone in the forest thus-like would be a crime!"

"I'm not asking your permission," Nightshade responded, his voice now firm, "I'm telling you. My duty is to Celestia, and nothing takes precedence above her security. Every minute that I linger here is another stroke closer to eternal night."

"I do not wish to sound snide, but a soldier's greatest foe is his own pride." She sighed, shaking her head, "But I will do as you ask, soon then may you continue with your task."

As Zecora went to get her supplies, Twilight took her aside and whispered quietly into her ear.

"Zecora, can't you wait to do this? I don't want trouble..."

"Twilight Sparkle," she replied somewhat indignantly, "This procedure cannot wait; much longer and everlasting darkness will be his fate. I understand your perilous plight, but your selfishness is not right. Do not worry so, a blindfold he will wear before he can go."

Though apprehensive, Twilight backed off and accepted Zecora's justification. If worst came to worst, they could handle themselves against a single, crippled guard. Just how he would react to them, however, was the

question. This soldier did not seem as brusque as Captain Braveheart, but not as compromising as Lightning Strike. As she watched Zecora administer an herbal anesthetic, the unicorn just hoped she didn't have to find out. The drugs would buy them some more time, but not much.

Turning to the side, Twilight saw Rarity leading Pinkie over to her. The normally energetic ball of pink puff now had her head lowered in remorse.

"Twilight, Pinkie and I had a little talk," Rarity said, "and she has something she'd like to say."

"Rarity, I know it's Pinkie, but you shouldn't treat her like a little foal..."

"No Twilight," Pinkie interrupted, "She's right, I mean I totally heard what you said about Nightshade...it just didn't seem to click, you know? Today is just so *weird*; I'm not used to being enemies with anypony. I just want to be their friend; I just want everypony to be happy. The best way to fight fire is with laughter, my nana used to say, because everypony likes to laugh and nopony likes to hurt another pony. I know that the guard raided your library and I know that Braveheart shot Big Mac, but I can't think them bad. Every time I do I remember how happy the captain was when nopony got hurt this morning... I dunno, I just think that if we talked with them they'd understand and help us. But what do I know; I'm not smart like you, Twilight. I'm sorry for being a dummy..."

Pinkie's sentiments Twilight easily sympathized with, she wished too that their dilemma could be solved by talking it out. However, she knew that such an approach would only land them in jail.

"Pinkie, you're not dumb," Twilight consoled, "normally I would agree with you. But the guard is not a deliberative body; they have orders and they execute them, just or unjust. Reasoning with them won't work...trust me. One of them, somepony who I thought was a friend, flat out told me that they would not rest until Luna was captured."

The unicorn's words piqued Pinkie's interest. The earth pony now looked Twilight in the eyes.

"Oh! Lightning caught up to you pretty quickly, huh?"

Twilight was a bit surprised that her friend was familiar with a pegasus she herself had not seen in years.

"Uh, yes. He met me outside of Fluttershy's cottage."

"Oh! That's awesome to hear that he got to see you again. When I last saw him, he was soooooooo sad. He didn't want to show it, but I could tell. Did you forgive him?"

"...no. He didn't ask for forgiveness." Twilight said solemnly, "He only tried to justify his actions."

"What? He gave off a totally different vibe in town this morning..."

"Speaking of which," Twilight interrupted, "How did you girls escape the guard?"

Clearing her throat, Rarity took the initiative to answer Twilight's question.

"Oh, it was quite elaborate and daring, dear. As you may have guessed, we were under the guard's custody at my boutique, but with a lot of hard work and a little charm I managed to craft an elegant Nightmare Moon costume and scare the soldier charged with watching over us. I think it may have whipped up a little panic in the town square, but it gave us the cover we needed to make it to Fluttershy's cottage."

"Hold on a second, Rarity," Twilight replied in surprise, "you guys did what? Do you realize how many ponies you put in danger? Not only that, you've probably fueled the guard's fear that the princess is a mass-murdering psychopath!"

A bit thrown off by Twilight's harsh reaction, Rarity stuttered in response.

"Well, dear, I suppose it was not, uh quite desired, but we had to escape somehow. Besides, I saw from my balcony the guard dispatching a mob just earlier this morning and no pony was hurt...Well, perhaps that's not all exactly true. I saw and heard parts, but from what I gathered nothing tragic came of it. I thought the guard would diffuse the situation as quickly as the first..."



"Rarity, that was a reckless decision! You just gambled with the lives of every citizen in Ponyville. You can't predict how ponies are going to react with such certainty!"

"What do you want from me, Twilight Sparkle?" Rarity responded, her voice filled with hurt, "You called on me to help you, and I did so without so much a question or doubt in my mind and now you have the nerve to criticize the lack of foresight in my decisions? I was imprisoned because of you Twilight, did you think of me when you decided to run off this morning with a fugitive princess?"

Pausing to let her words sink in, Rarity continued.

"I do not appreciate it, Twilight Sparkle, not the slightest, especially when you apparently had the time to chat up the captain *pro tempore* when your friends had to escape from a horde of armed guards."

Twilight flinched at Rarity's stinging words and averted her eyes.

"How, how did you know he's acting captain?"

"My jailers were quite upset about the fact," Rarity replied, "you may think me a flawed leader, but I do have a knack for picking up on detail. What concerns me is why it seems the guard is not on our tails. This village is not very large, and, as I said, a panic should not take so long to quell..."

"Unless it degenerated into a riot..." Twilight mumbled.

"OR," Pinkie chimed in, "maybe Lightning isn't searching for us."

"No Pinkie," Twilight shook her head, "He told me he'd buy me a little time, but that he was bent on carrying out his orders."

"Oh Twilight," Pinkie sang, "we both know that's a load of baloney. You say he said he wasn't sorry, but he sure is acting like he is! You know? Actions are more important than words after all, you must have convinced him deep down!"

"...Pinkie, Lightning sacked my library and interrogated me earlier today. The chance he would completely disregard orders is extremely unlikely..."

"But he's the captain now! He makes the orders."

Twilight brought her hoof to her face in silent frustration.

"It's not that simple, Pinkie. But maybe you're right, maybe my words had an impact on Lightning...It's just that we can't know for certain. All this conjecturing is pointless, the only thing we should assume is that the guard believes Luna is responsible for Celestia's disappearance and will do what they can to arrest her. We should focus on plotting the course before us instead of wasting time tracing the steps of the guard. In the end it's of little use. Trust me, I tried to do it this morning."

"Very well, Twilight," Rarity responded, "if that is what you think, I will respect it. I have little mind for such things, I'm an artist, not the student of a god-princess. Planning a dress or suit can be difficult, but at the very least I know my mastery will shine through in the end. I am not so certain about public affairs."

"Okay Twilight," Pinkie added, "but I still think you're being unfair to Lightning and the guard."

"Good." Twilight said, "the worst of our journey is behind us. If we can restore Luna's immortality with the Elements of Harmony, nothing can stop her from finding Celestia. Hopefully balance will be restored..."

"Twilight Sparkle," Zecora interrupted the unicorn from across the room, "The procedure I shall soon finish, your voices should thus diminish. Dear child, the drug I applied was quite mild. Don't look too dour, he shall not awake for an hour, but be cautious, I do not know when he will be fully conscious."

"Wow Zecora," Twilight said with surprise, "that was really fast for such a sensitive part of the body. How did you do it?"

Zecora hesitated before replying.

"It is an old technique with much history, but in your land it is a great mystery. Often it is maligned, for it is very risky to the patient who is blind. For this reason in your country it is banned, such has always been Celestia's command."

Twilight's eyebrow rose in suspicion.

"That sounds pretty sketchy, Zecora...by that I mean *really* sketchy."

"Your opinion I did not request," the zebra replied defensively, "to its wondrous effects you will soon attest."

"Okay, okay, sorry Zecora. I'm in deeper with the authorities than you are, don't sweat it." Twilight chuckled, trying her best to make light of the situation.

Zecora leveled her eyes at Twilight, closed them, and sighed.

"On the table you three will find some food," she said politely, "I hope you like your apples stewed. Now if you'll pardon me, I have another patient I wish to see."

Fetching a kettle from the hearth, Zecora exited the room. Twilight could see clearly now that they had been dismissed for the moment as Fluttershy walked out of the room a bit dissatisfied.

"Are you all right there Fluttershy?" Twilight asked her skittish friend.

"Umm, yes, it's just, uh, I'd like to be there for the princess...but Zecora insisted that I eat. I guess I should take care of myself too..."

"Don't worry Fluttershy," Twilight replied, "You've done so much today already, I'm so grateful to have you for a friend."

"Thanks Twilight," Fluttershy smiled, "But it looks like somepony else needs my help..."

Twilight's eyes bulged at Fluttershy's words. Apparently Zecora's drug was even less impotent than the zebra suggested. Turning around, she noticed the lieutenant beginning to stir.

Gesturing to her friends to keep quiet, Twilight magically wrapped a piece of nearby cloth around Nightshade's eyes.

"Zecora," the soldier muttered groggily, "is that it? How long do I have to wear this blindfold?"

He was answered with silence.

"Zecora?"

Sighing, the unicorn realized she couldn't keep up the façade for much longer and decided it best to reveal herself in a calm, collected fashion. As she prepared to quickly retrieve the zebra, she was surprised to hear Zecora's voice right beside her.

"Proud soldier of the royal elite, your treatment is near complete. Do not touch the cloth that blinds your eyes, to expose them to the light would be most unwise."

Mouth agape, Twilight stared at Pinkie Pie. The bubbly mare was always quite good with coming up with spur of the moment sing-along ditties with excellent rhythm and rhyme; what surprised Twilight was Pinkie's nearly flawless impersonation of Zecora's voice. Seeing the unicorn's shocked expression, Pinkie winked and continued her apt impression of the forest hermit.

"Come, dine with me as you wait, I assure you my cooking is really great!"

The black pegasus consented with a nod.

"You said my greatest weakness was my pride," Nightshade laughed, "but you were dead wrong. That honor belongs to my stomach! I can smell those heavenly stewed apples, and I won't lie to you, they smell better than anything from last night's royal banquet. If you could...you know...just lead me to the table..."

Twilight gestured to Fluttershy to help the lieutenant get some food. As the yellow pegasus led him away, Twilight looked at Pinkie with a mixture of joy and confusion.

"Pinkie," she whispered, "how in Equestria did you do that?"

The earth pony gave a faint giggle and responded.

"Zecora's accent is so cool and creepy that sometimes when I'm working at the bakery and Mr. and Mrs. Cake are gone, I pretend that I'm Zecora making a totally awesome, super secret concoction of mystery and magic!"

"...and you talk to yourself..."

"Well yeah, duh. I always like to talk and who better to talk to when I'm alone than myself? Myself can be a pretty interesting pony, I mean just the other day I met myself as a pirate..."

"...that's really something Pinkie." Twilight interrupted, "But I need you to keep the lieutenant busy for a while more. Can you do that?"

"Yep, no problem Twi!"

"Zecora," they heard Nightshade nervously speak to Fluttershy, "what's that sound? I hear voices, are we not alone?"

Pinkie Pie hurridly rushed to Fluttershy's side, thought for a second, and replied to the soldier's question.

"Hightened and confused, no doubt, your senses are. What you hear is the pitter-patter of mice, nothing very bizzare. Now hush and give me your trust, to this new world you must adjust."

Nightshade grunted unhappily; he did not like being reminded that he was incapacitated.

"Hopefully I won't have to, that is if what you said is true." Nightshade growled, "I can't wait to be rid of this blindfold and back in the field where I'm needed. Gah! I can't believe all this really happened..."

"What exactly bothers you, good soldier?" Pinkie asked out of genuine concern for the guard.

"I don't like to disclose intellegence to anypony, especially civillians, but you have only helped me, Zecora. It'd be hard to dismiss your request after you worked so diligently to give me back my sight. It's unlikely you'll make any use of it anyway." Nightshade replied before sighing heavily. "The royal guard's primary and most difficult objective is to capture the renegade Nightmare Moon. However, the general also charged us with protecting a powerful weapon from falling under the dark one's influence, the Elements of Harmony."

The four listened intently as the soldier paused to sample the stewed apple Rarity had dished for him.

"Mmm, pretty good stuff, Zecora, you weren't lying. Could use some more cinamonn, though."

"Ah-hem."

"Oh yes, pardon my digression. This power was entrusted to Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia's faithful student, and her five friends. Their profiles were distributed among the higher ranking officers so we could be better able to identify and defend them. Much to our horror, however, our preperation was of little help. During the night Nightmare Moon had penetrated our perimeter and succeeded in poisoning Miss. Sparkle's mind, one we had initially presumed to be incorruptible. Once this fact had become clear, the captain ordered the detention of all Miss. Sparkle's friends on any grounds we could come up with. What was important was that they were all accounted for and far from Nightmare Moon's shadow. We managed to round up three of them before our captain was...sent away. After that, operations came to a grinding halt under my compatriot who, for some reason, thought it a good idea to wait about the village before vanishing himself. I went out to search for him, but I came across somepony of greater significance: the element of loyalty herself, Rainbow Dash."

Taking another bite of his meal, the guard swallowed and continued.

"I'm sure you've heard of her, too. She's fast and destined for greatness, there is no denying that, but she is still an amateur in terms of maneuvering. Against a professional flier, she had little chance. In her desperation, however, she managed to perform her signature 'Sonic Rainboom' and sent me hurdling from the skies blind and broken. I failed, and now I sit at your table a useless pegasus."

There was a moment of silence as Nightshade ate his dinner. Pinkie was thinking hard about what next to say, evidenced by her distinct and obvious physical expression of what qualified as "to think". At last she responded.

"If catching and securing Twilight's friends is your goal, should you not pursue it like a troll?"

Nightshade stopped eating. One could not see his expression, but his words were heated.

"What do you mean, *"troll"*? You may have healed me, Zecora, but I will not stand to hear the Royal Guard be disrespected! We are the elite, we are organized and privy to all intelligence reports, even those once classified under the secrecy of the Royal Bloodline are at our disposal. No pony is more informed than the guard, no pony more able to make the right choice save Celestia herself! The corp has done everything in its capacity to ensure order and prevent Nightmare Moon from accomplishing her wicked desires, something ten million trolls could never in their lives accomplish."

Seeing that she misspoke, Pinkie quickly tried to clarify what she wanted to say.

"Uh, sorry, but what I mean is simply this: arresting ponies willy-nilly seems awfully remiss. Surely your methods are a tad extreme, talking leads to better cooperation, I deem."

"Ugh, you can never satisfy civilians." the black pegasus huffed, "They want us, neigh, expect us to solve a crisis without even the smallest sacrifice on their part. Then when something does go wrong as a result, they blame us for failing in our duties. No, Zecora, inspiring cooperation takes far longer than forcing it."

Formulating another response (and double checking the syllable count), Pinkie replied.

"To always treat another pony with respect, do you think it really that incorrect?"

Nightshade shook his head.

"Security is always priority, Zecora, respect for civil liberties is secondary. The world teeters on the brink of destruction, a few hurt feelings and a couple of owies are a small price we have to pay to save it. What we're doing is right, but civilians are too self-interested to give a damn."

Consuming the last few morsels, the pegasus once again shook his head.

"If it's one thing I've learned on the guard, it's that you can't compromise with evil, you have to face it and destroy it as quickly as possible. If somepony gets in the way, they too need to be removed. It is unfortunate, sure, but they made their choices. Casualties are inevitable, there is no cure-all."

Nightshade's words both intrigued and infuriated Twilight; at any rate the unicorn wanted to get her word in. Taking a quill and notepad from her saddlebag, Twilight quickly scribbled her reply and floated the paper to Pinkie to read.

"You may think yourself knowledgeable and altruistic, but I see you are applying a fatal heuristic. Nothing do you know of the sisters' last interaction, it is possible your 'sound intellegence' led to an inappropriate interpretation."

"Huh, your Equestrian is good for a foreigner, you didn't even rhyme the last time." Nightshade responded, noting also the change in Pinkie's tone, "If you're implying that Nightmare Moon isn't at fault here, you need to get your head checked. Just last year she tried to pull the same stint, and apparently she was even worse a thousand years ago. When it comes to an unholy evil like her, all means justify the ends. Anypony who doesn't think that is either living in a fantasy world or dead. Some ponies might think us overbearing, but I have no regrets. We have only done good."

Tired and irritable, Twilight had fought the urge to speak up and give the guard a piece of her mind. She couldn't stand listening to Nightshade, the guard was just so *wrong*.

*"Refute him."* the temptation gnawed at her, *"He's only one guard, so what if he knows who you are? He's stuck in Everfree Forest miles away from any help, nothing realistic will come of it."*

It made so much sense in her head that she became convinced it was the right thing to do.

"Such a heartless philosophy will only beget more evil, Nightshade, not good!" Twilight erupted, shaking the table and surprising her friends and shocking the lieutenant, "How dare you seperate the duties you have to Celestia from the ponies she loves, *together* they are the state you swore to defend and uphold! Citizens are not mindless foals in need of discipline,



don't you think for a second you're better than they are! In your haste to save the world you have shed the moral backbone of the guard and jettisoned all notions of honor and dignity in favor of efficiency. How can you think you have done good when you have abandoned all the principles of what good stands for? How can you combat evil if you cannot distinguish it in yourself! Your self-rightousness has left you a shell of a soldier, Nightshade!"

Ripping the blindfold from his face, Nightshade looked around the table to discover four blurry ponies, but he could instantly guess their identities. Seeing Pinkie Pie and Rarity, in particular, spooked the soldier.

"Umm, Nightshade, please," Fluttershy squeaked, "Zecora said to keep that on until you've recovered..."

"A lie! All of it smoke and mirrors!" Nightshade fumed, "There is no zebra, only a traitor! Where's your new teacher, Twilight Sparkle, did she teach you that load of rotten apples?"

"Be quiet and listen!" Twilight shouted, "At first I didn't want your eyes to be healed, but a wise friend reminded me that I was wrong to wish that, that it was a violation of your dignity. Later, I considered tying you up against your will just like you did to my friends, but I didn't. My life would be made infinitely easier if you were out of *my* way, but I realize now that it is a rare event when the ends *do* truly justify the means."

"Oh no, don't try to take the moral highground here, Miss. Sparkle," Nightshade responded, gritting his teeth, "Princess Celestia banished her sister to the moon to stop her from destroying Equestria. Was that excessive? Was that wrong?"

"...I don't...I can't know..." Twilight stuttered, "but it wasn't right, nor was it wrong, it was *just*."

"Bloody esoteric egg heads," Nightshade sneered, "always splitting hairs to cover their tracks and muddle obvious truths. What is good is just, what is evil is unjust, a foal could tell you that! It only goes to show how corrupt you are!"

"Think what you will then! Ignore the fact that we cared for you even though you seek only to do us harm!" Twilight angrily countered, "You'll never listen to me anyways!"

Nightshade's left eye twitched, a furious expression now burning across his face. He was having a difficult time focusing on Twilight, and his eyes began to seer with pain.

"You're right about that! You're the disciple of Nightmare Moon now, every word you speak is another drop of poison! One act of kindness will not buy my allegience, besides, your friend is the very reason I'm crippled. What thanks should I owe you for healing me? This is all probably part the demon's plot to ensnare me, but she won't! Not this soldier!"

From the corner of his left eye, Nightshade saw two figures enter the room.

"Oh my, what is all this ruckus!" Zecora decried, "My guests, you do my home little justice!"

"Shut up!" Nightshade responded, shaking his head furiously, "You're a lie, a puppet! I see your master beside you, that cursed and wretched Nightmare Moon!"

In all honesty, he could not really see Luna, only a distorted dark blue figure. Frightened, he shoved Twilight out of his way and made for the door.

"Oh dear," Fluttershy said, "please don't go Nightshade, you won't see a thing in the forest! It's really dangerous and your eyes..."

"Blast them!" he shouted, "I'll find a way, I am an elite!"

With that he opened the door and stumbled into the darkness of Everfree Forest.

Sighing, Twilight turned to Pinkie.

"That, Pinkie, is why you there's no reasoning with the guard. They already have their own..."

Mentally strained and physically exhausted, the unicorn fell to the floor.

"Twilight," Fluttershy said, "you can't go on like this, you only slept for only a little bit at my house. You need to rest, here I'll fetch a blanket."

Twilight closed her eyes and let her indignation subside. Now with clearer mind, she wished she hadn't caved into her argumentative nature so easily, but she had been too tired to check herself. The unicorn was aggravated; she had been so worried that Pinkie would slip-up that she failed to take into account her own weaknesses. Thinking back to how she yelled at Rainbow Dash, Luna, and Rarity didn't help her self-confidence either. She was so ready to give advice and tell others how they should behave that she forgot that she too fell into the same sort of non-sensical patterns of behavior. Her exchange with Nightshade also left Twilight troubled; the young prodigy had earlier convinced herself that Celestia had a reason, a justification for what she did in the past. Was she putting Celestia on too high a pedestal, was the princess really no better than the lieutenant, or herself for that matter? Was morality, the heart of harmony, really that much of a sham that it could be cast aside at the first sign of trouble, a time when it was needed most?

As Fluttershy draped the blanket over her, Twilight felt herself drifting back to sleep. Instead of a library, however, her dreams provided her with but a single book. Opening it up, she saw only one word crudely scrawled across the entire length of the page.

*Hypocrite.*

/

"I am glad to see you are in such good condition, it is not long now before you can continue your mission."

The rhyming words of the zebra brought a smile to Luna's face. More so than the décor of the hut, the accent invoked pleasant memories of happy festivities and beautiful music. The Zebic tribes of the Serengeti held a special place in Luna's heart, their peace with natural world reflected the harmonious vision she had for the settlement of Everfree. The absence of hierarchy, institution, and regimentation in society was what the moon goddess considered ideal, a return to those trouble-free days before Discord when the ponies roamed the wild fields of Equestria, much like the traditional tribal life of both the zebra and the buffalo. The ponies then were simple creatures, yes, but they were kind, loving, happy, and free from the

sins and burdens of what Celestia called civilization. However, Luna had long ago abandoned this hope for Equestria. The ponies were too accustomed and dependent on her sister's artificial constructs, those incessant, complex machines of government and economy. As it was, Luna saw everywhere the ponies in chains. The best she could hope for them was a semblance of that bygone liberty and community through self-governance and reliance. It was this hidden desire of Luna's that Morning Star had understood all too well. Her fair words resonated deeply with the moon goddess and moved her; it was true that society would never regress to its original shape, but it did have the opportunity to progress and evolve to once again reinstate those laws not created by the soulless state, but by organic nature. [Coupled with her goal to relieve Celestia of her endless labor, Luna had risked everything that fateful night to achieve this. She thought that if she could center the debate on her own feelings, her own need to retreat, she could pressure Celestia into an unavoidable ultimatum, one that would force her to choose between the love of her little sister or her rule of Equestria. Celestia's rejection had left Luna stunned, she did not honestly expect her sister to choose power over her, and the fact broke her heart and drove her to insanity.]\*

The pungent smell of hot tea broke Luna away from her straying thoughts.

"To imagine the goddess of the moon should grace this place, yet how sad it is to see her wounded face. Please drink your majesty, you will find healing in this special tea."

Pouring her a cup and offering it, Luna gratefully accepted.

"Thank you for your generosity, but who are you and where am I?"

"Ah yes, Zecora I'm known to pony-folk, to my home in Everfree you have awoke. On the back of Twilight Sparkle you arrived, it is with great fortune you survived."

"You live in my forest?" Luna smiled warmly, "What brings you from the Serengeti to Everfree?"

Zecora frowned at the goddess' words.

"I thought you more than anypony should know, being the moon princess of tales from long ago."

Luna looked at the zebra with worry.

"You cannot mean to tell me..."

"Yes, the ceaseless conflict has endured, after a thousand years it has only matured."

It was now Luna's turn to frown. More than a millennia ago she had effortlessly orchestrated a peace between the zebra and the gazelle. Grazing land and access to watering holes were the main points of contention, but, with the help of her advisors, she had organized a truce centered on principles of equal distribution between the tribes. It was entirely sensible, why should hostilities later ensue?

"How can this be?" Luna said, disturbed by the revelation, "I solved the problem. For two hundred years not a single drop of blood was spilled in the Serengeti. We danced together in celebration, pony, zebra, and gazelle alike!"

Zecora shook her head slowly.

"Through spoken tongue, not written word, has the phantom memory survived. Perhaps to an ancient it may sound a bit contrived, but the buried truth within must be revived. Long ago there was indeed a truce between zebra and gazelle, but it was shattered by a wicked spell. Famine and plague tore across the once fertile plain, and reborn was that great disdain. In their hour of need each side invoked your protection, but your silence was a sound rejection. Of the affairs of your land we zebra little cared, we could not imagine that the moon goddess was impaired. Without you, dear Princess Luna, patroness of joy and hope, with our hatred and despair we could not cope. Even as the shadow departed the fields of the Serengeti, the bloody feuds remained trite and petty."

Luna closed her eyes and shook her head in disbelief.

"No, how can this be possible? How could my sister permit this to happen, how could she stand idly by when there is such suffering?"

"Yes, in my youth I too once asked the very question" Zecora replied, "how could the sun goddess allow this aggression? But on her, too much blame and too little praise did I lay. For centuries she has sent her peacekeepers

to stem the violence and bring the tribes under her amicable sway. It is the zebra and the gazelle who cannot let go of their hatred and spite, all the power in this world alone cannot purge it outright."

"My sister wields the might of the Elements of Harmony," Luna countered, "there is no force in existence its equal, it should wipe clean such terrible hatred!"

Zecora gave Luna a puzzled look.

"Twilight has mentioned this magic before, but I doubt alone it can win a war."

Luna opened her mouth to protest, but Celestia's struggle in the war reminded the goddess that perhaps Zecora was correct in her thinking.

"...Well, still. Even without the Elements, can she do nothing more than peacekeeping?"

Zecora shook her head once more.

"A truce Princess Celestia has tried to forge, but little peace has been induced. The sun goddess is always quite busy, some say following her tracks makes one dizzy. It is not surprising that she has little time for the affairs of other lands, the needs of Equestria create for her a host of demands."

Luna knew the zebra's words to be true, but she remained uncomfortable about her sister's inability to impose peace. Celestia was the master of order and subtle political manipulation, her mind was infinitely more clever than Luna's and yet the sun goddess had failed where Luna had succeeded. It made little sense to the goddess, but then again, the zebra and gazelle she had once known were not the same as the tribes that now struggled against one another. Yet another fact disturbed her greatly: history had not corrected itself. There was little to no progress, though a hundred generations had come and gone their tribal hostility survived, a hideous scar from those darkest of days. The moon goddess questioned if they even knew *why* they hated one another.

Not wanting to dwell on the idea, Luna shift the topic of conversation back on to Zecora.

"Zecora, if what you fear is the instability of your country, why come to Everfree? It is a beautiful forest, yes, but it is less predictable than living in Equestria proper. Celestia has not touched my land; it remains wild and unsettled, unfortunately...ponies tend to love security more than freedom. This I could little understand..."

"Of pony-kind I am not," Zecora interrupted, "I too love freedom, it is something dearly bought. No, I do not like Celestia's many laws and regulations, I cherish too much a full spectrum of sensations. For that is what the mystery of life provides, if I may so confide. In Celestia's Equestria all things work in mechanical concert, even over nature, the weather, the seasons, complete control does she exert. My princess, such a predictable life is not for me, that is why I live under the boughs of Everfree. But don't you see? This forest permits me the peace of Equestria and the freedom of the Serengeti."

Luna considered Zecora's interpretation of her forest being a real part of her sister's empire.\* It was true that Celestia administered to the region and maintained a barracks around the northern perimeter, but its purpose was to keep beasts in the forest, not defend the brave few who chose to live a more spiritual life. But what could Luna really say? She knew little of the modern disorder in the Serengeti, perhaps her forest truly was a haven to this zebra.

After taking another sip of tea, Luna decided it best to steer the conversation back into happier waters away from the conflict of the Serengeti.

"Zecora, tell me about what you like to do, what about Everfree that makes you feel alive?"

"I cultivate herbs, such is my trade," the zebra replied, "many remedies have I made. Some you may call experimental for some of the side-effects are quite accidental."

Luna looked at the zebra with a raised brow.

"That sounds a bit, shall I say...questionable?"

Sighing, Zecora ignored the familiar comment and continued.

"But this is not my sole dedication, I am also a known musician throughout my nation."

Luna's eyes lit up in response.

"Then you know of all the old songs as well? Could you, perhaps, play me a song? It has been centuries since I spoke Zebric, but I'm sure I'll remember the lyrics if I can hear the beat of the drum."

Zecora blushed, a bit nervous to accept the request of a goddess.

"Oh, but, it is unnecessary..."

"Please Zecora," Luna asked, "I'm sure your voice will heal me better than any herb you've plucked from the earth."

"Well, if you insist," Zecora smiled, "who am I to deny the goddess in my midst?"

Moving to a large drum at the end of Luna's bed, Zecora paused for a moment and turned back to Luna.

"My heart guides what I must sing, I hope you are not bothered by its painful sting. Of this bitter-sweet tragedy you may be aware, *Utenzi wa Shufaka* is often hard to bear..."

Beating the drum in a slow, rhythmic motion, Zecora sang in a low, tranquil voice.

*"Kisa, uje ukaribu mbele I utakarabu tamukalo ukutubu; ukihifadhi..."*

It had been a thousand years since Luna had last spoken Zebric. Unlike the unchanging tongue of dragons or firmly standardized Equestrian, the language had greatly evolved throughout the centuries, making it difficult for the goddess to understand the lyrics. Zecora's dialect, too, added to Luna's confusion. And yet, the song was so familiar to her, its beat and rhythm synching in concert with the beat of her troubled heart. Slowly, the music awoken within the goddess the unpleasant memory of *Utenzi wa Shufaka*.



The story told of two sky spirits who argued over the goodness of the zebra. The first believed that the zebra had fallen, that their compassion had long dried up under the hot sun of the Serengeti. The second rejected this, maintaining firmly that they remained as righteous as ever. Descending to earth to test a tribe of common zebra, the first spirit proclaimed that the second was ill and could only be saved by the blood of a willing foal. Despite their great love for the young one, the chief of the tribe offered her only daughter's life. Such selflessness revealed to the first that it was wrong, but it could not bring back the dead. As a reminder to the good of the zebra, the spirit cast the foal's ashes across the heavens, memorializing the young one's sacrifice for eternity among the stars.

The princess of the night knew that the story was merely a myth, she had crafted the constellation herself a few millennia ago, but she did not want fact to ruin an exceptional work of art. However, though she enjoyed the beautiful flow of melodious poetry, the content of the tale was unsavory. Of her own choice the young maiden had accepted death, but was it truly her will or that of her mother? Where was the compassion of the spirit who needlessly permitted the young one's blood to be shed by her own mother? How could such callous disrespect for life ever be interpreted as good, how could such heroic compassion and sacrifice be a corruption of the morality it sought to inspire?

Luna chose to shake away such thoughts and focus on the rhythmic beat of the music. The wondrous verse brought back her memory of the Zebra lyrics, and though an imperfect speaker, Luna joined in Zecora's song. At the sound of the goddess' voice, the zebra ceased singing and listened in awe to Luna's sublime chanting. It was as sweet as the morning song of the springtime robin, yet as sombre as the blackbird's cry. Luna's Zebra too, was far older than Zecora's, but the sound of the old tongue complemented the ancient roots of the tragedy. Losing herself in the music and divine rhyme, the goddess became oblivious to all else. For an hour she sung the entirety of the epic, and upon approaching the climax of the tale Luna poured a thousand years of her sorrow into the dying words of the young zebra.

*"Mamaye si kilio, mimi kufa hivyo roho dunia wapate kuishi. Ukuu nini mimi kupata katika kifo na uovu wa mimi kupata katika maisha."*

Rendered into Equestrian, it translates roughly thus-like:

*"Mother cry not, I die so the sky spirit may live. Such beauty I find in death and what evil I find in life..."*

Not only did the naive bravery of the innocent move Luna to tears, but the mother's tender reponse.

*"My beloved daughter, with heavy heart I offer your soul to the heavens above. If I could I would spill every drop of my blood to save you, but fate does not permit me that joy. Forgive your poor, wretched mother for what she must do."*

As she sang of the swift stroke of the knife, Luna began to weep. *Utanzi wa Shafaka* was not just an old epic of a foreign tribe of equids, it was, in many ways, her own history. Echoed in the mother's plea were Celestia's final words to her a thousand years ago.

*"...I'm sorry Luna. This is the best I can do for you...and Equestria."*

She was Celestia's sacrificial lamb, an offering to that bleak phantom called fate. The moon goddess had once scoffed at the idea, but her imprisonment and mortality had given her new perspective. Defeated and no longer invincible, Luna was acutely aware that she was hardly in control of her destiny, verily, how could she be? Most obviously she she did not choose banishment. Even more telling was how she had relied on the help of others, surrendering her will to theirs' and abandoning responsibility for the consequences. Perhaps fate was not the abstract, guiding force she had thought it to be but rather the very concrete and chaotic sum total of a million free wills of varying strength struggling against each other? Was even her sister just another will in an ocean of many? As the most powerful one, did this mandate that she must bind and give reason to the infinite in the hopes she could dismantle destiny and permit a greater semblance of free will to even exist? Was order truly the source of free will, and liberty the source of destiny?

Choking back her tears, Luna tried to sing the final verses correctly, but the joy she was supposed to convey upon the release of the foal's ashes was overshadowed by her grief.

Zecora had been enthralled by Luna's angelic voice, which, coupled with the steady drumbeat, kindled within her a spiritual ecstasy she had never in her life experienced. She felt Luna's tribulation as if a thousand daggers had

pierced her flesh upon slow, excruciating succession, but the pain was not evil.

It was enlightening.

As the song came to an end, Luna and Zecora sat in silent introspective reflection. After a few minutes, the zebra suddenly realized her error.

"Princess Luna, please pardon my choice in song, to do so was unprofessional and wrong."

"No, Zecora, not all tears are evil, but all are purifying." the goddess replied, "Music does not always heal through happy song, more often it is a mirror to the soul that permits one the chance to see within and remove the roots of her suffering."

"This may be true, but there is no reason to always be so blue. May I tempt you with a happier tune?"

"Yes Zecora," Luna smiled, "I think it's wise to warm my spirits before I face the chilling wind yet again. Could you perhaps play *Dada jua na dada mwezi*, it is an old favorite."

"An ancient song you request," Zecora said with a wink, "but I know it, my lucky guest!"

Taking out an exotic stringed instrument, Zecora picked a pristine melody that gradually quickened in pace and tempo. Rising from her bed, Luna began to dance and sing in Equestrian. Gone from her voice was the chilling dread of *Utenzi wa Shufaka*, it had been replaced with elation and euphoria for this was not just an old folk song, it was *her* song, *Sister Sun and Sister Moon*. More than a thousand years ago, a delegation of the zebra tribes had come to the court at Canterlot to pay their respects to the two princesses. Among them was a bard called Zerdowski who crafted an epic in both Zebric and Equestrian in honor of the two sisters. He had spent his entire life composing the 60,000 verses and was richly rewarded by Celestia for his devotion and impressive skill. Of course, *Sister Sun and Sister Moon* was only the first ten or so couplets put to music, but it was by far Luna's favorite part. When Zerdowski performed it at the court at Canterlot, she had gotten Celestia to dance with her. The sun goddess, however, was no ballerina, so Luna took the opportunity to teach her sister

that curious art of dancing. It was indeed a strange sight for all the nobles and ambassadors in presence to see Celestia stumble about, trying to keep up with her far more elegant and flexible little sister. What Luna loved most about this memory was that Celestia didn't even care about the onlooking crowd seeing her embarrassing weakness, she only laughed and continued on with her awkward attempts.

The song itself sang of their youth, and though it was fairly inaccurate, it still warmed Luna's heart and made her feel spiritually at one with her sister.

{...}

In the middle of the song, however, Luna felt something was off. Pausing, she heard angry shouts leaking through the door, tainting her joyful song with unwanted discord. Giving Zecora a worried look but saying nothing, Luna exited the room with a heavy heart.

Once more she was torn from her sister, feeling anew the loneliness and pain of separation and isolation.

Once more she felt the icy cold of death's shadow graze her soul.

# Chapter 10

"Hey Applejack, what's the hold up? We've got places to go, hustle it up!"

Trudging onwards against the renewed ferocity of the prevailing wind, Applejack struggled to keep up with her zealous friend. Though incredibly stout and strong from years of harvesting her family's namesake, the earth pony lacked the swift agility of her pegasus peer. Applejack was impressed with Rainbow's display of tenacity despite flying in the face of winter's harsh harbinger. Even for a pegasus, a race more resistant to the fury of the elements, Rainbow was exceptional. Joining the rainbow-maned pegasus at the eves of Everfree, Applejack was disheartened to find before her the fulfillment of the north wind's covenant; the freezing rain that once poured down the boughs of the forest had now coalesced into a crystalline flurry of drifting snow. Its icy sheen glittered in the pale light of the moon as it danced to the sway of the wind's roaring symphony. A divine *pleasantry* for the eye to behold, the beauty of the new fallen snow was nonetheless lost to Applejack. Feeling only its bitter bite consuming her with numbness, the earth pony could only see a demon garbed in white and masked in shadow. Shivering, Applejack turned to Rainbow Dash and smiled playfully.

"Nice work you put in here, RD." the orange pony chuckled, "It's not too often you go beyond the call of duty! A rainstorm, sure, that's one thing, but a blizzard this early?"

"Hey!" Rainbow Dash responded defensively "There's no way you're pinning this one on me! Yeah, I kick-started this baby, but Everfree took it and made its own! Just take a look at these snowflakes!" she said playfully, swiping a couple from the air to show to Apple Jack, "They all look the same! I mean, c'mon, even I wouldn't be caught dead with a shoddy piece of work like this!"

Telling the difference between a good snowflake and a bad one was never the concern of Earth Ponies and Rainbow Dash knew full well of that. Grinning, Applejack simply shook her head.

"Whatever you say, hun! Now, how 'bout we can get to helpin' Twi like you were sayin'? A dragon ain't somethin' you want on yer tail."

"Ha! Chill-out Applejack!" Rainbow replied nonchalantly as the two entered the forest, "That cold-blooded loser is probably snoring right now, I'm pretty sure I read somewhere that they don't like snow or ice..."

"Rainbow Dash. Read?" Applejack said, while unsuccessfully stifling a laugh. "Phft...!"

Rainbow Dash wanted to feel insulted, but in all honesty, she had little grounds to be and it was a little funny, too.

"...fine, I guess you can call it more of a field experiment..."

"Readin' and experimentin' now?" burst Applejack, unable to withhold her laughter anymore, "Well Ah'll be darned Rainbow, yer startin' to sound like Twilight Sparkle here!"

Rainbow Dash blushed at Applejack's words. The pegasus knew her friend was secretly still hurting inside; Applejack wasn't one to forget injury so easily. Rainbow knew this fact firsthoofedly from a long history of pranks and competitions. The earth pony was strong-willed and uncomfortable with asking for help; she would deal with her pain in her own way. Often enough, it was through light-hearted teasing, a practice aimed at detracting others from her own troubled feelings. As such, Rainbow was not totally oblivious to why her friend was so detached from their predicament, but she couldn't help but feel a bit annoyed.

"...okay Carrot Top," Rainbow Dash chuckled hesitantly, "Yeah, well, by 'experiment' I kinda meant the time I pummeled Spike with a hailstorm of snowballs! You see, Twi was kinda angry with me about that cause Spike was out of it for a week afterward...but it probably doesn't matter anyway. I'm sure Princess Luna gave that lizard a big royal cup of kick-flank!"

Flying in front of Applejack, Rainbow did an enthusiastic loop and looked back at her friend.

"It was awesome, AJ! The dragon actually thought it could beat the princess! I mean, what a lame-brained frog, am I right? He tried blasting her with a firestorm but she didn't even break a sweat! Then she faced him head on. No armor, no weapon, no fear! Now that's a princess I can get behind, she's definitely not afraid to get her hooves a little dirty!"

Applejack frowned, any pretense of good-humor melting away at the mentioning of the moon goddess' name. Once more she tried to embrace her brother's words and refrain from judging and hating Luna, but it was too difficult to accept so quickly. Her feelings would not conform to what her mind wanted to believe, no matter how wise the lesson. Rainbow's words of praise for Luna only made her hidden hatred for the princess seethe.

"Her hooves ain't a little dirty Rainbow." Applejack whispered in contempt, "They're filthy, bloody, and darn-right disgustin'..."

Surprised to hear Applejack's teasing devolve into sincere hostility towards their goddess and princess, Rainbow Dash's mouth hung open in shock. The pegasus knew Applejack held Luna responsible for her brother's beating, but her words made it sound as if it were Luna who actually took the nightstick to Big Mac's face.

"Hey, AJ, you know that's not true, cut the princess some slack!" Rainbow Dash said as they continued following the muddy trail before them, "Look, I know it's not easy for you to help Luna out but..."

"Ah ain't helpin' Luna," Applejack said, the calm of her voice betrayed by an irate quiver, "Ah'm helpin' my friends, the ponies Ah love who deserve mah trust an' respect."

"Since when has 'Applejack, the most dependable of ponies' had a check-off list on who was good enough for her help?" Rainbow replied, "That doesn't sound like my friend, nope, not in a hundred, no, thousand years would she abandon a pony in need!"

"Never mind it, Rainbow." Applejack huffed, "Jus' lead the way. Ah don't want to talk about this anymore."

Seeing her friend once more swallow her pain, Rainbow Dash sighed and decided against pursuing the issue further. As it was, the pegasus wasn't the best at consoling ponies with emotional problems, though she could, at the very least, sympathize with Applejack. Like her, Rainbow's solution to problems was usually to deny or ignore them. If confronted with them, she would push ponies away and wallow in her bitterness while knowing full well that she truly needed them. But pride is cruel and knows no reason. The best thing Rainbow could do for Applejack was to respect her decisions.

"Yeah...okay then." Rainbow replied, "I'm pretty sure we just keep following this path for a ways yet, I mean..."

"What?"

"Nothin', it's just really dark...but I got it, really!...Oh yeah, and if we get there and they're not there, don't freak! Twi said that they would be heading to Everfree Castle."

With a slight nod, Applejack continued down the perilous path before them; the wet mud had frozen and made for both a sticky and slippery journey while the palpable darkness made it even worse. Unlike Rainbow who soared the skies nimbly and quickly, Applejack was married to the earth and bound to its limitations. She had no hope in traversing the forest at the same pace as Rainbow, meaning that she would be slowing down the . A small part of Applejack envied her pegasus friend; but this was not a new feeling. Dwarfing it was a larger part of her that did not care about reaching Luna in a hurry. The prickle of ice carried by the wind's fell breath further tried Applejack's thin resolve and blackened her spirits.

"Serves her right," Applejack thought, "If she needs me so badly, she can just sit her royal keister on her throne in Everfree 'til Ah get there! She's a pony no better than anypony else...goddess or not, Lady Justice sees not a single difference. Why should Ah? Why should Rainbow? But she can't tell, she can't care, how could she? Rainbow has the memory of a goldfish swimmin' in a glass of whiskey an' 'cause of that, a little firework show from Luna can win her over. Ain't make one bit of sense!"

As they walked, her hate for Luna bled into her misgivings about Rainbow Dash. The notion that Rainbow could follow and trust Luna over a superficial display of power, one that should be unsurprising for a *goddess*, was insanely incredulous. Even Twilight, Luna's principle advocate, was not so confident in her convictions concerning the princess. Applejack was sure that Rainbow had some demented and misguided sense of loyalty for Luna, despite everything they knew about her and everything she did to usurp Celestia. Yes, the princess she should be fighting for, the one *deserving* of their respect and admiration. Whatever Rainbow thought about loyalty, it definitely didn't add up.

No, it wasn't just that. It was downright stupid.



Watching the green leaves of Everfree torn from their branches as they succumbed to the blanketing snow, Applejack kept pressing forward in accordance to the pegasus' guiding flight path. Coming upon a crossroad, Rainbow Dash paused and looked nervously at both directions.

"What's the matter Rainbow, did ya get us lost yet?" Applejack said dismissively, "or did ya remember somethin' important too late?"

Though her words were delivered casually, they were laced with a venomous spite. Gone was any shred of Applejack playfulness. In its stead, the earth pony's famous passive-aggressiveness had come out in full force, much to Rainbow Dash's misfortune. Surprised a bit by her friend's unwarranted vitriol, the pegasus thought it best to just write it off as just another jab...well, a particularly poignant one that is.

"Yeah, AJ, there's no problem, I was just checkin' to make sure that we're still headed in the right way..." Rainbow said before muttering, "...just don't get your lasso in a knot, geez..."

"What?"

"Uh, nothing. Hey, I was just wondering if we could maybe speed it up a bit. How 'bout it AJ?"

"Easy for you to say, hun." Applejack said in much the same manner as before, "It's another day at the job for you, but Ah'm not built for blizzards. Don't get your feathers in a bunch about it, you hear? I'm doin' my best...honest."

The obvious lie made Rainbow sigh in frustration. The junior speedster wished Twilight was there to deal with their stubborn friend, especially so now that Applejack's attitude was becoming not so much annoying now as it was just plain irritating.

"Ah Twi," Rainbow thought as she led on, "I'd be at your side in a blink of an eye if it weren't for Turtle Jack holding up the show here! I know she's dragging her hooves now, I mean, yeah, it's freakin' cold, no lie, but AJ's the toughest earth pony I know! What she's sayin' is a load of horse apples, I see her clear through mountains of snow every year! This is peanuts in comparison!"

Further down the path a new juncture emerged presenting Rainbow Dash with three potential routes. Unlike the first, the pegasus was gripped by a troubling uncertainty that did not go unnoticed by her reluctant companion.

"Well this is swell," Applejack groaned bitterly as she waited for the pegasus to make up her mind, "You said we were in a rush, but we're doin' a whole lotta standin' now instead! Can we please get a move on before we turn into a couple of snowponies?"

Gritting her teeth in a futile attempt to mask her frustration, Rainbow responded the best she could.

"Just give me a sec, would you? Geez, this isn't easy. I don't walk around Everfree in my spare time, it's impossible to know every nook and cranny of this stupid forest!"

"Yer right 'bout that, Rainbow, you wouldn't 'cause yer too busy takin' naps." Applejack replied unforgivably, "Ya know, you give Ditzzy Doo a whole lot of grief for not havin' an ounce of direction, but yer no better when push comes to shove."

"Hey!" Rainbow shouted, her sensitive pride no longer willing to put up with Applejack, "What are you tryin' to say? I'm *Rainbow Dash*, the fastest pegasus to come out of Cloudsdale..."

"Without graduatin'." Applejack finished for the pegasus, "Yer lazy bones and non-stop day dreamin' held ya back, Ah mean, even Ditzzy passed her exams."

"...are you sayin' I'm dumb, AJ?"

"Well Ah'm not sayin' yer a prodigy." the earth pony replied coldly, "Listen, yer talent will only get you so far Rainbow, ya need to work at it. Life's not just 'bout trainin' to fly fast, it's 'bout doin' yer own thinkin' and becomin' yer own pony. Flight school was supposed to help that, but you flunked out."

Applejack's words carried more force than any wind. Each felt like a sharp blow to the ribs, leaving Rainbow flustered, angry, and at loss as to what to say back. She wanted to give her friend a taste of her own medicine but was unable to think of anything, wit never being her forte. Defenseless and

exposed, Applejack's cruel and brutal honesty ravaged Rainbow's pride mercilessly.

"Well, um, well, that's got nothing to do with anything!" the pegasus sputtered, "Don't try to tear me down just because you've got a thing against Luna..."

"Mah thing against Luna?" Applejack replied, her anger now quite visible "No, it's yer thing *for* Luna that's the problem! How can you be so...well, so darn *happy* followin' her!"

"I, I never said I'd follow her anywhere, I...I'm here for..." Rainbow stuttered in defense, her fiery temper subdued by Applejack's own intense display.

"Rainbow, Ah've known you fer a good time now," Applejack continued, her tone unchanging, "And when somepony gains your respect, you know darn well you'd fly right into a dragon's mouth for 'em in a heartbeat without questionin' or thinkin' about the consequences. Nah, you let us do that for you."

"That's 'cause...'cause," Rainbow responded, "well, I mean, she's a freakin' *princess* Applejack, c'mon! She has to be a good guy deep down."

"So what if she's a princess?" Applejack fired back, "When you first laid eyes on her "highness", she was a psychotic witch who you were ready to kick all the way to Timbucktu! But hey, add a little title to the front of her name and the same pony becomes a saintly do-good-er out to save the world she had wanted to leave in darkness!"

"It's not like that at all..."

"It *is* like that Rainbow, what you think about a pony is just that shallow. Remember when the Wonderbolts were holdin' try-outs and Rapid Fire got in? You hated him, and not us' because he got a shot at yer dream. He was a no-good bully who tormented the lot of you lil' pegasi in Cloudsdale with his devilish pranks. But as soon as he made it on the team, you found yerself another idol to drool over."

"...he wasn't just a bully, you know" Rainbow weakly defended, "he was always kinda cool in a loveable jerkish sort of way..."

"Save it Rainbow." Applejack interrupted again, "No matter which way you spell it, you adore the fella because of a cheap spandex uniform, not for who he is deep down at heart. The same goes for Luna, you care more about what she's called than who she really is!"

"That's, that's no-not stupid!" Rainbow shouted, quivering on the verge of tears, "You're not being fair, AJ!"

"No, Ah'm just right, that's all." Applejack coldly replied, "Rainbow Ah can't follow you. Ah just can't trust your judgment anymore than Ah can lasso and hogtie it. Ah'll find my own path to Everfree Castle..."

"Applejack, please, I remember now, I promise!" Rainbow broke in, "I'm not stupid, I'm not! We can get there together, don't leave!"

Turning her back on Rainbow Dash, Applejack took the right pathway and trudged on forth without looking back.

"Hey wait! Hold on AJ! That's not the way to Everfree Castle, I've never even been down that way before, who knows what's down there! C'mon, we gotta stick together, this forest is full of monsters!"

"If you had half a brain, Rainbow, you'd hush up and follow me!" Applejack shouted back, not wavering from her decision for a second, " This path is the widest and best kept! Looks like a castle road if there ever was one!"

As the pegasi were connected body and soul to the heavens above, so too were Applejack and her kind to the earth below. Pushing away the new fallen snow, she needed little light to tell that the gravel seemed finer and the ground more firm under hoof. Rainbow Dash, however, only saw dirt no different from the path she desired to take. Desperate to sway Applejack away from her choice, Rainbow's bold spirit emerged once more to lock horns with the earth pony's adamant stubbornness, but the fresh wounds it had sustained could not be hidden under such a thin veneer of confidence.

"AJ, that's not the right way to our friends, I'm telling you!" Rainbow yelled, her voice trembling as a violent gust blew through the forest boughs, "Listen to me, c'mon! They're over this way!"

But Applejack didn't hear her over the wind's fell cry and continued onward undeterred. As ice and snow buffeted her face, she found herself not caring

if Rainbow were to follow her. This was her path, the *right* path; she would walk it even if it meant going alone. If Rainbow was so sure of herself, she would find a way to Everfree Castle on her own. With her speed, recklessness, and dumb luck, the pegasus could easily brave the forest by herself. Applejack knew that's what her friend was thinking anyway and couldn't agree more; besides, the frustrated earth pony couldn't stand to look at Rainbow anymore. Whenever she did, Applejack could only see a crude caricature of the pegasus she loved so dearly. It pained her not only to see Rainbow's loyal heart warped by her naïveté, but her devotion to the mystique of night incarnate; Princess Luna. In a strange way, running away from Rainbow was a final act of resistance against this goddess of despair. If she was fated to help the villain, so be it, but it would be on her terms. Not Rainbow's, not Twilight's, and most definitely not Luna's.

Yes, her own; no others'.

The novel notion thawed her frozen limbs and drove her deeper into the heart of the forest. Without thinking, Applejack found herself building up speed against the wind's current until at last she was at full gallop. With abandon she charged forward, not out of urgency to reach the castle but to flee from the sickening hatred she felt coursing through her. In this sense, the once repressive cold had become liberating; every chilling breath she drew no longer filled her with dread. Rather this union between the freezing air and her burning heart produced an exhilarating wave of energy to take hold of her senses and push her to the limit.

Coming upon a clearing, Applejack stopped to catch her breath and noticed a large erratic situated in its midst. The remnant of an age long past, it stood monolithic and proud as it endured the vicious winds in no different a manner than it had the past few millenia. Weathered but massive nonetheless, its summit offered an ideal lookout that just managed to pierce the umbrage of Everfree.

"Well, Ah'll be darned, a little luck comes mah way." Applejack thought with little enthusiasm, "Ah'll see how far the castle is just up ahead, won't take long to find out."

Climbing the boulder, Applejack cast her eyes across the vast expanse of Everfree. Expectantly she looked for the dark turrets of the castle in the black of night until a fiery glint caught her eye for but a second. Looking

westward in the direction of her intended path, the earth pony could just barely make out the outline of Luna's citadel from afar.

Applejack's pride swelled at the sight. From atop her perch, she shouted against the wind and snow.

"Ha! Ah knew it! Ah knew Ah was right! See, a good bit of common sense and responsibility can get you far, Rainbow! You hear? Ah was right!"

In that moment, the farm pony felt unconquerable as she stood upon the rock's precipice, her proud smile seemingly goading fate's hand to do its worst. Tolerance being no virtue of destiny, it responded in kind with a sudden powerful updraft. Its indiscriminate touch knowing no limitations, it snatched and carried Applejack's hat away into the forest.

"No, no, no!" she cried aloud in dismay, "How could Ah be so careless? Shoot, get back here now!"

Jumping from top the giant stone back down to the earth without so much as a flinch, Applejack's eyes were locked on the faint shadow of her hat. Cruelly the wind toyed with her by floating the old heirloom in the air just above her, tantalizing the earth pony to no end. As the hat crossed the pathway and entered into the thick, snow-covered brush of Everfree, Applejack gave no thought to pursuing the ragged piece of felt. Breaking branches from their limbs with ease as she charged, Applejack felt little pain as she was torn at by thorns and ice. Nothing could distract her from that most cherished possession, the honor of father's memory. Applejack was bound heart, soul, and mind to the preservation of what very little she had left from him, that what she still needed from him.

At last, it seemed the wind had grown weary with its little game. Dropping the hat neatly before the entrance of a small cave, the wind dissipated as if to allow the humbled pony the right to retrieve the thing without interference.

"Thank mah lucky stars!" Applejack cried out "Thank Celestia, wherever she is! Thank, well..."

Pausing only for a seconds Applejack's doubt was overpowered by the intense relief and joy she felt.

"Heck, why not? Thank Luna and her crummy witchcraft too! Ah thank-"

A slight tremor in the earth shook Applejack from her cathartic adulation. Puzzled, she took a single step forward and felt another vibration. To her horror, Applejack beheld a creature born of the blackest nightmares emerge from its hidden burrow; the tarantulion. Three times the size of a pony, the giant arachnid was covered in a thick coat of bristling, toxic hairs. Around its head extended particularly long strands that gave the death trap the deceptive appearance of a lion's regal mane. The monster bore razor sharp claws at the end of each leg, ideal for shredding any unfortunate fauna that may stumble above its feasting hall. Just above the beast's tremendous, skull-crushing jaws, eight grotesque, unblinking eyes rested and stared intently at Applejack until it caught sight of the hat before its trapdoor. Content with taking it as a prize, the tarantulion ceased the hat and retreated back into its burrow to continue preparing its den for its long winter sleep.

Applejack stood in dead silence unable and unwilling to shift her gaze away from the beast's lair. A cold emptiness now pervaded throughout her being as if her heart had instead been torn away from her. As the farm pony trembled and fell to her knees, a fresh stream of hot tears trickled down the side of her face. The despair she felt was not just for her loss, it was also because she deserved it.

"What have I done worthy to wear pa's hat anyway?" she questioned, "I didn't listen to mah brother, I abandoned Rainbow a few miles back, and I disrespected them both because I let mah arrogance best me again...What would pa say if he saw me now, alone in the middle of the most dangerous forest in Equestria? 'Ya reap what ya sow now, Applejack, you don't grow apples from oranges', that's what."

Closing her eyes, Applejack reflected on the events that had led her before the tarantulion's den, a thousand thoughts passing through her mind in the brevity of seconds. She remembered how moved she was by Big Mac's comforting wisdom, but she was far from Fluttershy's cozy bedroom. In the heart of a blizzard, his words seemed to have lost all meaning or use. Applejack wasn't a sage, talk of how life should be was always secondary to how things are and as she endured the icy slings and arrows of nature, the earth pony found very little reason to change her attitude. Even now Applejack continued to grapple with the story of her father's death, trying to

make sense of it all in relation to her own struggle. She had been so young when it happened that over the years he had become a sort of legend to her, an intangible paradigm of virtue pure of sin and selfishness.

"Pa was a humble pony who gave everything to do what was right."  
Applejack thought, "Ah tried to be like him, Ah've tried mah whole life, but when it all boils down to it and things are lookin' tough, what am Ah? A no good coward? But how can Ah do the right thing by doing what Ah know feels wrong? Am Ah even makin' any sense now?"

Turning her teary eyes to the star-lit heavens above, Applejack made a final plea to the bygone spirit of her father. In her mind, she knew nothing would come of it, but she needed release somehow.

"Ah'll make you proud, pa, Ah swear Ah'll find a way, just you see...please, give me another chance!"

"You got it boss!"

Shocked to hear a response, Applejack stood up straight only to feel a rush of air pass just above her ear. Landing before the mouth of the cave, Rainbow Dash turned back to smile at her friend.

"Miss me? You gave me one heck of a race Applejack, but you can't get rid of me that easy!"

As she said this, a red glow emanated from around the pegasus' neck; it was the light of loyalty shining brightly in the darkest of places. Though overjoyed to see her friend return, Applejack felt a twinge of fear creep down her spine as she noticed just where Rainbow Dash was standing.

"Rainbow, get away from there! It ain't safe there's..."

"A big ugly spider. I know, no big deal." she replied. Knocking the top off the trapdoor, Rainbow taunted the busy tarantulation."Hey you dumb hunk of husk! I've been stamping around your little dirt hole for a full ten seconds now! How is it that the world's slowest spider is still alive with a time like that? Do you have your mom down there spoon feeding you flies or something!"



Of course, the content of her words meant very little to the tarantulion but the vibrations they sent through its home incensed it to no end. Though not hungry, a final snack before hibernation seemed to be in order. Like lightning the beast struck from below, but it was hardly a match for Rainbow's agility. Deftly dodging the attack, Rainbow Dash shouted at the arachnid "That's it? Let me show you how its done, itsy bitsy!". Building up speed before charging right back at the tarantulion, Rainbow smashed one of its legs with terrifying impact. Slightly crippled, the beast let out a guttural roar before slashing at Rainbow with its claws. Surprised to see a spider with such a dangerous appendage, the pegasus barely managed to escape the brunt of its swing. But a scratch from a full-grown and angry tarantulion can hardly be dismissed, as Rainbow soon learned as a warm trickle of blood split down her face and into her eyes.

"Rainbow, leave it be and let's get outta here!" Applejack desperately appealed, "It ain't worth it!"

Briefly turning back to her friend before returning to the fray, Rainbow Dash simply grinned.

"No worries AJ, a little bug bite's not going to keep me down for long, I got this!"

Flying into the air, Rainbow Dash rode the winds powerful current to achieve breakneck speeds that would crush a lesser aviator. In a rainbow flash, the pegasus assaulted her foe with a barrage of blows. Shrieking, the tarantulion recoiled and bided its time, waiting for its prey to leave herself open. As it endured the dizzying pummeling from above, the beast subtly shed its toxic hairs and dispersed them into the air. Little to Rainbow's knowledge, the irritating pricks she felt was the sensation of a debilitating venom entering her veins. It didn't take long before the pegasus started feeling fuzzy-headed and tired but continued her attack unabated. As she pulled away from her latest strike, she felt one of the tarantulion's claw grasp her. Slamming Rainbow into the earth and pinning her firmly down, the beast crawled over its victim in eager preparation for the *coup de grâce*. Struggling in vain to free herself, Rainbow saw no clear way out.

"Claws off the wings, you damned dirty bug!" she cursed, no longer resisting, "Keep it up and you'll find your ugly face getting bucked hard!"

The tarantulion ignored the unintelligible growls of its prey and lowered its head for the kill. Clicking its mandibles wildly, a premature drop of venom drooled from its exposed fangs. As the lethal rope of toxin threatened to graze her face, Rainbow Dash did not flinch or cower out of fear and hopelessness. No, that wouldn't be much like Rainbow Dash at all; she would rather piss death off with a snide smirk and a dismissive laugh.

"Ha! Your funeral, I hope you like Apples..."

Suddenly, from out of the shadows, Applejack's powerful hooves emerged to ream the beast square in the face.

"... 'cause you just got a mouth-full!"

Gripped by immeasurable pain, the tarantulion screeched and reared up on its hind-legs, exposing its sensitive abdomen to the courageous and cocky pegasus. Recovering with a quick flip, Rainbow delivered a swift aerial blow to the beast that sent it falling backwards. Flailing madly, the tarantulion rolled itself back on to its feet and fled into the forest. Though the ancient arachnid had abandoned its burrow to its better, there festered no semblance of resentment in the tarantulion's simple mind. The laws of nature could not be challenged, might was always right.

"That's right, run!" Rainbow shouted weakly, "Tell your monster pals that no one, and I mean no *one*, hurts my friends! Doesn't matter how or why...doesn't...matter..."

Seeing Rainbow's knees wobble, Applejack jumped to support her friend before she could fall.

"Rainbow, that was the gall darn dumbest thing you've ever done!" Applejack cried aloud, her stern voice trembling, "You scared me dead stiff, I was so worried I'd lose you over a stupid old hat! If you had...had died for that hat Ah...don't think Ah could ever live with mahself..."

"Applejack, I didn't risk my wings just for your hat and you know it. I did what I did because I knew how important it was to you, I knew that it was your dad's. No matter what you want to call it now, that hat is part of who you are and where you come from. You're my best friend, Applejack, I...I love you, you know? I'd sacrifice anything to defend even the smallest bit of what makes you so special, so strong, so incredibly awesome..."

"Rainbow, how can you say that after the way I treated you?" Applejack sniffed, shaking her head "Ah don't deserve your love, you shouldn't love me now. Ah wanted to hurt you, Ah *did* hurt you! How can you forgive me so fast? Ah can't even forgive mahself! It doesn't make an ounce of sense!"

"Heh, well, what can I say?" Rainbow replied giving a fatigued chuckle, "Sure you pulled some pretty sharp punches, and yeah, it really did hurt to hear the honest truth. But hey, I'm your friend, I'd never ditch you because of some stupid fight. I mean, how much sense would it make for me to hate you? What good would come from that? None."

As she spoke, Rainbow's voice became noticeably raspy and cracked as though parched. Trying again to stand on her own four hooves, the pegasus stumbled back into Applejack's embrace.

"Ha, oops, slipped up again. Thanks AJ..."

"Hush hun, I'm going to get us to shelter, just hold on for little while."

Hoisting the pegasus on to her back, Applejack carried Rainbow Dash to the cave the tarantulon had once used as bait for weary animals. Though its mouth was wide, the inside of the cave was quite small. Lying Rainbow down on the cold rock, Applejack looked at her friend with subtle awe. Though Rainbow's strength had waned, the light of her element shone ever the brighter, revealing not just the walls of the cave, but revealing the full extent of her injuries as well. Apart from the bloody memento the tarantulon's claws had carved into the left-side of her face, the poisonous hairs of the beast had inflamed the cyan pegasus' skin, leaving red scratches across her body. Her feathers were ruffled, dirty, and covered with frost while her left wing hung limply as though broken. The despair Applejack had felt upon seeing her brother's broken body returned with devastating force, causing new tears to well and new sorrows to blossom.

"Ah'm so, so sorry Rainbow, this is all my fault!" Applejack cried, "Ah was just so full of myself and Ah didn't listen to you proper...it's like Ah'll never learn! It's so hard to change for the better Rainbow, Ah don't know if Ah can do it!"

"Applejack, give yourself a break!" Rainbow returned, trying her best to ignore her own poor condition, "I know you're super responsible and everything, but you gotta stop acting like you've got the whole world on

your shoulders! Besides, I like to take credit for my own near-death experiences, thank you very much. I got a little beat up because I chose to fight a giant spider, nothing you said or did made me do it. "

"...but that *stupid* hat...it still wasn't worth the risk!"

"Oh really?" Rainbow smiled weakly, "Take a look at yourself and tell me that with a straight face."

Checking to see what exactly her friend meant, Applejack was surprised to find her body covered in nasty cuts and large bruises.

"Ha, you bulldozed a good chunk of Everfree to chase that 'stupid' hat. To be straight with ya Applejack, you don't look much better than me right now...Let's face it, the only thing that kept you from kicking that spider out of its hole and getting your hat back was that you were alone and scared. I would be too, AJ. But when I faced that slimy bug, I knew you were there at my side. If things started looking bad, I knew that I could count on you to make sure that I didn't end up as spider chow."

"Rainbow...I guess yer right, but how can you be so confident about it all? Ah didn't deserve yer trust at all..."

"Geez, cut it out with the humility thing already. It's getting old fast, okay?" Rainbow interrupted, "Anyway, it's like your brother was saying. When everything is on the table and the stakes are high, the only thing we've really got is each other. I know your trust issues with Luna are really screwing with you today, but you gotta see that sometimes respect and faith in a pony doesn't need to be earned. Sometimes, it's just gotta be expected, you know?"

Applejack closed her eyes and sighed.

"No, I know, but...but...I can't ignore the past..."

"Well, that's gotta be important too, but we can't live like we're stuck in time. You said it's hard to change for the better, but it's possible because we have our amazing friends to help us. I mean, without you guys I'd probably just be some loud-mouthed, selfish bully flying around Cloudsdale doing nothing but causing problems. And look at Twi, she's come a long way from being an anti-social shut-in, don't you think?"

"Ah do..."

"Well then, as your friend, it's my job to help you be the best pony you can. Just give me a sec and I'll be right back!"

Applejack was astonished to see her friend confidently rise to her hooves, something just ten minutes ago seemed nearly impossible. With a hobbled stride, Rainbow ducked into the empty burrow at the cave entrance and emerged a few moments later covered in web. Atop her head was Applejack's beloved hat, freshly rescued from the walls of the tarantulion's lair. Moved beyond words, Applejack smiled warmly as a single tear escaping her eyes.

"It fits you better than it does me." Applejack said, "Yer brave and loving, Rainbow, just like mah pa was."

"No offense Applejack, but it's not really my style. It works a whole lot better for you." Rainbow chuckled, taking the hat off and placing it back on Applejack's head, "See? And hey, don't sell yourself short, it took a lot of guts to come save my flank too. Your dad would be proud AJ, 'cause if there's anypony like him, it's definitely his kid."

Applejack lunged at Rainbow, hugging her tightly in loving appreciation. As she held the pegasus closely, the grateful earth pony could feel the warmth emanating from Rainbow's elemental jewel pass into her. Soon, the cold frost that had touched her heart had been cast out.

"Thank you Rainbow, thank you so much for everything, you really are the truest, most loyal friend a pony could ever ask for. Ah can't tell you just how important and special you are to me. Ah was lost and confused, but you've helped me find mah way again!"

As Applejack nuzzled up against her, Rainbow Dash was overjoyed to see that she had really made a difference in the earth pony's life. The brash pegasus never thought she was too good with handling other ponies' issues and definitely didn't consider herself a well of wisdom. Yet here she was dishing some out; such is the extraordinary power of friendship that her unknown potential could be tapped.

Though she had done a lot of good, Rainbow knew that there was still one agonizing thorn buried deep in Applejack's heart that needed to be

removed. Always one for a risk, the pegasus was now confident that she was the one for the job.

Momentarily breaking their embrace, Rainbow pulled away from Applejack and looked deeply into her eyes.

"When I heard you ask for a second chance, I didn't think about it at all. It didn't matter to me if you deserved it or not, everypony should be able to prove themselves, at least that's what I think. No pony is above forgiveness AJ...not even Luna. You need to forgive her, AJ! It's the only way you can ever forgive yourself."

Applejack turned herself away from Rainbow's gaze, ashamed and angry at herself.

"...Yes, it's just...Ah can't do it..."

"Why, is it really that hard to believe that Luna has changed?"

"...Ah can't let go of my hate for her...for Luna. She only leaves a trail of misery behind her, how can it be that she's changed? Luna is the night, Rainbow. She is this darkness, this mystery, this...this *terror* that surrounds us right now. How can honest good come from that? How can I be expected to forget what she is? It would take a miracle for me to believe in Luna..."

"A miracle?" Rainbow interrupted, "Well you know me, I'm always up for a challenge!"

Focusing as hard as possible, Rainbow began flapping her right wing while her crippled left wing twitched uselessly.

"Stop that Rainbow, it looks painful as all get up!" Applejack said with concern.

"Ugh, no pain, no game!" the tenacious mare replied with a wink, "It's really not that bad, I'll show ya!"

Applejack cringed at her friend's futile effort, the tortuous sight making her conscious of her own injuries. After a brief while, the earth pony heard the obscene cracking of bones and immediately worried for Rainbow's well-

being. Her fears were soon dashed when, to her complete amazement, she saw the gutsy pegasus take to the air. Hovering with a wry smile on her face, Rainbow Dash laughed at the sight of Applejack's jaw drop.

"Ha, good as new, what did I tell you?"

"But...but...your wing was more busted than a bucket of juicing grapes!" Applejack sputtered, "And yer face, it's, it's all patched up too!"

Applejack pointed to the gruesome slash, and indeed, gone was any trace of blood or rash. Only a faint scar marked where claw and flash had met.

"Really? Sweet, it kinda stung a bit," she responded, the strength of her voice now restored, "Hey, you look a little less bad yourself!"

Checking herself over, Applejack watched as a small cut on her leg healed over, but not without a surprising release of pain. The earth pony simply stared in dismay as she slowly realized the implications.

"She wasn't lying." Applejack muttered under her breath.

"What's that?"

"Luna...she was being honest, but Ah...Ah didn't want to believe her, it all sounded like a bucket of hooey...but Ah guess we really did steal her immortality from her..."

"Wait, wait, wait, slow down." Rainbow said, waving her hooves wildly, "We're *immortal*? That is so **cool**!"

"Not exactly sugar cube, we still got pretty roughed up fighting that spider, but...wait. Twilight never told you what this is all about?"

"Nope!"

"Then how did you know you'd get better..."

"I didn't, but it never hurts to keep on trying and having a bit of faith," Rainbow replied, "...well, maybe it did a little bit this time around. But hey, whatever works!"

Turning and looking out at the radiant silver moon resting across the horizon, Applejack closed her teary eyes and sat in silence as a bitter war raged in her heart and mind. Her hate remained, but its roots withered in the light of faith and reason. As she tried to purge the loathsome cancer, Applejack's thoughts strayed back to her brother's life stories. Once dead and divorced from everything the earth pony understood, Applejack's trial through wind and snow as well as beast and demon had breathed new meaning into Big Mac's words.

*"AJ, there's no way fer us to understand exactly Princess Luna's motives or goals. She's a goddess after all, so much depends on her. She's powerful beyond our knowin', so she has to be careful with what she says, one word could mean the difference between life and death. All we can do is have faith in her, jus' as we have faith in our friends. When it all comes down to it, that's all we've got."*

As she meditated on this, she felt Rainbow warmly embrace her in solemn support. Opening her eyes, Applejack found the strength to cast out her hate. With a deep breath of winter's cold air, Applejack felt cleansed and absolved of her weakness. Never before had she felt such relief as respect replaced hatred, although its shadow would never entirely be lifted from her. But in that moment she felt renewed, perhaps even like if it was a normal day with normal expectations.

She was at last ready to trust and help Princess Luna not because she was led on a leash by destiny, but because she *wanted* to. It may be stupid, but her personal sacrifice echoed the ethos of both her brother and father; one family bonded together by honor, humility, and swift service to those in need.

"Well Rainbow," Applejack spoke up, her voice filled with passion and promise, "it looks about time Ah got over my sobbin' fit and get back to work! Saddle up! Ah've let mah friends down too much today and Ah won't tolerate it no more, so let's get a roll on!"

"That's the Applejack I know!" Rainbow shouted, "All right, Everfree Castle, here we come!"

As they left the cave, the duo didn't get far before Applejack heard the ominous sound of breaking branches coming from the east. The threat of the tarantulion returning with a vengeance seemed very real, especially



since the wind could not be blamed. Curiously, its intensity had diminished since the fight with the spider. Thus was the unpredictability of Everfree.

"Ugh, Rainbow, please tell me you hear that." Applejack said, looking at Rainbow with uncertainty.

"Hear wha-"

Out of the darkness of the forest, a shadowy figure bolted straight into Rainbow, causing both to fall to the ground. By the light of Rainbow's jewel, Applejack was surprised to find no monster, but rather a black pegasus covered in bandages, bruises, and cuts.

"Hey buddy, watch it!" Rainbow shouted as she got back up and dusted her feathers off, "What the hay are you doing in Everfree anyway, are you crazy or something?"

"That voice..." the pegasus grunted, "...That voice! You can't be..."

Realizing just who it was he crashed into, the stranger's red eyes opened in horror.

" Rainbow Dash!"

"Of course I'm...wait, old on," Rainbow Dash said, "Nightshade, is that you?"

"Nightshade! Lt. Nightshade? The pegasus that wrangled me in the mud?" Applejack asked, "What in blazes is he doing here with no armor wandering around like Granny Smith after a hot cup of special cider!"

The guard got to his hooves and looked at Applejack, his sensitive eyes straining to get an ounce of good detail in the dark.

"Applejack? You were under the custody too! Damn it, damn it, damn it! How could Lightning Strike let this happen?"

"Hey settle down there, partner." Applejack said, trying to calm the volatile soldier "You don't look all that swell, maybe you should come with us."

"To the moon I will!" Nightshade sneered, shaking Applejack's hoof off him, "I'd never follow a bunch of witches to their coven! You won't fool me, the lot of you will pay for what you've done!"

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard..." Rainbow said, thinking back to the 'race', "Don't be so sore about losing, geez..."

"Damn, they're all here in Everfree!" Nightshade shouted, "They're all here! But this isn't the end, I'll bring the whole bloody hive down on this forest in a blink of an eye! That's a promise!"

Before another word could be said, Nightshade, in spite of his injuries, dashed madly into the forest at a speed that would put Rainbow to shame. Such was his haste that the snow melted in his wake, leaving a trail cleared of both brush and ice behind him.

"Did you get that Rainbow?" Applejack said, "Our friends aren't at the castle. You were right, well, in a way. Anyhow they must be where this Nightshade fella came from, c'mon! This guy means business, did you see that? We best get a move on, and quick-like!"

Rainbow just stared down Nightshade's path having just witnessed the fastest pegasus she had ever seen.

"Rainbow! Snap out of it and come on!"

"Uh, yeah!" Rainbow shook herself, "Vamanos, allons-y, and all that other good stuff! We're outta here!"

As the friends shot down the eastward path out of the heart of the forest, they failed to take notice of a red bird perched above the cave quietly priming its plumage before taking off once more into the night sky.