



# The Life and Times of Caughlin Mare

By Casca

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# Chapter 1

## Enter Caughlin Mare and Dr. Whooves

### **Discordian Era, year unknown**

Caughlin stood on the director's stand, an elevated stage that oversaw the large den of operations. She was a gray unicorn mare with a blond mane and yellow eyes, of average build. As usual, the den was cluttered and buzzing with various activities; in one corner, a few ponies were examining a sample of cotton candy clouds, and in another corner, others were prodding at a curious crystalline material. It was a pity, she noted, that they could not afford to split the space into separate rooms. In the far end of the den she could see her own workplace, a large, cylindrical glass-walled chamber, in which pink trees were growing inexplicably from the stone ground. She tapped a hoof impatiently as she waited for the unpredictable, yet confirmed visit of Discord, ruler of Equestria. Handling his visits was something she had to do. As lead researcher, she was responsible for taking care of the projects' integrity, and that meant distracting Discord from them. She herself had near-completed her own project - reality bubbles, from whence her cutie mark originated - and so she could afford to spend her time off it.

She rubbed her eyes and magicked a clipboard to her side. The group was small, less than ten ponies, crammed together into an underground facility. She could faintly remember the above world, but knew nothing of it; everypony in the Laboratory had been taken down here since childhood, and had lived here since. Not that it bothered her; she enjoyed science and research, and the new understandings they unveiled regarding nature despite Discord's permanent mark on it. She read off the clipboard. Team 4 was to present their results on accelerating grass growth by tomorrow. She looked forward to it. It would definitely help keep Equestria's ponies fed, considering Discord's latest boasts about turning whole fields of soil into worthless sand.

She took some time to reflect on her home. The Laboratory was simply space hollowed out underground, sub-divided into the main hall, where they all were, and bedrooms that branched out from the hall. The surface

was smooth and fairly clean; it was reconstituted rock, easier to clean and walk on than rough bedrock or soil. Experimental bulbs lit the place brightly, recharged every time Discord made an entrance. The excess magic that flowed off his body was tapped and harnessed by hidden nodes. Not that Discord didn't know of them, of course, but rather for aesthetics' sake the spindly things were embedded into the walls, out of sight.

Speaking of the devil, there was a loud crack next to her. She turned and bowed. "Lord Discord," she murmured. She felt her heart pound. It had begun.

"My dear Caughlin," said Discord, smirking. "Well, well, well. What do you have for me today?"

"Well, as you know, we've been working on the consistency of your cotton candy clouds," said Caughlin, leading him down the steps to the ground floor. "We believe we have found the empirical composition of the clouds, and the relation to their retention of the chocolate rain. This in turn lets us delve into finding the rain seed crystals, which is very fascinating." They drew up to the table. The other ponies watched, their expressions blank.

Discord yawned loudly and stared at the sample hard. "And this means...?"

"Well, we should be able to make the clouds under controlled conditions," said Caughlin, her eyes firmly on Discord's floating hooves. She could not bear to look at the rest of him, let alone his face.

"Hmm. So if I were, say, to do this to Canterlot..."

Caughlin looked up in horror as Discord waved his arms. A mirror appeared mid-air, showing the town of Canterlot from afar. Slowly, a translucent cylinder glimmered around it, locking the residents firmly within its confinement.

"...you would be able to make it rain inside?"

"Y..yes," said Caughlin. "With enough materials and some more research, yes, we could."

"What about raining other things? Like frogs?" Discord waved his arms again, and Caughlin watched on as the heavens opened to shower

Canterlot with frogs. Because of the cylinder, the frogs soon began to build up. Even though the den was deathly silent, she could imagine the screams and yells of ponies as they tried to run for cover, tried to avoid being smothered by frogs, the very ponies in the mirror and their looks of horror. It was not pretty.

"Yes, like frogs. But we need more research for that, too."

"Ah well." With a click of his fingers, the cylinder disappeared. The frogs, though, did not. "The prospect of ponies being able to cause chaos is so wonderful, Caughlin, but you make it so boring and methodical. You're not getting the heart of it right at all," said Discord disappointingly. "You hear me? Loosen up. Improvise. Let chaos do the work."

"Yes, lord Discord," said Caughlin, her face set like stone.

"Good. Carry on, then." With another gaze at Canterlot, Discord disappeared in a puff of smoke, and the mirror crashed to the floor.

Caughlin shook her head and swallowed a lump. The other ponies silently tread towards her and gave her a hug.

"I'm okay, everypony," said Caughlin quietly. "Get back to work. Somepony please clean up the glass. I want that out of here." She walked back to her own station. "Somepony could get hurt," she whispered.

A few days later, Discord re-appeared. This time, however, he had brought somepony with him.

"Caughlin? Caughlin!" said Discord, annoyed. "Where is she, that ditzzy mare?"

"Yes, lord Discord?" asked Caughlin, trotting up to the stand from her work area. Discord rolled his eyes and poofed both of them in front of her.

"I don't really have time to join you today, I have an uprising to quell," said Discord. "But I thought I'd drop this pony off first. I found him in a corner of Manehattan. I find him interesting. Maybe you want to take him apart or whatever, surprise me. Now I'm off." As abruptly as his entrance, he left, leaving the two to talk. Curious heads turned towards the newcomer, who was very frightened.

Caughlin considered the newcomer. He was a light brown earth pony with a dark brown mane, blue eyes and an hourglass for a cutie mark, which immediately perked up Caughlin's interest. She stepped towards him, but he shied away.

And then...she hadn't stepped towards him, but he was even further away now, scrambling up the director's stand. *Wait...what? Did I just miss something?*

"Hey, come back down here! I'm not going to hurt you," said Caughlin, sighing and walking slowly up the stairs. The pony did not respond, opting instead to paw at the solid wall. "Look, if you just stop, we can talk this out reasonably..."

And then she was back at the base of the stairs, with the feeling that she had said something even though she had not. She paused and stared at the pony, frowning.

"Oh, I get it," said Caughlin, and lowered her horn. A shimmering bubble enveloped her and she made her way up the steps again. The pony watched her and squeezed his eyes, as if trying to use magic without a horn, but as she progressed, something was going wrong. He yelped and hugged the edge of the stand.

"Look, I'm not going to hurt you," said Caughlin, "but test my patience further and I most certainly will. You have a very unique ability there, by the way. I'm impressed."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" shouted the pony. "Let me out of here!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Caughlin grimly. "Firstly, Discord put you in here. If he comes back and asks for you, and you're gone, he'll wreck hell in here."

"So? I don't care!"

"But we're just trying to help, you idiot!" She lunged at him suddenly and pushed him off the ledge. He screamed, only to be caught in levitating magic just before hitting the ground. Holding him firmly in place, she trotted back then, bubble gone, and dropped him. "There. Yelled enough?" Then,

as an afterthought, she raised her head. "Get back to work, everypony. You've had your fun."

"I just want to get back home," whispered the pony.

Caughlin sighed and put a hoof around him, startling him. "There's a second reason I can't get you out," said Caughlin. "None of us have ever been let out since we entered. This place is several feet underground, and only Discord has the ability to come in or out."

"But you're a unicorn, aren't you?" he cried. "Can't you teleport?"

"Discord disabled that particular part of time-space in this area," said Caughlin. "Speaking of which, I know why you're here. You have the talent of time manipulation, don't you?"

"I..."

"Don't deny it, I'm no filly when it comes to these things." She helped him up and extended a hoof. "I'm Caughlin Mare, head of the R&D department of Equestria. And I sincerely swear on my horn that I will not harm you, nor will I let Discord harm you. You're safe in here, safer than above at least."

"How can you be so sure of that?" spat the pony.

"Because Discord likes us," said Caughlin, venom in her voice. "And do not make me repeat that again." She relented, and sat down, tired from the struggle. "I'll tell you more, but we have to get things straight first. I need you to settle down."

"I'm...Whooves."

"Just Whooves? No first name?" asked Caughlin curiously.

"Yeah," said Whooves, shuffling uncomfortably.

"Well then. Since you're now part of the only circle educated ponies in the whole of Equestria, sad as that may be, we can call you Dr. Whooves!" joked Caughlin. This drew a chuckle from some of the older ponies who had been around during the inception of the televising machine. It was an invention of the R&D department, used in communication and

broadcasting; it had spread quickly, and the many shows and series were a solace for ponies everywhere from the daily chaos that raged around them. Discord had allowed their use until he found out that they were being adapted for rebellion communication, and had destroyed them all in a flash.

Whooves made a face. "But I don't know anything! I didn't even go through Elementary Pony Ed!"

"Don't worry, you'll learn," said Caughlin, giving him a smile and a pat on the head. "But in the meantime, I'll show you to your quarters, get you fed up. The shock of everything must be too much for you. Just relax for today, and we'll talk more tomorrow."

When Caughlin went to fetch Whooves for supper, he was fast asleep. She figured it was the assault on all senses, physical and mental, and decided to just leave him some bread and cheese. The best part about living in an underground facility was that there were no pests to steal unattended food. She met up with the rest of the ponies in the middle of the den, where a large table had been set up. Meals were often cooked on Bunsen burners and served on petri dishes, due to the lack of room for normal tableware. It had taken all of Caughlin's persuading ability to get Discord to make bedrooms for them, each with a functional toilet. Still, she did not mind. From the occasional glimpse of the Discordian world above, Caughlin gathered that her life was luxury.

When the food was ready (tonight, it was corn cobs the size of cellos), Caughlin nodded, and everypony ate. The table was quiet with the absence of talk of ponies who spent nearly every waking moment together, and were possibly spied on by Discord. After dinner, they cleaned up with a combination of magic and experimental chemicals, and proceeded to "recreation" - reading, or less demanding, personal projects, or in Caughlin's case, sky-gazing. Her experiment chamber had a tube that led upward toward the sky; it was through this tube that Caughlin learnt about the chaos in the balance of nature, day one moment and night the next. A few times it had been both. She was content to sit there, looking through the tube at the changing scenery, letting her thoughts run free.

"So, what are you doing?"

Caughlin turned to see Whooves. "Looking at the sky," said Caughlin.



"What's so interesting about it?"

"Well, it changes a lot."

"Yeah. Yes, it does."

"Did you have a good rest?"

"Yep."

"Did you have something to eat?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Uhh...okay," said Caughlin. She realized at that moment that she was not good at small talk. Honestly, who was, here? There was no need for small talk, only research and discovery. Science. She felt bad for not being able to entertain Whooves.

"Hey, uh, Caugh..miss?"

"Caughlin."

"Yeah. Thanks for everything. I must've acted like a complete idiot just now, losing my head like that," said Whooves, sitting next to her.

"Nah, it's okay. I think I can understand," said Caughlin. "Mind telling me a bit about yourself? Unless you've got something better to do."

"I don't think I do, miss," said Whooves, smiling for the first time. "So, I'm Whooves, and I was born in Manehattan..."

# Chapter 2

## Enter The Order of Order

Caughlin waited for her assistants to make the final calculations. With a nod from them, she closed her eyes and performed the only spell that came naturally to her. The talking bags of flour surrounding her faded away as the bubble expanded, engulfing everything in a perfect radius. She sighed as the assistants shook their heads, and with a flick of her head, the bubble, too, vanished, leaving her alone in the chamber.

"Bravo! Well done!" said Whooves, tapping the floor enthusiastically.

"No, Doctor, that was a failure," replied Caughlin, stepping out to meet him.

"I don't see how," grunted Whooves. "Personally, I think that's good enough."

The experiment was an attempt to cast the bubble away from herself. They had placed variations in the thaumatic field of the chamber, to no avail. Caughlin opened her mouth to explain, but relented and gave him a playful clonk on the head instead. "And what about you?"

"What about what?" grinned Whooves.

"Eh...oh," said Caughlin, frowning. "Wait, did I say something? I think I did. But in this set of time I haven't. I told you to stop doing that. It's disconcerting."

"Yeah, okay," replied the stallion. "It's fun, though."

Caughlin simply laughed. She felt happier, somehow, she mused. It had been a few months since Whooves' inclusion into the Equestrian R&D department, and she had tried her best to treat him as a fellow, not as a test subject. It was hard, considering that he wanted to know the details about everything, but lacked the knowledge to understand it. She herself was curious about his powers, but figured that it could wait. When he was more willing, then she might set some time aside to run tests. So Caughlin

had taken him on as a student, teaching him the basics of Discordian physics and how their unique talents came to be.

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Caughlin knew what "order" was, because under the Pony Elementary Education Program (PEEP), fillies were raised up for the first four years of their lives in normal, non-chaotic conditions. This was Discord's own initiative; according to him, chaos lost its meaning without order, and so for Equestria's residents to fully "appreciate" it, he had them all experience order first. It was cruel and twisted, but then again, this was Discord...and through the PEEP, Caughlin had discovered her thirst for understanding. She was fascinated by the idea of heavenly bodies moving in regular patterns, and objects not moving unless given force. Discord had kept a careful eye on her, and found to his glee that instead of flinching away from the chaos of the outside world, Caughlin had taken it all in with wide, amazed eyes.

"So, little mare, I believe you have not casted a spell before." Discord had laid a reality-bending finger on her horn and stepped back to watch. "Let's see what you can do." Still stunned by the chaos, she did not feel it until it happened - the magic welled up inside of her rose and burst out as a reality bubble. The grass under her hooves were green instead of blue. A bouncing rock next to her lay dead still. Discord had laughed hard, she recalled, even going so far as to clap and cheer.

She shuddered at the thought of Discord taking interest in her. She glanced at her student, struggling with his newest reading assignment on density. He had not been through the PEEP; his parents had hid him, whilst they were still alive. Somehow he had managed to grasp the idea of time manipulation without any concept of it whatsoever.

"So, do you know about the term, time-space?" she had asked early on.

"No, no, no," he whined, "I don't get any of these sciency things! I just, you know, do it, just like that!"

"I find it very hard to believe that you can take advantage of the weakened state of time fabric 'just like that' without knowing what you're doing," snorted Caughlin.

"How do you do yours?" shot the stallion. "You probably know, though, since you're such a smarty-pants."

"What are pants?" frowned Caughlin. "Ugh, wait, you're getting me off track. Look, it's like...well, imagine a piece of fabric. Cloth. It goes in a certain pattern, weaves, whatever you call it. But it's made up of many, many long threads. With me? Now between those threads, in the tiny holes, is what we call 'magic'. And on those threads are things, objects, ponies like you and me. Now Discord - Discord here uses magic and rends the holes bigger. He weakens the relationship between things. And he's very good at it, to the point that he does it all the time, just he pulls harder in some places than others. Like the shower of frogs in Canterlot a few days before you arrived, I'm sure you heard of it. So because they're not bound to each other as tight as normally, in your case you can take hold of them and move them *backwards* - that's your time-reversal ability. And mine is, I use my magic to pull things back together."

"So...you just do it?"

"Uggggh." She facehoofed. "Yes. Yes, I just do it."

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She could not help but chuckle as she remembered those slow, aggravating lessons. Whooves had grown up considerably, and was much more at ease in the Laboratory. It was touching, in a way, watching somepony grow up through her amateurish efforts.

"So, then, Doctor, you ready to explain to me what density is, and how Discord affects it?"

"Yeah, I guess so. And can you stop calling me Doctor? It's, uh, sarcastic."

"Sarcasm is funny for everypony except the user and the target," smirked Caughlin. "For the user, it isn't funny, it's just fun. Now come on."

Before Whooves could speak, there was a loud pop. He had not yet become used to it, and had gave an involuntary jump. Caughlin took a deep breath and headed toward the sound.

"Caughlin! Cauuughlin?" called out Discord, doing a mock survey of the area.

"Yes, lord Discord," greeted Caughlin. "Welcome."

"Ah, Caughlin. Good. Say, do you have anything that can spy on an area?" asked Discord.

"I'm sorry?" Caughlin blinked. A request? This was new.

"You know. An extra eye, or something. Something that records? Oh, come on, you know what I mean," grumbled Discord.

"I guess I could set something up, if we had a lens and some circuitry," said Caughlin carefully. "But we need to know more to get the design to be practical-"

"It's those damn rebels!" roared Discord, the sudden force of his voice physically pushing her back. "They're at one place, and there's at another the next! I've seared the ground, torn up forests, caused earthquakes, and they're still nowhere to be found? What do I have to do to get them, bring about the end of the world?"

"No, no, no! That's okay! Just calm down, lord Discord! We'll fix you up with something! Just tell us where you want to use it, and-"

Discord did not wait for her to finish. He pressed a talon hard on her horn. She yelled in pain briefly as an image seared itself into her mind, a scene of wasteland, still smoking.

"There's your place. I want full surveillance of the surface in a hundred-metre radius," said Discord evenly. "When you're done with the workings, I'll find a way myself to have it linked to me. And I expect this to be done when I next come back, or so help you all."

With a crack of thunder, the tyrant left. Whooves immediately ran up to her. "Caughlin! You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good. Ooh, boy," muttered Caughlin, getting back on her hooves. The image had not faded from her mind. It seemed to be stuck there. "Alright, Whooves, get me a sketching pad, a pen and that new drug

Team 7 was working on." She raised her neck, and her head throbbed even more. "Dammit. The rest of you! I want you all to freeze your projects and prep up! Surveillance device, multi-faceted! Radius of one hundred metres from a side view! With zoom capabilities! Oh, by Discord's claws," she moaned, slumping on the floor. Whooves came quickly with the items, and after downing the drug, she drew out the landscape. It was fairly easy, as the place was simply a desolate plain of debris. It had probably been a small village, judging by the charred clay and many stumps on the edge of the radius.

"I can't make copies of these," said Caughlin, getting back up. "It hurt even to draw this. Get somebody else to duplicate the thing."

"Yes, ma'am!" yelped Whooves, voice unusually high, and scrambled off. Despite the agony, she felt her heart lighten at the hurried figure of her student. She allowed herself a laugh. Whooves, huh. He was a good kid, even if he wasn't too bright.

"Hey, uh, miss?" said Whooves upon returning. "I wonder, but why don't you just use the reality bubble? That is, if the drug isn't working?"

It wasn't. Caughlin blinked at this sudden stroke of inspiration and thought about it hard. Then she shook her head.

"I can't risk that. Right now, my powers can't simply fix anything with a trace of Discord's interference, they take some of the thing away too. But I can't be sure what he did to me. It may be an illusion, or he may have altered my brain itself. You remember the flour bags? If my bubble could simply un-Discord things, the bags would have remained. But they disappeared. I'm not going to risk having my brain disappear," reasoned Caughlin. "But thank you, Whooves. That was smart of you. Now go help. I just need some rest."

She wobbled slightly as she left for her room. Whooves watched her, mumbling, "So that's why you keep on training."

She had lied down for a couple of hours, her condition only slightly better, when she heard a loud din. There was shouting, curses and threats. Panicking, she forced herself out of bed and ran outside to see the commotion. What she saw left her speechless.

There was another pony in the middle of the den, an outsider. He had been pinned down by a load of other ponies, and he was protesting to no avail.

"Oh, Caughlin! Caughlin's here!" cried a scientist, and they all scrambled off, with Whooves refusing to budge.

"Where...did you come from?" she asked, drawing near, her mouth dry.

"So you are the famous head of the Laboratory," coughed the pony with a grim smile. "Good question-"

"I asked where!" she shouted, kicking dust into his snout.

"I'm from the Order of Order! We're the rebels, and we ask for your help!"

Caughlin felt her heart pound. Her head was in a swirl as she said, "Whooves, get off him. Get off! Take him to your room. The rest of you, pretend this never happened. Do you hear me?"

When it was just the three of them, she had a better look at him. He was a jet-black unicorn stallion with a black mane, most probably dyed. He had no cutie mark, or rather if he did it was hidden by the dye.

"You used magic to teleport here," said Caughlin, brain now whirring in overdrive.

"Yes. Yes I did. We have abilities. We've mastered our environment. We know how to use Discord's chaos against him."

"So do I," said Caughlin simply, drawing near to him. It hurt even more, but she had to make sure. She produced another bubble that wiped off over him. "Now you teleport away."

"But I-"

"Now!" she shouted, the word coming out in a croak. *I've never shouted this much in a day*, she mused. *First time for everything, eh?*

When the stallion refused to respond, she said without turning, "Whooves, get me a knife. Now. This very instant."

Abashed, he stepped over to the bedside drawer and took out a long bread knife. She decided to ignore the fact that he was hiding a long knife in his room - for now.

"Stab the silly pony's shoulder. Three, two, one-"

There was a yelp as the blade sunk into his shoulder, and more gasps of pain. Caughlin lowered the bubble, weary, and gave a confused Whooves a pat. "Go get some dressing." To the stallion she said, "I'm sorry but I had to check. Discord's the only one theoretically that can overcome my bubble. You said that you could manipulate Discord's chaos. So can I. Much, much better. *He* doesn't like to get hurt, of course, so at the threat of the knife he would have revealed himself. I'm sorry, but I had to make sure. That you weren't Discord playing tricks on us."

The stallion stared at her blankly, and began to snigger painfully. "So I see, so I see. You are one heck of a mare! Listen, I'll be off soon. But I just wanted to deliver a message." He magicked a saddlebag. From it came a scroll and a small alligator, a creature known to her only through PEEP books.

"I'll get fixed up back at the base," said the stallion. "Until then, stranger." With a gasp, he teleported away before Caughlin could say any more.

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She hid the two items away until Discord's next visit, which was five days later. In those five days she was stricken with heightened panic of the discovery of those items, curiosity about them and the slow madness the image was driving her into. It refused to fade, staying in her mind all the time. It kept her awake at nights and woke her up in the wee hours of the day. It interfered with her theoretics and blueprint sketching. She was almost glad that she could present the system to Discord, and the moment he left the image was relieved.

She decided to take out the items in favour of sleeping. This was simply too important. She gathered her team together - they were *family*, for goodness' sakes - and opened the scroll.



# Chapter 3

## Enter The Order of Order, 2

*"To those who are reading this, greetings and peace.*

*I am Furhich, leader of the Order of Order. We are a band of ponies who wish to return the world to harmony and order; we wish to doppel Discord.*

*I do not need to tell you how much ponies all over Equestria are suffering at the whim of Discord. To him, they are just events of chaos, but to us, it is a fight for survival.*

*We are different from previous rebels. Unlike them, we have mastered Discord's influence on reality. Many of us can teleport, and some of us can revert areas touched by Discord's paws to its original, rightful state. This has given us a great advantage in the sense that we are still alive and well; we are in hiding and on the run, but still alive.*

*We also know more than previous rebels. We know of the existence of the Laboratory; we know who you are and what you do. Your actions are mixed and confused; you side with him in things, and yet you help save thousands of lives through innovations and creations. Your ability to turn the tide of this battle is high, very high indeed.*

*Are we to be trusted? Consider this. We are fighting against Discord. Discord favours you for now. When he gets bored he will dispose of you, no doubt. But we are in no place to dispose of you, in fact, we value you highly. You are basically our only hope of winning. It is not a matter of trust, it is simply a matter of choice. Whether you will move out of your comfort zone and aid the world, or ignore this and be judged by history.*

*Can we win? Not by ourselves, but only through unity. We have a plan to defeat Discord. Should you agree, we will send it to you.*

*This leads us to the issue of communication. You will have received with this letter an artificial dragon. Communication via dragonfire is safest, but impractical considering the nature of dragons; we have therefore developed this - an artificial dragon. He is toothless, and contains a spell that stores*

*messages unless prompted, hence lowering risk of physical injury or unwanted discovery. To prompt the message, poke its right eye, and it will belch out any messages in storage. If you do not poke it, it will not release its messages. The dragon feels no pain, as it is a golem of sorts, so do not hesitate.*

*We understand that you are a team of brilliant individuals. No doubt you are reading this immediately after one of Discord's visits; no doubt, the safest time to do so is immediately after he leaves, as we gather that Discord generally appears at random time intervals, but not directly after leaving.*

*To reply, feed the dragon your message. We await as long as necessary. Please, consider us, and our plea on behalf of Equestria.*

*Sincerely,*

*Furhich."*

After the reading, everypony fell silent. Caughlin examined their expressions. All were torn between reluctance and guilt, especially Whooves, who seemed rearing to go already. She herself did not want to think about it. Could she just ignore it, pretend it did not exist? Maybe when Whooves developed his ability better, they could go back in time and destroy the letter before Caughlin could read it aloud.

She closed her eyes to think. Instead, she was filled with memories. Images of ponies on the run for their lives, struggling against Discord's latest design, images all seen while perfectly safe from harm. They were special and protected. All they had ever wanted was to learn, to work, to understand. Was that so wrong?

And then she remembered the Incident. She made up her mind.

"I'm in," she said softly, before her logic took over. "I'm going to help them."

"But our projects, our research! What about those? Are you going to throw it all away?" yelled a scientist, cracking from the unspoken tension.

"There is no need for a reality bubble if the world is no longer plagued by chaos," said Caughlin quietly. "Nor is there need for cotton candy clouds and chocolate rain if all they do is ruin crops. There is no need for

painkillers if there is nothing causing pain! There is no need for any of these things, if we can end them at the root!..." She felt herself flare up, but the energy was soon lost to weariness. "I refuse to force anypony. But I need rest. So do you all, since you've been working non-stop on the surveillance system. Go and sleep. Heck, we're all scientists, and we can't decide on anything unless we mull over on it. Tell me three days after so that I can send a reply."

"But what if Discord finds out?" stammered another scientist.

"Then we die," said Caughlin simply. *What the HAY am I saying?* "Besides, we can still try out that thing. Theory number one."

"Caughlin Mare, you have gone mad! It must have been what Discord did to you! I suggest a motion to depose you of directorship!"

"And I suggest a motion for you to shut up," replied Caughlin. "I'm going to bed. And hey, when you all do the same, think about how many ponies can do that without worrying about the sky falling on their heads. That, or razor blades."

The last phrase made everypony except Whooves flinch. Without another word, Caughlin trotted off, and collapsed on her bed minutes after.

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Whooves was one of the few who couldn't sleep. He paced the den restlessly, and when he got bored of that he began jumping back in time. Caughlin would have lectured him for being an idiot, he was sure, but there wasn't anything else to do. At least time-shifting felt natural to him, and helped to take his mind off things. Despite only being able to reverse a maximum of three point four seconds, the process was draining and he soon found himself too worn out to even stand.

"Are you done with messing up time, kiddo?" snarled an old-timer from his bench. He was drinking something hot from a mug, and looked ill at ease. It took Whooves some time to pick up from his voice that he was one of the neigh-sayers. Whooves did not know how to respond (he knew how he wanted to, but that would only upset Caughlin) so he remained silent. The old pony took a sip and motioned for Whooves to sit with him. Wary, he complied.

"Bah," murmured the old-timer. Up close, Whooves could see just how wrinkled his eyes and snout were. There was a scar on his neck. "Well, kiddo. Caughlin's new boy. You decided? Probably have, eh."

"That's right," said Whooves defiantly. "I'm sticking with Caughlin all the way."

"You're not even sure of what it'll end up like, do you?" smirked the old-timer.

"Of course I don't! But I know what's going to happen if we don't do something. Nothing is going to happen. And everypony's going to be stuck in this cycle," defended Whooves.

"Aye. Young words, those are. Good on you." The old-timer's voice was suddenly filled with sorrow. "As for me...why, I'm pretty much resigned to the idea of being stuck. A cycle's a cycle for a reason, after all. Because things don't change that easy. That's why it's a cycle."

"But we can at least try, right?" pleaded Whooves. The old-timer took another sip.

"Let me tell you a story, boy, one about an accident from a long time ago..."

"How long?" quipped Whooves.

"When Caughlin was but a young mare, around twenty years ago," said the old-timer, somewhat annoyed. "When we all first started."

.....

It had been a year since the formation of the R&D department. We were settling into our new lives, our new home, learning to live with one another. The pony-in-charge was a mare called Macquaire Pie, and his forte was geology. Most of our projects back then were focused on one aspect or another, not like today where everypony worked on their latest inspirations. And as Pie was the leader, he had the say of things, and we mostly worked on rocks - gems, bedstone, densities and such. Because of that, we needed sharp tools and their replacements every few months or so. Only Discord could give us supplies, so Pie had to put in requests.

Well, anyhow, one time Discord got bored with Pie's systematic way of asking every three months. He hates order, after all, and so he told Pie to bring him a tray of tools. Pie in turn asked Caughlin, who was as introverted as any sciencepony could be. Not only that, she was the youngest one in our team. She was very nervous of course, and I find it so hard to blame her for what happened next.

Caughlin carried the tools with her magic up the steps. She was too hasty, and she tripped on the last step. She sent the tray flying all over the two, and that's when it happened - Discord's scaly, physics-defying body was cut by a scalpel.

The sight of blood was just mind-blowing for us. Discord was the absolute ruler, there was no doubt. But to see him cut like that by such an accident... I guess several things happened that day, to all of us. We realized that Discord wasn't immune to problems like injury, or pain. He was just good at dispensing it. And we think he knew we knew, because at that moment he exploded. No, not literally, just emotionally.

You thought Discord was scary a few days ago? Hell, that was much worse. He roared and bellowed like a manticores for minutes, no words, just pure rage. Caughlin had fallen back down the steps in shock, and lay there cowering. I don't want to remember, but he said something like this:

"What on Equestria made you think this was blunt, huh? If this is blunt, I'm sure nothing would be wrong if I did THIS!"

We were surrounded by an illusion, or a simulation of something happening in the world above. This wasn't real, because Discord would never let us out, even if it was to teach us a lesson. We were in the middle of Ponyville, a small, peaceful town that produced most of the apples ponies ate. Discord roared again, and the skies turned gray. We watched in horror as Discord first ripped the buildings down, turning every possible piece of cover into thin paper. Then came the rain.

It wasn't chocolate anymore. It was scalpels, just like the one that had cut him.

It was horrible. We screamed and shouted as we watched the Ponyville residents...no, I'm not going to say anymore. You can guess what happened next. It was a massacre. There was so much blood, so much

screaming, wailing, crying...the blades did not fall on us, even when we flung ourselves toward them. Like I said, it was an illusion. Discord had meant for us to watch it in its entirety, without giving us a chance of relief.

But we knew that he was vulnerable. I think he spared us just because he thought it was more fun. He's kept a careful eye on us since, veiled by his usual foolery and even affection, and heaven knows what really goes on in his mind.

.....

"Then what happened?" asked Whooves, shivers dancing all over.

"Then we came back," choked the old-timer. He was now crying. "Discord returned us all except for Pie. As the illusion faded, he nudged Pie and said, 'Here's your new supplies', and left him there in Ponyville. Don't ask me how he did it. He's Discord, alright. Why, just to prove it was real, when we were back in here, he dropped a bloodied body on us. The stench were terrible. He probably went crazy from the trauma. Any of us would. We never heard of him again."

Whooves sat silently as the old-timer sniffled for minutes. He felt hollow inside. He had heard news of the Ponyville massacre when he was a child; his parents had been still alive then. They were arguing about whether they should trade in some of their food for materials to build a better roof. But he had no idea about the details.

"So Caughlin..."

"Caughlin recovered, or at least we hope," said the old-timer. "She blames herself for it. Goes a bit crazy whenever Discord threatens an area or somepony because of something we say or do, or fail to do. Haven't you noticed she becomes all pleading whenever Discord wants to do a demo?" He snorted and drank again. "And she hates Discord. She smiles and bows and things, but we know that deep down she hates him. We all should, really, just that none of us want to face this hate in case we get funny ideas and do something stupid."

"But why not?" exclaimed Whooves. "Why don't you just band together and fight back?"

"Because he's too powerful, you stupid foal!" shouted the old-timer, spilling his drink as he slammed a hoof on the workbench. "What good is it if we die here and now? Tell me! What's the point? What's the point?" He breathed heavily. "Ponies are just ponies, boy. Discord...he isn't a pony, he's something much worse. He can be cut, he can feel pain, he can be led astray by emotions. The problem is that none of those are weaknesses for him. Just more death for us. And I...I don't want to hurt anypony anymore."

Whooves stiffened and bit his lip. He got up and left the pony without another word.

.....

That night, Caughlin had nightmares. She awoke in a cold sweat and gave a yelp at two, fluorescent purple eyes met hers. The offending figure blinked, and in an act of stupid defiance lay back down on her blanket. She reached for it and held it at leg's length. The creature seemed content with that, and stared at her.

*It actually feels kind of soft, she thought. For a dragon.*

She hesitated, and finally decided to give it a quick hug. It gave no response.

"You're a silly little thing, aren't you," whispered Caughlin. "You probably don't even know what you are." *The same could be said for you*, her mind retorted. "Looks like you're the newest member to our group. My name's Caughlin. What's yours, hmm?"

The artificial dragon yawned and closed its eyes.

"Stupid. That's be a very fitting name for you. Stupid, the artificial dragon," said Caughlin, rolling her eyes. "Sigh. I think I'll let Whooves name you. I don't even know if I can keep you, let alone name you..."

That night, she slept with the dragon curled up next to her, and thought no more of the day's events until she woke up.

# Chapter 4

## Enter Project ALICORN

The day had been spent in silence. No pony felt like talking, and the tension was thickening with every passing hour. Caughlin felt like kicking worktables just to get an outburst from them and ease even a bit of the pent-up frustration in the air. Thankfully Discord was still caught up with whatever it was he did. A visit now would almost definitely elicit a nervous breakdown from some pony in the hall.

That night, she had a hasty dinner and began to write in the secrecy of her room.

*To: Furhich, of the Order of Order.*

*I am Caughlin Mare, chairpony and head of the R&D department. We are all aware of your offer, and we considering its implications.*

*Personally, I do not believe that many will join. We are sympathetic, but feel that the cost is too great. Have you considered, in the event that we fail, the effects our absence will have on Equestria? Who are you, and why should we believe in what you say?*

*We understand that you are not agents of Discord. But we require more information about your operations e.g. Intel, transportation, and more importantly administration before we can decide. A life is not an easy thing to give up when it is your own.*

She found the artificial dragon under her bed, and tentatively waved the scroll in front of it. It watched almost boredly. Suddenly it opened its toothless mouth and lashed out, gulping the scroll. She wondered how long would it take for a reply to come.

There was a knock on her door. "Caughlin?" called out Whooves.

"Just in time, Doctor. Come in, please."



Her student stepped in, blushing slightly. Caughlin indicated to a chair and pointed to the dragon. "Now, this thing. What do you think we should call it?"

"That's what you wanted me here for?" asked Whooves, taken aback.

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked incredulously.

"Well...I thought, you know, about the Oh-cube."

"Oh-cube? Wait, you mean the Order of...oh, Whooves, you silly filly. No, that's alright. I trust your decision completely. You're your own stallion." She gave him a tight smile. "Think of it this way. There are two more days until the final vote, two more days before we spend the rest of our lives wondering why we choose to do what we're about to do. I'd rather save those moments."

"And spend them on naming things?" retorted Whooves.

"It's the little things in life that keep us going, Doctor," said Caughlin. "Ponies like us don't get many little things, which is why we have to treasure them all the more."

"Never thought you to be the sentimental type," snorted Whooves. "Still..." He examined the dragon critically. "How about Stupid?"

"No!"

"Then...what about Toothful?"

"I think you're taking the whole 'sarcasm' thing a little too far, Whooves," said Caughlin, rolling her eyes. "Gummy?"

"Plain. Accurate." Whooves seemed to chew on it. "Sounds just like something you'd choose. Sure, why not?"

"So then, Gummy it is," said Caughlin, beaming. She extended a hoof and gave its eye a careless poke. To her surprise, it belched green fire, and a dirty scroll unraveled itself mid-air from the flames.

"...Caughlin?"

"Wait." She grasped the letter quickly.

*Dear Caughlin Mare,*

*We understand your possible reluctance and fears. They are of good standing. However once again I plead our cause because your team is the conerstone in our ultimate plan.*

*To help persuade your members, we have attached Phase 1 of our plan. We do so at very great cost to ourselves, as Discord's discovery of this plan will certainly fail all other future plans like it. However, for ponies of your scientific understanding, you should be able to appreciate our confidence once you analyse these.*

*As to who we are...we are simply regular ponies who wish to bring back harmony to the world. You must know by now the difficulty Discord is experiencing in handling us. Surely that, and our ability to gather intelligence regarding you should be enough to convince you of our capabilities. The other issues will be answered in good time, should you accept.*

*Sincerely,*

*Fuhrich.*

Whooves stood impatiently as Caughlin scanned the plans. Impatience soon gave way to curiosity, as he watched Caughlin's eyes widen.

"Caughlin Mare, what on Equestria is that?"

"Nothing like we've ever seen before," said Caughlin softly. "I...they are either mad or brilliant, Whooves. Possibly both. But this changes everything."

Caughlin had gathered the entire department immediately after breakfast. She passed around copies of the plans which she had made last night. After letting it sink in, she pressed it further: "You see, my fellow ponies, we run no risk of punishment. We can hide it in the open. If anything he'll even approve it without realizing. And you have to admit, such a project is compelling, ambitious. The concept is so radical, yet the initial calculations

and theories point to success. If you do not wish to do it for the Order nor Equestria, do it for the sake of science."

No pony had anything to say in response. She could see it in their faces; they were thinking hard, being pushed harder than any cloud mass breakdown or rapid-growth seeds. The bait was too good to resist. Ponies whose only purpose in life was to discover and develop, faced with their greatest project yet. She felt a pang of guilt as she moved up for the final blow.

"Now I know I gave everypony three days to think this through. There are two left," she said quietly. "But I will now draw up the deadline to this moment, because neither we nor they have time to spare. All in favour, raise a hoof."

She raised her hoof slowly. Whooves' shot up energetically. Moments of exchanging glances went past before, with a solemn nod, everypony else raised their hoofs.

Caughlin felt an immense thrill rush up her body.

"Thank you, everypony," she said, gulping. "On behalf of the Order, myself and the whole of Equestria...thank you."

.....

After passing on the news to the Order, they waited.

After two days, Discord finally reappeared. He looked worse for the wear; he almost seemed weary, and was standing on the floor instead of floating for once. He must have spent a lot of energy hunting the rebellion, to no apparent success.

"Lord Discord!" said Caughlin, bounding up to meet him. She wore an expression of positive excitement that immediately put Discord on guard. "We are so glad for your return!"

"You are? Well, well," muttered Discord. "You are, are you? What is it you want?"

"Always to the point, lord Discord," said Caughlin, feeling her face ache from the wide smile she was wearing. "We have an amazing idea that we want you to see."

"Oh? That sounds new," said Discord, raising an eyebrow. Caughlin was so...out-of-character today. But as a being of chaos, he liked new things, and for even her to be so excited this must be something worth looking at.

"Here it is," she said, handing him a sheaf of notes. "We call it Project ALICORN."

Discord kept his expression straight as he skimmed through the notes. They were chock-full of scientific expressions and terms. While he understood them perfectly, he was weary to use his mental faculties after days on end of chasing empty leads. He looked at the diagrams. He began to laugh.

"This, this is amazing! It's *hilarious*! Not even I could have thought of this!" he exclaimed, wheezing as his cackles filled the den. "This is a joke to the highest degree, Caughlin! How on Equestria could you think of such a thing? Oh, by me!" He fell over, writhing as he laughed. The entire project was so absurd. It was unnatural, sick even, a complete defiance of Nature.

It was chaos, and he knew enough to appreciate the quality of it.

"Well, my lord," protested Caughlin, "the idea is plausible. Theoretically, if we can balance the Horn, Wings and Potential found in the three classes of pony, it is possible for them to co-exist in the same body. Why, if you would allow me to explain..."

"No, no, no need for that," gasped Discord, wiping a mock tear from his eyes as he floated upright. "This is great, Caughlin. You deserve a promotion, except that you're already in the highest position possible for ponies. Why, I can't wait to see what happens. Get this done, Caughlin, with my full blessings. Why, I think I might even *look forward* to visiting here just to see how things are going."

"I cannot promise anything," said Caughlin. "The actual work is complex and we need to factor in many, many things. It will be slow to say the least."

"Bah, that's alright. Just do what you must. Oh, my. Alicorns. My goodness! The limitless chaos these things could wreck! Good job, everypony, and carry on, carry on! Oh, bother me. I haven't had fun in ages." With a final, maniacal laugh, Discord leapt into the air and left the den.

*To accept the possibility of an "alicorn" one must first consider the nature of the classes of Pony: Unicorn, Pegasi and Earth.*

*With reference to the time-space fabric theory, each class of Pony exists and interacts within the fabric in limited manner. Pegasi possess Wings that allow them to control "light" matter such as clouds and wind; Earth ponies possess Potential in their bodies that allows them to manipulate "heavy" matter due to their strength, speed and stamina, while the horns of the Unicorns allow them to harness "magic", that is, the all-present inter-matter force, giving them a variable degree of control over both kinds of matter, as well as space and, in rare cases, time.*

*The presence of one defining characteristic blocks out the other two. This is largely due to Physical Limitations, that is, natural pony bodies cannot withstand the strain of using and upkeeping more than one characteristic, not to mention the incompatibility of the elements themselves. Wings and Potential are the most obvious, as they manipulate matter in different ways ("light" material by, crudely, "going with the flow", and "heavy" material by exerting force. In the same system, should one attempt to use both, they will cancel each other out before effecting a result).*

*To produce an "alicorn", which is a pony that possess all three characteristics (in a stable situation), one must go lengths to alter the Subject, as well as closely monitor and regulate said Subject's growth and development. The key to alicorns, we believe, lies in the horn; as the characteristic that holds the widest range of power, methods should be designed with it as the primary, supported by the greater latent control given by Wings and Potential, resulting in a pony that has heightened powers over matter.*

.....

After Discord's departure, they took Gummy out and prodded it for any new messages. With a thank-you letter came the blueprints, sketches and workings for the alicorn design. Leaving nothing to chance, Caughlin had her team double-check everything, reporting to her any improvements that

could be made. There were exactly ten of them, herself included; while eight worked on Project ALICORN, two others were to keep at "beneficial" assignments, and they would rotate shifts every three days.

The work of the Order's scientists was well-planned, meticulous and thorough. *The only thing they don't have is facilities*, mused Caughlin. *I feel used*. But there was little room for that kind of thought. It did not change the fact that they were taking part in scientific progress. The first steps in the project were largely on thaumatic fields, translating the Wings and Potential physical fields into thaumatic terms, and finding a percentage balance. These were mostly calculations and applications. Next was dealing with the issue of implanting this amalgam of Horn, Wings and Potential, as a thaumatic mass, into a host body. There were suggestions, together with argued pros and cons, but no definites - the Order scientists seemed to need answers from them. *At last, some real science*.

With Whooves at her side, trying to follow as best as he could, she began to draw up diagrams and labels. The first thing that came to her mind was the use of a newborn foal, contrary to the Order's belief that fully-grown stallions would be best because they could withstand the stress of the operations. However, she felt that being able to endure was not enough; the alicorn had to be able to *use* her powers after all, right? And no other pony learnt quicker than a foal...

The team spent a total of sixty-seven hours and forty-three minutes going through the Order's progress. Many letter had been sent back-and-forth in the privacy of Caughlin's room, debating over issues and opinions. Every other night Caughlin demanded more information from Furhich, and received nothing substantial in return.

*The Order wants an alicorn, something with amazing powers. But can an alicorn defeat Discord?*, she wondered, staring at the ceiling. *What will we do with it then, if we win? An alicorn, huh. There's a lot of things an alicorn can do. Why, the greater thaumatics base the Wings and Potential provide can allow the alicorn to achieve significant levels of magic ability. They could also rob the Horn of the mental focus required to power it...no, no, Caughlin, you're on break. Get some rest, for Equestria's sake.*

*And why does it have to be a "he?"* asked her mind in a final attempt to be heard.

*Which one - Gummy or the alicorn?*

*Good question, Caughlin. Touché.*

*Well, Gummy's a 'he'. I mean, you know, because of the thi-*

*Um, Caughlin, hello? Derping much here?*

She sighed and rolled over in her bed. Gummy choose this moment to crawl up on her mane.

"You know...I like you, Gummy. I think I'll keep you, officially, when this is all over."

Gummy did not say anything, but the way he curled up seemed to imply that he was perfectly alright with that.

# Chapter 5

## Enter Codename: LUNA

It was only the sixth day, and Caughlin was already beginning to have her doubts. She had been too caught up in the research to notice, but now she saw that each letter was taking the Order longer to reply. A side-by-side comparison showed that the handwriting in each was different, and was deteriorating as time went by. Perhaps they were finding it hard to keep up due to...circumstances.

"Say, Doctor. Maybe, just maybe, if the Order were captured before we finished the project, what do you think we should do then?" she asked idly, as she gave the rock-sugar lump in front of her a sharp poke.

"Since when did you need to consult me on the alicorn project?" sniffed Whooves.

Caughlin stared at him. "Really, Doctor? The fate of Equestria lies in the balance, and you're acting hurt because of attention?" Secretly, though, she could not blame him. In the frenzy of fresh work, she and most of the team had dropped their previous activities, and one of that was her tutoring sessions with Whooves. She recalled him poofing about in her reality bubble-testing chamber for long periods of time. She gave him a gentle clap on the head. "Yes, Doctor, I do need to consult you at times. After all, I think you're much better at some things than I am."

"Caughlin. Please," said Whooves, failing to hide a grin. "Focus, will you. Those rocks won't turn themselves into sugar unless you figure out the magical cross-matter designation, you know."

"It's 'thaumatical', not magical," corrected Caughlin, although she was impressed that he could say it in one stretch now. "And yes, there really are some things. Like Gummy. He seems to like you much better than he does me."

"So you're saying I have a thing for animals?"



"Um, Whooves. We're ponies," said Caughlin, rolling her eyes. "Put things in better terms, will you?"

"Fine, *little creatures*. Squirrels in the trees, the cute little bunnies, birds flying free and bees with their honey, and that's only if you extrapolate the possibility of you being right." Caughlin could not help but snort. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, if I'm to have my way, the alicorn will be a foal. And since, you know, the rest of us are simply hermits living in close proximity, the task of taking care of them will probably fall into your lap. Literally," said Caughlin. "Wait, no. Give me that hammer."

He handed it to her with a pout. "Why? I'm not a unicorn. Oh, and hey, that brings us to another thing. You know, it's probably just me, but something just feels wrong about the whole 'make the horn the focus' thing. What's wrong with wings and, uh, potential?"

Caughlin chipped away at the rock. Now that he mentioned it, he had a point. From the letters she had picked up a somewhat haughty vibe from the scientists when it came to alternate pivot points of energy channeling. She had attributed it to regular, smart-alec stubbornness. She would have to ask Fuhrich about that some time.

"Doctor, let me assure you that all ponies are equal. I truly believe so. And you can teach the alicorn that too, when you babysit her."

.....

The den was now noisier than ever. Caughlin's test chamber had been reconstructed as a life-support device, and was now filled with viscous, light green liquid. There were tubes and wires everywhere, splayed across the floor and ceiling like roots. On the walls of the chamber itself were runes and symbols that served to stabilize the thaumatic field during union and transfer. Extending from the cylinder was a triagram - a geometric expression of magic direction and behaviour control, three circles linked in a triangle etched into the ground. It was a balance of attending physical and thaumatical issues in the alicorn creation, and a joint venture by both parties in terms of design.

*Dear Caughlin,*

*After much consideration we have finally decided to agree with you on the use of a newborn foal for Project ALICORN. We will no doubt have difficulty obtaining this foal, not to mention the time cost required for it to mature, but given the circumstances this should be for the best.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dr. Klipit,*

*Chief Scientist of the Order of Order*

She gave a silent cheer as she read the letter aloud to everypony. Even to the end, the scientists had clung to their snobbery. No matter. She had won. Everything was in place, now. The equipment, the calculations, the amounts and measurements needed were all set. Now all they needed was a sample of Horn, Wings and Potential, as well as a foal...the Order, of course, were to send them these items. How exactly they were to go about it, Caughlin did not want to think about. She only knew that the fruit of their labour was approaching soon, and she was excited with anticipation.

Three days later, in the wee hours of the morning, Caughlin stirred to the noise of sharp crying. Head spinning, she made her way out into the main hall, lighting the way with her horn. There was a basket there, together with three ominous-looking black boxes. Immediately she perked up and began shouting, voice magically enhanced with a spell:

"Team! TEAM! Get over here! It's go time!"

She then examined the boxes. On one of them was a note:

*Do not open*

*Do not ask "how" nor "why"*

*Just do it*

Under any other circumstances she would have defied all three, simply because somepony had the audacity to order her around. But this was now. She had a project to complete.

.....

The procedure was simple enough to understand. The foal was to be suspended in the liquid, sustained by a gas mask. The three boxes containing the essence of the characteristics were to be placed in the triagram, with the "director" (Caughlin) in a fourth circle to start and oversee the magic processes. Standing in backup circles were a unicorn, a pegasus and an Earth pony to back her up should she fail to carry out the union (how they were to do that, they themselves were not sure; Caughlin sincerely hoped that it would not come to that point). With that done, the "director" was to implant the essence into the foal through the runes, slotting the product thaumatic field into the gaps of her own body.

It looked easy. Why then was she so nervous?

"Whooves, get ready," she murmured, clenching his hoof tightly. "If anything goes wrong, you know what to do, the chamber first and then me..."

"I won't have to," said Whooves, grinning and clenching back. "You're Caughlin Mare, remember? Smartest pony in all of Equestria, and whatnot. Besides you don't want to risk me using my time-jump under pressure. Who knows what could happen?"

"Good point. When we're done with this it's going to be regular training sessions for you from now on."

With a deep breath, she let go and Whooves stepped out of the circle.

"Everypony clear and ready?"

"Yes!"

"Let's do this." She closed her eyes and lowered her horn, and entered a trance as she gave the elements the first spark toward union.

"Well, well, what's this?" asked a dreaded voice amusedly, taking her out of the trance. *Oh no.* An assistant rushed up and placed a pair of earmuffs around her head. She had to stay focused. Let the others handle Discord, please, *please don't mess up. Dammit, Caughlin, focus!*

She refused to look back. From the sidelines, ponies were trying to explain things to Discord and stop him from going over. She felt the elements

rejecting each other, and tried to delve deeper into the thaumatic realm. If only she could reach their plane, she could use her tools to join the elements together-

And suddenly she was there. She could not hear anything. She risked opening her eyes to see the world around her. The den was gone. It had been replaced instead with a vivid swirl of colours, from pink to yellow to green, rushing around her like a sea. It was like being on that drug Team 5 made three years ago, but much more real. She could *think* in this place. In front of her were the three elements, pulsating lumps of red, blue and green. All she had to do was merge them together.

*I'm in the thaumatic realm*, she realized as she tried a step forward. Then another. *I'm in a freaking different dimension. Oh my goodness.*

*Focus, Caughlin*, drawled a lazy voice. She spun around. No pony else was there, but she got the message. She moved up and took the elements gently. They felt like spongy clay. As she moved them together she could feel them repelling, like magnets. She tried a bit of magic to overcome the forces, to dispel the repulsion. It worked. With gentle prods and harder nudges where the tension felt strong, where it simply felt *right*, she got the lumps together. They seemed to dissolve into one another, becoming one mass. It was complete.

And with that, she found herself back in her own body, suddenly feeling weak. The black boxes had disappeared from their circles. The runes along the cylinder were glowing brightly, charged up with the thaumatic field.

"Must I do everything around here?" spat Discord, rolling his eyes. "Go on, Caughlin. Finish it off."

"Wait, so you mean you-"

"Yes, yes, I gave you the ethereal shift into the thaumatic realm. It wasn't easy, I can tell you," snorted Discord. "Ponies are such inflexible creatures at times, especially you with your reality affinity. Finish the procedure, silly mare, before the union dissipates!"

Nodding dumbly, she turned back to the cylinder and strained. She could feel the foal's pulse and vital signs as the triagram's energies linked her up to it. She had not yet examined the foal, but she realized that it was a

unicorn. Not that it mattered, though; as a newborn she had literally no magical energy in or around her. The union slid perfectly into her neck, where the power soon flowed through her - up her spine into her horn, through her back and into her belly. There was a loud screaming that wrenched Caughlin's eyes open. Wings were beginning to sprout from her back, no larger than a chicken's, while her horn was glowing brilliantly. She tapped back into the scene and used her own magic to contain the burst within the foal. It had to remain in her, all of it, or there would be an imbalance. *Just a little bit more for her body to adapt. Just a little more...*

And the crying ended, and Caughlin felt the burden lift. The foal had stopped crying. It was asleep, or unconscious from the pain. She sincerely hoped it was the former.

"V...vital signs."

"All present, Caughlin."

"Good. Good. Good job, everypony." She stumbled out of the circle and faced Discord. She bit her lip and bowed. "And...thank you, lord Discord."

Discord sighed and shrugged. "I suppose. I'll let you ponies off the hook for being too preoccupied to even greet me, but I will not do so again next time. Not that there'll *be* a next time, mind. Since you've already completed your little project. Right?"

"Well, my lord, there is still the issue of bringing her up and developing her abilities as an alicorn..."

"Yes, yes, but you *know* what I mean!" Discord made a few exaggerated flails. "The flashy lights, the liquid, the hoopla. Even though it was very entertaining. I haven't seen anything quite like it since those televised shows." He peered at the suspended foal curiously. "What is she called?"

Caughlin walked up to the cylinder. The foal was a midnight blue, with a blue mane, looking like an adorable creature of the night. "I don't know, my lord."

"You don't know? For Equestria's sake, Caughlin, lighten up a bit, will you, and just name the thing already!"

She stared at it. Quiet, peaceful, reminiscent of the night sky above she had stared at almost every night.

"Luna," said Caughlin. "We'll call her Luna."

That night, they had a celebration, albeit a quiet one - they did not want to wake up Luna, nor were they capable of partying hard given their disposition to work. The food was better, though, there were drinks all around, and most importantly everyone was relaxing, something nopony had the luxury of doing in a long time. They even tried a bit of dancing to music from a "juke box" they had designed a year and a half ago.

"This is fantastic, Doctor," said Caughlin, laughing as she swung him about clumsily. "We did it! We actually did it!"

"I know, right?" Whooves was clearly happy as well. "So is this one of those little moments you were talking about? Because I sure can dig it."

"Little? What are you saying, you silly filly? We just created an alicorn! We've achieved history!"

"No, not that." Whooves was blushing furiously, and stammering. "I mean, hearing and seeing you laugh like that. It...looks good on you. And sounds good from you. You know, not that one is better than the other, but..."

She opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it, and in a rush of mischief she gave him a peck on the cheek instead.

# Chapter 6

## Enter Fuhrich, Leader of the Order of Order

Today's schedule was the same as yesterday's, and tomorrow's would follow soon after. Even so, Caughlin woke up a happier mare than most each morning.

First, with a bit of levitation she would carry the sleeping Luna to her bubble chamber, modified yet again to become a conditions-testing area now that they did not have to feed her through tubes, with liquid nutrients. Her vital signs, growth rate and physical details would be examined, recorded and cross-examined. Then she was woken up to wash up and eat (the foal slept surprisingly well; Caughlin figured that it was because of the higher demands her compound characteristics made of her body). Next, while the rest of the team filed in, Caughlin would take the alicorn to a side for schooling alongside Whooves. Lessons went on until an hour or so before lunchtime, where Luna was to learn to develop her Wings and Potential before taking on magic. The reasoning behind this was that both were things ponies used naturally, passively, as of compared to magic which was an active skill. Hence, if those tender early years were spent on developing them, Luna would have a strong "base" for her advanced alicorn magic to build up on later on.

After lunch, they would run a series of tests, followed by playtime and tea. A bit of light reading before bed, and Luna would be too pucker'd out to continue.

It had been nineteen months since Luna's alicornification. She was the demure sort who took after her surroundings - she engrossed herself in new knowledge and asked a lot of questions, but said little of her own accord. Just as well; Caughlin liked that in her.

"Mommy, what's 'field'?" asked Luna, looking at with wide eyes.

"A field is an area around something," answered Caughlin, waking from her reverie. "And Luna, I've said it before, I'm not your mommy, okay."

"Then what are you?" asked Luna again.

"I..." *That's the money shot, isn't it?* She reached down and ruffled her mane. "Well, we're all your family. Everypony here. But I'm not specifically your mommy."

"Why can't you be?"

*Because that would be selfish,* thought Caughlin. The alicorn was alive and functional - well, rather - thanks to everypony's efforts, even the scientists at the Oh-cube. Why should she get such unique attention? It made her feel guilty. Just because she was the one taking guardianship over her (again, her near-complete state of reality bubbles meant she had the most time to spare), it didn't mean their importance in her life was diminished. She felt that they should have credit too. And then there was the matter of Whooves...she winced as she thought about that. She was lucky that Luna didn't call him "daddy", or the embarrassment would drive her to resign.

The kiss wasn't even a kiss. It was just a playful peck. That was the story Caughlin was sticking to, and she meant it. And it was in the rush of the moment, at the peak of their euphoria. The period after the party had been the most non-threateningly awkward situation she had ever been in. She was older than him, his tutor and guardian of sorts as well. How could her colleagues think that there was something between them? *Maybe for the heck of it,* answered Caughlin, sighing inwardly. She remembered the soap operas of the past, and those questionable discs old Macquaire Pie had stashed away back in the days when he was not so old. Maybe it was something in ponies that reveled in fantasies. Heck, when you lived in a world of flight and magic, fantasy was reality.

*Professional. Just be professional.* Caughlin smiled as Whooves trotted over. "Morning, Doctor."

"Hey," replied Whooves, returning the smile.

"Good mowning, Wooves," said Luna brightly.

"Morning, Luna. What's that there?"

"Basic magical field theory," replied Luna proudly. "Mommy's teaching me theory."



"That's awesome, Luna! You'll grow up to be a brilliant pony," said Whooves, letting the foal indulge in attention.

Whooves had responded to Luna surprisingly well. Instead of seeing her as competition, he had taken a great liking to her. *Wait, competition? For my attention? What am I thinking?*

"And how about you, Doctor? Have you done your reading on individual element control in a time-shift field?"

"Well..." Whooves shuffled uncomfortably. "I can do it, isn't that good enough?"

"Whooves." Caughlin shook her head, chuckling. All this time, and he hadn't changed. "It isn't enough that you can do it, you have to know what you're doing. You have to understand what the effects are now to determine what'll happen after. Or in your case, what the effects were to the effects today, or...ah, bother. You get the picture."

"I drew a picture," said Luna happily. "It's Mommy and Doctor and me and everypony eating cake."

"That's nice, Luna. Now get back to reading. We'll have a small quiz soon-"

There was a loud crack. Luna, who still hadn't gotten used to it, ducked behind Caughlin. She patted her quickly, motioning for her to stay and trotted up. Discord had brought yet another new pony. He was an old unicorn stallion, with greying mane and a dark brown coat. He seemed unfazed by everything, oddly, and seemed to radiate an air of control.

"Caughlin," greeted Discord quickly. "Spare the pleasantries. I just want to drop him off here before I forget or lose him. You may find him less fun than that other one - yes, you - that I brought over. He doesn't say much. Found him trying his hand at teleporting, and got stuck halfway through a rock, would you believe it! I'll just stick him here. Maybe the next time I return he'll do it again and I can have a good laugh. Now excuse me, the ponies in Canterlot are getting restless from the relative lack of chaos in the lives."

"Ah- I'm sorry, relative?" asked Caughlin, immediately stepping up as the intercessor.

"Yes. It's almost sad. I focus my eye on someplace else for two weeks, beyond the Great Sea. They form a *committee*. Of all things, a form of government! They're trying to organize their agriculture and construction, and already they're plotting how to kill each other. I swear, if I stopped doing anything for a month, when I come back things'll be no different, because you ponies are just so good at destroying things," ranted Discord, popping up and down in various places as he went on. "But hey, there *are* you guys, and you seem perfectly whole to me, so there's an exception. Anyhow, I should really get going. I think I can sense a hurricane coming about in those parts." Before Caughlin could say anymore, he left, as usual.

All attention focused on the newcomer. He took a short bow, and raised his head.

"Hello everypony. I am honoured to meet you. And you," he said, turning to Caughlin, "must be Caughlin Mare. Grey coat, blond mane. Clearly the authority here, judging by the way you hold yourself. It is a pleasure."

"Same, I'm sure," said Caughlin cautiously. "So, you know my name from what I look like, you seem perfectly at home being here. Any surprises we should know about you?"

"Only one," replied the stallion gravely. "I am Fuhrich, leader of the Order of Order, and I am here to oversee the progress of Project ALICORN."

.....

Caughlin paced about in her room, horn aglow, creating her signature reality bubble wildly. She was fuming. She briefly remembered something about Luna being coaxed to take a nap in Whooves' room instead. Just as well; it wouldn't do any of them good for her to see her rage like this.

She thought of Fuhrich again, and let loose another sphere, larger than the previous. *How dare he. How dare he!*

Fuhrich had wasted no time with introductions. A brief nod, and he requested to see the alicorn. Luna was brought forward. He did not like what he saw. They began to argue, Caughlin trying to reason with him while he ranted on about resources and opportunity cost.

"It's been over a year!" Fuhrich bellowed, looking like something had snapped inside. "Me and my ponies have been cantering all over Equestria just to stay alive, goading Discord to buy you time, and this is what we've been waiting for? A little blue *foal* that shies at strangers? This is supposed to be the champion against Discord? I thought the results you gave us were all positive!"

"Aren't they? What sort of rock have you been living under? Don't your scientists tell you anything?" retorted Caughlin, rising to the taunt. "You of all ponies should know that it would take a long time. Twenty, thirty, maybe even forty years for Luna to reach her peak powers! She's just a child, Fuhrich! She needs to grow like any normal pony!"

"It's not the growing part that disturbs me, it's the ridiculous rate at which it's going! Can't you do something to make her mature faster? She's just an experiment, after all, not even a regular pony-"

The rest was a blur. She had "seen red", the most basic instinct of equines when faced with immense rage. Maybe it was the complete buffoon Fuhrich had been that had triggered it. Maybe it was the fact that he was insensitive enough to say all of that in front of Luna. Maybe it was because he had brought up that one, unpleasant fact that Luna's ultimate purpose was to fight and defeat Discord, something everypony was more comfortable leaving at the back of their minds...

One thing was sure. She would not have blown up if she did not care about Luna. *So now I know what I think of her. Great. And all I had to do was listen to her get insulted.*

The next few moments of outrage were only a smudge on her memory. When she returned to sentience she was locked in her room with a note that read: "Just cool off for a while. Luna's okay. Don't worry. -Whooves". And that was exactly what she had been doing. Cooling off. She was just not very good at it.

There was a knock on the door. "Is it safe?" came Whooves' voice.

"Safe enough," snarled Caughlin, feeling her horn ache. "You can come in now."

The door was unbolted, and her student stepped in. "Gee, Caughlin. I never knew you could kick like that," he said in awe. "You sent him *flying*, did you know that?"

"No. No, I don't. Can we never speak of this again?" moaned Caughlin, sitting down on her bed. "I feel like an utter meathead, Whooves. I'm a pony of science. I may be boiling furious now, but I shouldn't have resorted to physical violence."

"I think you landed a pretty good blow, there," admitted Whooves. "A bit lacking in speed, though for strength I say-"

"Whooves! How could you?"

"If it wasn't you then it would have been me!" replied Whooves hotly. "Or any other pony who's taken Luna as one of us! There's no way we would have taken that lying down."

"But the thing is, Whooves...he's right, in a way," said Caughlin remorsefully. "Think about it. Put yourself in his horseshoes. They've been on the run for their whole lives, Whooves. And they're depending on us to make a brighter future. That sort of expectation shatters pretty hard, you know."

When he did not respond, Caughlin tried to go on. "Not to mention he's the leader. Everypony looks up to him. Who knows how many ponies are putting their hope in him? And he's put that hope on us."

"Caughlin. Listen to me," said Whooves, trotting up and gripping her shoulders tightly. "He's him, alright. Fine. But you're *our* leader. You're family. And we've put our hopes in you, and I promise you, nopony's going to think any worse of you for doing what you did. Disappointed, maybe, if you didn't, but the fact remains that you did." She could hear, smell his deep breaths as he stared into her eyes pleadingly. Then he looked away. "Even if you could have kicked him a little lower in the belly, that would have been hilarious."

Caughlin blinked, mouth open slightly. Then she managed a tiny, pained smile, and drew him into a hug. *But no more than that*, she thought quietly.

They left and checked up on Luna, who had just woken up. Caughlin lifted her tenderly in her hoofs and cuddled her. "Are you okay, Luna?"

"Yes, Mommy," whimpered Luna, trembling slightly. "I'm sorry, Mommy."

"What for, sweetie?"

"For making you angry." Luna sounded like she was about to burst into sobs.

"No, no, Luna. It's okay, it's okay," soothed Caughlin. "You didn't make me angry, Luna. It's got nothing to do with you."

"The new pony said my name."

"Ignore whatever the new pony said," said Caughlin, kissing Luna softly on her horn. "I...love you, Luna, just the way you are. And don't ever, ever think that I won't. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mommy." She could feel Luna shift in her arms. "I love you too."

She glanced at Whooves, who bit his lip and smiled. Silently, she thought to himself:

*Yes, it's the little things that matter. No doubt about that. But how many of these little things are we going to have left?...*

# Chapter 7

## Enter Codename: CELESTIA

That night, everypony ate their dinner in silence. It was almost like the days before the big decision, except that this time the tension was directed fully at one particular pony. The irony was not lost on Caughlin. *You've made our lives harder. Have a taste, see how you like it.* Even though she still held it against him, she knew that they had to resolve this as soon as possible. She pulled him to one side as soon as they finished, and with Whooves they sat in a far corner out of earshot.

"First off, I want to apologize. Not for reacting, but for resorting to hoofs," said Caughlin, offering a foreleg grudgingly. Fuhrich nodded mutely, and shook it firmly, once.

"I, too, am wrong," answered Fuhrich. "I was just so, well, disappointed. You can't imagine how much we're relying on you. And seeing the alicorn as but a child, well...you can figure out what happened." He bowed his head, and Caughlin realized just how old he was, easily around Macquarie's age if he were still alive. "I let my heart get ahead of my wits. I am truly, truly, sorry."

The sudden turn in attitude caught her off guard. "No, it's alright. I suppose we're all being pushed closer to the edge, what with Discord stepping up his antics."

"I see. I noticed, miss Caughlin, how you tried to reason with Discord. It was odd, attempting to make sense to a being of chaos. But your efforts were noble. I respect you much more for it," continued Fuhrich.

"Weren't you all disappointed and mad moments after?" shot Whooves, to Caughlin's chagrin. But Fuhrich simply smiled and waved a hoof.

"Respect is earned, and has nothing to do with feelings. If anything, I was as angry as you saw me *because* I respected you so much. To have my hopes lifted up by so much by seeing her step up on behalf of Canterlot, then having them dashed, no, it did not feel good. But still what I did was

unjustifiable." He looked at the two squarely. He had, Caughlin realized, guarded eyes, ones that seemed old and accepting, yet hiding something behind that guise. This pony was intelligent. She would have to carry herself carefully.

"We accept your apology," said Caughlin.

"Wait, we do?"

"Yes, Whooves, we do. I don't want this event to be a stumbling block any longer. But I warn you, watch yourself when around Luna. You may be leader of the Order, but ponies here take orders only from me." *Yes, that sounded good. Firm, willing to compromise a bit of face for the sake of the whole.* Caughlin kept him in her glare, trying hard not to blink. "Deal?"

"Yes, miss Caughlin. I humbly accept," said Fuhrich, giving her a relieved smile. "But then, what of your colleagues?"

"They'll come around," said Caughlin confidently. "They trust me. Whoever I approve, they will too, eventually. But it'll take some time."

"You bet," muttered Whooves. This earned him a kick in the shins. "Hey!"

"Now, now. Temper, temper," said Caughlin.

"This is a very big relief to me, miss," said Fuhrich. "But we cannot ignore the fact that Project ALICORN is not coming to fruit yet. Discord is using a lot more force to deal with us, much more than we thought. He's increased his disaster output too soon - what little preparations we could have made are even more insufficient now. The average body count is rising. Resources are extremely scarce. I wish to sacrifice as few ponies as possible, and for that to happen we need to take him down quickly. Every day spent in chaos is a day wasted."

She noted that he did not say "no pony", simply "as few as possible". *Suspicious.* "Believe me when I say we do not want any pony to die unnecessarily," defended Caughlin. "But the alicorn is more than just a tool or a weapon. She is a *pony* just like you and I. She needs what every pony needs. And care is one of them."

"Then she is a lucky pony. Others above do not have this luxury," said Fuhrich, sounding restrained. "I...I had a foal, about her age, and..."

When he did not continue, Whooves prodded, "And...?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned him," said Fuhrich, voice now stone cold. "But the point is, we cannot afford to achieve the optimum for a single pony at the expense of all Equestria. I know she is precious to you, all of you, and I understand that feeling. However priorities are priorities, and mine are to my followers and Equestria. I beg of you to re-consider yours, and where they lie."

*Again with Equestria*, she thought. Aloud, she replied, "I see where you are coming from. And we are sympathetic. Why else would we have agreed? But a pony is a pony, and their growth processes, physiology, they're all courses of nature. We can't change them. Force-feeding her or zapping her with electricity isn't going to make her develop faster."

"Well, what if you programmed another alicorn to do so?"

"Wait, what? Program a pony to grow faster? Age, mature..."

"Yes, all that," cut Fuhrich. "Isn't it possible?"

"Well, theoretically, yes..." Caughlin trailed off. Already her mind was whizzing away at possible algorithms for sped growth. They had done this sort of thing for crops, hadn't they? But to use it on a pony, a living, feeling, thinking pony, was it okay? "We need to discuss this before we can decide. We have to think through this thoroughly. All things considered." *Including ethics*, added Caughlin meaningfully.

"Thank you," said Fuhrich, bowing again. "But I pray, please think faster. We have not much time to spare."

.....

The debate started soon after Discord's next visit, exactly sixty-five hours and twenty minutes after the last.

As Fuhrich and the other ponies argued across the table, Caughlin tried to listen and pick out points, jotting them down.



### Home team:

- 1) Running a 2nd alicornification process without Discord's approval.
- 2) Acquiring resources for the alicornification process without Discord.
- 3) Performing lab work and calculations without Discord's approval.
- 4) The unavoidable pain involved with rapid cell multiplication
- 5) Sustainability issues given hormones, emotions and the negative feedback system.

### Fuhrich:

- 1) Possible to manage the work if the Order provides sufficient distraction.
- 2) Lab work can be done by the Order without a need for double-checking.
- 3) The Order can provide more materials. (Fuhrich seemed willing enough to bear the costs, and argued that the alicorns were their only hope, and hence worth every bit poured in)
- 4) Drugs and magic can be used to ease birth pains and control growth
- 5) A 2nd, faster-growing alicorn was necessary to save more ponies, and to liberate Equestria faster (Caughlin rolled her eyes at this)

"So it's a matter of risk," murmured Caughlin. The sound of her voice immediately brought a hush of unintended silence. "Betting our lives on whether or not your ponies can keep Discord occupied. Isn't that right, Fuhrich?"

He did not reply. Caughlin went on. "By artificial means, we keep this second alicorn alive. But for how long? When will this altered system stabilize? Do we keep her on drugs and hide her in a room? Discord will show up at any time, maybe even now-" She paused and looked around- "so we can't bring her out. She'll be cooped up in her little room, stupefied. How can you expect to teach her anything? She'll turn out a feral beast, if the trend continues."

"But with the help of my scientists, I'm sure we can find-" began Fuhrich, but Caughlin raised a hoof.

"No, Fuhrich." The words hung heavy in the air. "The cost is just too much. For both ourselves and the second alicorn. Luna.

*"That's right. I can't leave her alone."* I know the fate of Equestria lies in our hooves. But Fuhrich...I'm sorry. Equestria will have to wait until Luna matures. I am not going to bring another pony into this world if she has no chance of happiness." Caughlin stood up and gazed at him keenly. "And my decision is final. Everypony against the production of a second alicorn, raise a hoof."

Silently, they were raised.

"A majority of all minus one." Caughlin bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Fuhrich. I hope you understand."

"I...do," sighed Fuhrich. He turned to face the others. "I thank you all. You are all brilliant ponies with such wonderful gifts. From this, I can see why you will not take the risk. Yes, you have a point." He gulped visibly. *Probably for show*, thought Caughlin suddenly. She became alert as she sifted through his words.

"But I will ask you. Will you at least share your equipment, if we acquit you of all risk? If we can ensure that you will not come to harm because of the second alicornification, will you allow us to come and perform it ourselves?"

That was it. The clinch. *Fuhrich had planned for this. But what's his game?* Her heart raced as she tried to foresee every possibility. *The Order knows about this place. They've had a pony teleport in here before. Fuhrich was brought here by Discord himself. They're all manipulators of a sort. They have ponies with special abilities, like me and Whooves. Does he really mean that he's going to bring his ponies down here?-*

There was a hubbub around her, demands for him to explain himself. Arguments and counter-arguments. Protests, shouts, even. It was chaos.

"Quiet!"

A large purple bubble unfurled itself, swallowing everypony. They dropped their words as the skin washed over them, the sensation calming their nerves, and it vanished along with the noise. With a final splutter, the residue magic faded from Caughlin's horn. All eyes were on her now, including Fuhrich's...

"Whooves!" She suddenly dove for Fuhrich and pinned him to the ground, using her magic to back herself up. As the brown stallion ran up to help her, she could see in her peripheral vision jet-black ponies filter through the ceiling like water through a paper cone. *Am I hallucinating?* There was no time to think about that, though. She shouted for the other ponies to brace themselves, to watch out, to hold guard...then there was a flash of light, a deafening roar of magic unlike anything she had heard before, and everything became dark.

.....

Caughlin woke up feeling sore in the head. She had had a rough night. She got out of bed to check on Luna's cradle. Luna was not there. *She's probably having breakfast already*, thought Caughlin.

"Good morning, Gummy," yawned Caughlin, stretching a leg. The dragon, of course, gave no reply. She got herself washed up and ran through a mental checklist on her things-to-do as she trotted out into the den.

"Good morning, Fuhrich."

"Good morning, miss Caughlin. You're up late today."

"Yeah, I know. I had a bad night." Caughlin stretched her neck, trying to ease the stiffness. "Gah. Well, anyhow. You know, I'm glad we worked things out." She relaxed a little at the memory of a few days ago. At least that was over.

After she had pinned Fuhrich down, one of the floating ponies had stunned her with a spell. They were the Order's watchmen, ready and waiting to protect Fuhrich, and Caughlin's hasty jump had set them off. Fuhrich had quickly dismissed them and tended to her. After she awoke, they had more conversations. She was skeptical, and still was to an extent, but Fuhrich had finally managed to convince her. He was so sincere about it that he had talked to the other ponies individually, too.

"I'm glad for it too," said Fuhrich, smiling warmly. "I am honored by the generosity of you ponies in letting us come."

"Don't mention it. You're the ones at risk, though. I hope for your sakes that you can keep Discord busy and at bay," replied Caughlin, shaking her head. "You're really into this, aren't you?"

"Anything for Equestria," answered Fuhrich gravely, and they both laughed.

"Luna! Oh, Luna, there you are. Did you have a good night's rest? Hurry up, Luna, and then I'll get you started on some work before I go for breakfast." A quick cuddle and a peck on the forehead. She looked around her, where the other ponies were gearing up already for the day's projects. Two of them would be doing supplementary work on the growth algorithm for the second alicorn, while the rest continued with their previous stuff. The Order would handle the rest of the load.

"By the way, Caughlin, I have an idea for the implanting chamber. Do you know of guise spells?" asked Fuhrich, drawing her attention once more.

"They're rather simple but useful things. It's basically an upright plane of magic woven in, like a patch on a quilt but in two dimensions, and what happens is you can hide the changes by making it seem like..."

Fuhrich talked on, but Caughlin wasn't listening. She felt her head throb briefly.

"Eh, I'm sorry, Fuhrich. I guess my bad night really got to me. I think I need to take a nap later."

"Don't overwork yourself," chuckled Fuhrich. "Don't worry, I have your back. By the way, out of curiosity, what shall we name her? The second alicorn."

Caughlin blinked. At least she could handle this without too much thinking. "Well, the first one's called Luna. I'd like to think they'll become sisters. So one's named after the moon, the other the Sun, perhaps? Ray-ray? No, that sounds ridiculous, no. Hmm..."

"How about Celestia?" suggested Fuhrich.

"It sounds so grand and royal," complained Caughlin, frowning. "But I suppose...I can't come up with anything. The Sun. What is the Sun's name in Old Pony, hmm. Ah well. Celestia it is."

She glanced at Luna, who was already deep in reading. *You're going to have a sister, Luna. Isn't that nice? I hope you get along with her. Because she's going to be family too.*

She felt her head throb again. She wasn't going to be able to do much. Somehow, her mind just felt addled today. And yet amidst this mess, there was a tiny but persistent, nagging feeling that she was forgetting something.

She would have to ask Whooves later.

# Chapter 8

## Enter The Façade

She had not felt normal all week. Things were going well on the Order's end, their experts sneaking in visits every other day, and progress was being made. The scientists still consulted with them on complications and particularly nasty variables in the experimental accelerator gems they planned to use for Celestia. They had been recognized, albeit unwillingly, and it was a new landmark in their partnership. Obviously this was good. So why did she feel that something was wrong?

*Ponies that can phase through matter, and teleporters*, thought Caughlin grimly. *They could have been watching us all this while. Probably have been.* A meaner corner of her mind suggested that she whip up a reality bubble the next time she saw one, to see whether he would stick in the ceiling. She quickly quelled the thought. She had not used her spheres in a while, come to think of it. She did not use her magic for anything except levitation and reality bubble, and she could feel the build-up of unused magic itching in her horn. It was simply the natural course of things, so she had no right to complain. *Which is less than can be said for Celestia, the poor dear. I hope we can get her through this safely.*

Fuhrich had suggested that they take Celestia out of the den for excursions when possible, to give her a greater sense of space. Caughlin did not like the idea of letting young foals out into the chaotic world above, even if guarded, but it was a better alternative to cooping her up. He had also said something on the pains of faster growth, and she had agreed to it, but what had it been again? She couldn't remember. That was odd.

"But if you can take her out, then why not us, one day?" Whooves had asked.

"Well, teleporting through a magic barrier isn't easy," Fuhrich had explained. "Discord set up one around this area, right? But he himself teleports in and out, so that means there's a loophole, one we've found. But maneuvering it takes much more stamina, much less carrying somepony

with you. It's easier to carry a foal, since there is less mass involved, yet even so I think we'll need at least two ponies to carry her out."

"Then what about your, ah, phasers? The ones that can go through walls?"

"They can't carry anypony. They're only good for surveillance," said Fuhrich with the slightest smirk on his face. "And sudden entrances, of course. But not transport. That's why I had to strut my, ah, 'powers' in front of Discord to get here. I couldn't have gotten in any other way."

Caughlin was content with staying inside. She had lived her whole life in the den, and life was never boring; first it had been science, and now it was Luna. But Whooves had been abducted. She could understand where that desire to re-surface came from. Maybe when this was all over he could take her to Manehattan, that is, if Manehattan was still standing.

"Caughlin? Er, Caughlin?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, Whooves," said Caughlin, snapping to attention. "What is it?"

"How do I resolve this here, uh, time-tension with reference to a moving frame of reference?" asked Whooves, planting a worksheet in front of her ruefully.

"Well, it's quite simple. You just have to, here you go..." She let her educated understanding take over, drawing additional lines and the occasional formula in a smooth flow of ink and explaining along the way. "One cancels out the other. You just have to find which tensions oppose each other, and they, well, cancel."

"Caughlin? Are you okay? You don't seem right," asked Whooves worriedly.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm good, Whooves."

He nodded, and buried his head in his work once more. Suddenly he shot up and exclaimed, "Oh, wait! Darn! I forgot something, and it's in your room, Caughlin. Come on with me and unlock your door, will you?"

"My room? Left something?" She ignored the inevitable sniggers from the next table as she followed the agitated stallion down the corridor, through the door...

And she was suddenly inside, pushed roughly on to her bed, Whooves blocking the way to the door. He had shifted time.

"Whooves?" she asked, panic rising in her voice. "What are you-"

"Shh," pleaded Whooves. "Just, dammit, Caughlin, hear me out, okay!"

"I...okay, Whooves. But you had better darn explain to me what's going on."

"My pleasure," he said grimly. "But first I need you to work a reality bubble."

"Why?" asked Caughlin suspiciously. "Listen, I guess this is some sort of elaborate prank, and even if you're trying to cheer me up I don't-"

"Shut up and just do it!" shouted Whooves, voice raw with emotion.

Whooves had never talked back to her like that before, and surprisingly it hurt. She shook her head sorrowfully and complied. Her horn glowed. As the magic began to channel she felt her head throb again.

"You can do this," drifted Whooves' voice through the pain. "You can. Just push through the pain. Get it done. For my sake. For everypony's sake."

"I don't know what you're going on about," mumbled Caughlin, now straining to get the strands of magic together. This was strange. Normally it just flowed to her so easily. "I..."

"You can, that's all you need to know."

"I..." With clenched teeth she pushed harder. She could feel the pain burning between her eyes. With a huff and a wild swing of her forelegs, the sphere burst forth and engulfed the room like a burst dam. And suddenly it was lifted, all of it. The pain, the muddle-headedness, the tiredness.

More importantly, she *remembered*, and the recollections began pouring in.

"Tell me what you know," said Whooves hopefully.



She sat still, gathering her thoughts and joining the dots. There was only one possibility.

"Fuhrich used a memory hex. He used a bloody memory hex. On me, on you, on all of us. He ambushed us and used a bloody!-"

"Shush, Caughlin, you don't want him to know you know," said Whooves hastily, a hoof on her mouth.

"I...thank you, Whooves. Dang. I had no idea." Caughlin swallowed hard. That was the point of memory hexes, after all - a comprehensive, detailed over-weave of past recollections. Her thoughts were rushing in all directions, but at least they were coherent now. *First things first. No rush.* "Luna?"

"Luna is, well, immune," admitted Whooves. "The memory hex did nothing but put her to sleep. Not that they know, of course. I've told her to play along. It's like a game for Mommy, I told her. And she has to play it really well because that's what Mommy wants."

"And you?"

Whooves slumped on to a chair. "I saw it coming a second before. A book mentioned it before, how funny is that? The colour of hexes, I mean. It was a bright green-and-purple. In the midst of the hex hitting my brain, I shifted back. Not just me, the whole den. Four seconds. A new record. It's amazing what fear does to you, eh?" He gave her a painful grin. "Then as events progressed again - you know, you jumping on him and telling me to move - I pretended to trip and faint. Fuhrich didn't suspect a thing." He sounded weary all of a sudden. "It's been ten days, Caughlin, with everypony clueless as to what happened. I was so worried, so afraid. What happened if Fuhrich went and did this, or did that to you? You're his biggest threat, of course. He's probably only keeping you alive because everypony, Discord included, would notice if you were gone. It was all I could do, acting dumb while stopping myself from exploding and sending him to kingdom come."

Caughlin took this all in mutely. So three days had gone by as one "eventful" one, three whole days of her life lost in a dream. She waved for him to go on.

"Anyhow, I've done my best to watch out for things. I took a gamble with you and the reality bubble. It was the most horrible moment of my life, worse than when Discord found me, wondering whether you'd lose your brain like you said you might a year or so before. Whether I'd prefer you alive but confused, or back to normal but possibly dead. So far Fuhrich hasn't done anything out of the ordinary. It seems like he just wants to get Celestia done," continued Whooves. "I don't know what he's planning after that. By the way, I had to guess too that his memory hex was something Discordian and not magical. If it was magical, well, you know...I'd have lost you forever. And I wouldn't have a clue what to do." He shook visibly as he said the final words, poking his horn-less forehead with fake bravado. "It was so bad, I had nightmares of you and him. But thank the Creator, thank Discord, thank anypony up there that you're alright, Caughlin."

She rushed up and met him in a deep embrace that seemed to last forever. She felt tears trickle down her snout and mane freely, and couldn't care less. Those were tears that had to be shed. Tears not only of torture and fear, but also of joy and a new-found resolve.

"You stopped calling me Doctor. I realized that I like being called Doctor." She could hear the smile in his words, and drew him tighter. "Damn, Caughlin. Just, damnitall. What do we do now?"

She let go slowly and wiped the last tears from her eyes.

"I'm not sure. But we will do *something*," she said quietly. "We have to find a way to free our colleagues and get them out safely. And we can't hurt anypony either."

"Not even Fuhrich?" choked Whooves.

"Well, maybe a little for him," said Caughlin, sighing. "But we can't resort to violence. The reason being, we don't know how many ponies Fuhrich has with him. If they're harmed, there might be more coming for us. And I refuse to stoop to their level. If we're going to make it out of this, we have to do it the right way."

"Right isn't easy," groaned Whooves. "I'm not even sure whether right is possible."

"But it's what makes us different from them, Whooves," she said, nuzzling his mane. "Remember what we're teaching Luna? We can't go around being hypocrites. We'll never be able to live it down. We're living for the future, for all the little things. And this is one of them."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Appreciate the little things," said Whooves, laughing now. "But hey. You have to take your own advice too."

"Since when have I ever not appreciated the little things, Doctor?"

"Well, here's one for size," said Whooves, leaning in and kissing her on her lips.

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*Act normal. Our first advantage is Fuhrich underestimating us.*

The two ponies re-emerged into the brightly-lit hall. A pony leaned forward and gave Whooves a nudge and a wink, to Caughlin's disgust. Others came forward with reports and data for her to review, at least having the decency to hide their sniggering.

*Don't prod, pick out. Fuhrich may be the perfect puppeteer, but his lackeys may still slip up. Don't ask odd questions. Analyze and compile.*

She walked over and began talking about the guise spell for the chamber with Fuhrich, whether there was anything left to cover, only to "discover" that it had been settled and prepared yesterday. She laughed it off and blamed it on her less-than-optimum state of mind.

*Be prepared. I have my bubbles, and you have your time shift. With our powers we can already reverse most fatal situations. But don't use them until somepony is at risk of death.*

That night, at dinner, Caughlin invited Fuhrich to deliver a short address to the R&D department, which he graciously accepted. He expounded on effort, work and unity to defeat a common foe, and extended yet more thanks for their generosity on behalf of everpony in Equestria. There was a smattering of applause. Even hexed, the ponies did not take well to speeches, it seemed.

*We have each other, and we have Luna. And when we find the counter-spell, and either stop the second alicornification or save Celestia, we'll get our family back together again.*

That night, Caughlin slept better than ever. Unknown to her, Luna was wide awake, sitting up and watching her Mommy rest at last. A tiny smile played itself across the alicorn's face as she felt peace return to the room. She did not know this, she just felt it.

"Sweet dreams, Mommy. I love you."

*And that is going to be our greatest motivation, our source of strength and our final goal. I don't care if it's selfish; Equestria can wait. Family comes first.*

# Chapter 9

## Enter The Stalemate

It was times like these that Caughlin was thankful for her strong mental capacities. Listing key points on ink and paper risked discovery; it was better to have them locked securely in her mind. Every night, she replayed the fake memories and scoured them for details. Profiling was vital - "know thyself and know thine enemy", or so went the quote - and she wanted to make sure just who she was dealing with, as well as what sort of persona to act out in front of him.

"There's Fuhrich," she mouthed silently, staring at the ceiling above her bed. "Discordian ability, memory hexes. He's strong enough to maintain a hex over at least ten of us, so there's no doubting his magical stamina. Physically, though, he might be weak due to the toll of stress. Note to self, observe physical conditions. Then there's his manipulative skills as a leader and tactician." She thought hard about her augmented memories. Fuhrich had implanted the memory of her being won over by reasoning, but that was it. He had not altered anything else. *He wants us to follow him of our own accord, she realized. He doesn't micro manage. He actually wants us to still do work by ourselves.*

"Goals? To complete the second alicorn, Celestia. To use our facilities to achieve said goal." He had not directly assumed a leadership role, she also realized. He had simply weakened hers, and let other ponies slip the administrative duties to him. He did not participate in Laboratory activities, and spent most of his free time reading. So it appears that he had no major use for her colleagues, except for their permission of use, gladly given thanks to the fake memories. *We're letting him do what he wants because we think he's convinced us.*

"Behind Fuhrich there is his Order. Patrols in the ceilings, and at least five of them, judging from the ambush. Any direct confrontation will trigger them, so we're at a fighting disadvantage. So no fighting." She wondered whether it might be possible to catch them in a reality bubble before they

reached. But that would mean making and maintaining something as large as the den, and Caughlin had never done that before. No, it was not worth the risk.

*But wait...if I can hold them off at bay, and keep everyone in it, will it disable Fuhrich's own memory hex ability? Because then he'll become nothing but a frail, regular unicorn. And as out-of-shape as we are, surely we can take on that. Then Fuhrich will become our bargaining chip against the Order. What happens then, though? Hmm. Well, at least we have an emergency plan now.*

The most important thing was that she undo the hex on everypony before they carried out any sort of active plan. It would take too long to explain the situation to a newly-freed, confused mass; better for them to be well prepared when - if - it happened.

"But Fuhrich needs to expend a certain amount of magic to maintain the hex, doesn't he?"

Hexes. What were they, again? She had taught Luna about them just this morning. "A hex is an advanced triune, the third level of joint spells above triunes and pentaspells. While the triune is a union of three single threads, the hex is a union of three pairs, producing an elaborate, comprehensive patch layer on the intended target, be it imagery or memories," she recited. Given Fuhrich's dependence on keeping them in the dark, she figured he would at least check on the hex weave every so often. How did one go about doing that, anyhow? Caughlin had little experience with such things. Either way, it meant that he would notice if suddenly he was free of such a burden.

And then there was the issue of Celestia. She could not stop the Order from obtaining a foal. It was beyond her reach. But she could save her from alicornification, or at least the process regarding the offending accelerating gem. She tried to remember the schematics for the improved procedure...

"Firstly, the Accelerat will be added alongside the characteristics. As a spell, the Accelerat is already thaumatic; conversion is not needed, but it has to be placed in the right nook to avoid development imbalance between characteristics." She tossed and turned in her bed as she gathered the rest from scraps of overhead conversation; she had not been on Project ALICORN duty at all since Fuhrich's takeover. "Meanwhile a second,

physically-crystallized Accelerat will be surgically implanted in in the foal. This ensures that her physical growth is on par with her thaumatic development." So that means Celestia would be plagued with the problem already, even if she was not an alicorn. She could only hope that they did the procedure here, instead of above the surface; then she would have a chance to stop it. "Once both sides are ready, they will be unified according to the same procedure as Alicorn #1."

So she had to somehow convince Fuhrich to perform the surgery in the Laboratory.

*You could just leave Celestia be,* whined a tinny voice at the back of her head. *You don't even know her yet. It's not too late.* She sat up and looked in the direction of Luna's cradle. That was all she needed to kill any remaining doubt.

*I'm not going to leave her behind. I intend to save everypony, and that is what I will do.*

She could not liberate her colleagues yet. It pained her, but she would have to let them continue under the illusion of submission. Right now, getting Celestia was step one. When her security was guaranteed, and she had more information about Fuhrich's operations, she could plan everything else.

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"Good morning, Caughlin."

"I wish it were," grumbled Caughlin.

Fuhrich gave her a look of concern. She shrugged it off moodily. "It's just sleep. I need it, that's all, same as usual," she said. "It's alright."

"Good to hear that," said Fuhrich. "We're setting up the guise spell soon. One single drape right over there." With a sweep of his foreleg he motioned to her block. "It'll look just like that from this end, but on the other side, well, we'll have the implantation chamber set up and everything."

*Slight wheezing at the end, noted.* "Oh, okay. That's good. Need any help?"

"No, no, that's quite alright, Caughlin. Our unicorns will be here any minute. Rather I do have something else planned for you," continued Fuhrich with a smile.

"Oh, you do? What is it?" she asked, careful to stay sounding tired.

"As you have played the director's role before with Luna, we hope that you can do the same for Celestia. Thaumatical union is a tricky business, but we believe that you have an affinity for it, as you've entered the thaumatic realm before."

*He's putting the alicornification into my hooves. This couldn't be better!* "Why, sure thing," she said. "That is, of course, if I manage to rise up to it. I hope this insomnia leaves me in time, just, ugh," she added, groaning loudly for good measure.

"Thank you very much. And we hope so, too," said Fuhrich. "We wish only for the success of this event, and when Celestia is ready we will take hold of the future."

*Great how you've ignored Luna completely, you controlling twat.* Caughlin rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Yes, yes. We all do, I'm sure. But you're using accelerating spells, right? It'll be a new experience for me, directing them I mean. Is there anything special I need to know about it?"

"No, it's quite all right. Our scientists will handle that. You just need to do what you did last time. We have in fact even prepared a spell that will simulate Discord's ethereal jaunt from last time."

*He's hiding some thing from me. Why?* She kept her suspicions hidden. "Okay. That's good, then. You know, just out of curiosity, what percentage of work are we contributing to this? Us, you know, I mean." *That's good, keep fumbling up yoursentences...*

"Your efforts in the first alicornification are invaluable," said Fuhrich stoically. *Ah, flattery. Here comes the crunch.* "However this time round we're making good progress by ourselves based on the wonderful efforts of your team. So please be assured that without you, this would not even be taking place."



*You're damn right about that. So basically you're saying it's all you.* Caughtlin gave an appreciative laugh. "Very well. I'll be checking up on Luna's exercises, then."

Luna's characteristics development lessons were intensive, but were not much different from the norm - she was taught how to fly pegasus-style, in the way most pegasi learnt how to fly, and given weight-moving training to work her muscles. Even as she trotted over she could see Luna wobbling in the air, and felt a tinge of pride.

"Look, Luna, Mommy's here," said her pegasus trainer with a wink at Caughtlin. "Come on down now, gentle landing, there's a good girl."

"Mommy! Did you see me? I was twirling in the sky!" exclaimed Luna, bounding up to her. She nuzzled the foal.

"Yes, I saw you, Luna. It was great. Good job," replied Caughtlin. "You're coming along very well. But Luna, just, well, this isn't the sky. It's flying, yes, but you don't have to move in the sky to call it flying." She caught her moment of confusion. "The sky, is, well, the place above the ground. Not that this isn't above our ground, but there's a...ah, Luna, I'll tell you another time." She smiled warmly at her. "When you're older I'll show you the sky."

"Why can't Mommy fly?"

"Because Mommy doesn't have wings," said Caughtlin.

"Then how will Mommy fly with me?" persisted Luna.

"I...can't," she answered, and felt a tweak in her heart. "But you know who can? Your little sister, Celestia. She's going to have wings just like you, and a horn as well. And when you two are older you can fly together, and do magic together. And you two can become the best of friends."

"But I wanna fly with Mommy! Mommy's my best friend," pouted Luna.

"Then what about Whooves?" joked Caughtlin, glancing around for the stallion. He was busy watching the scientists raise the guise spell on the other side of the den.

"Whooves," frowned Luna. Then she shook her head, having made a decision. "Whooves is my second best friend."

"That's good then. Go on, Luna, you had better get back to flight training." To the trainer she said, "I'm sorry for interrupting."

"Nah, it's okay," giggled the trainer. "She's such a cute little thing, isn't she? Mommy this, Mommy that. Discord know how long it's been since we've had children. Actually we've never had children in here, before, have we? But I digress. Oh, Caughlin, I never knew you had it in you."

Caughlin blushed as the trainer gave her a final, playful nudge before attending to Luna. "I never knew I had it in me, either," murmured Caughlin.

That afternoon, she sidled up to Fuhrich once more.

"You know, I've been thinking, have you gotten a foal yet?"

"As a matter of fact, we have," said Fuhrich. *Dang*. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious, really," said Caughlin. "Where do you get them from, anyhow?"

"We just find them," admitted Fuhrich. "We have contacts in the main towns. Whenever Discord does a big doozy on one of them, we step in and try to rescue the remainder. That's how our numbers keep on growing, also."

The thought suddenly entered her mind. "So...does that make them orphans?"

"Sadly so," replied Fuhrich. Something in his voice suggested that he was wondering what sort of obvious question that was. "Well, at least until you adopt them. I see that Luna's grown very fond of you."

"Well, you know. I suppose she just grew on me," said Caughlin offhandedly. She had to be careful. If she let on too much, Fuhrich might see her as more of a stumbling block than before and decide to get rid of her prematurely.

"But that's good, isn't it? Look how happy Luna is." *She's happy enough without you messing around! Stop looking at her!* "I'm honestly hoping that you could do the same for Celestia." *Wait...you are?* Fuhrich shrugged and went on: "After all, while we are doing our best to minimize the pain, we can't prevent it completely. The poor soul will need a parent figure for reassurance, and you're the perfect candidate. Also, this is why you have to make sure the alicornification runs perfectly." Suddenly, there was an evil glint in his eyes. "I don't think you've been shown the plans, have you? But you see, due to the complications of the acceleration spell, we have to divide her thaumatical field into halves. We will give her anaesthetics to numb her, but we are still not sure what the long-term implications are."

"Wait, what?" Caughlin's mind began racing once more. Split thaumatical fields? But that meant-

"Yes. Basically, we have divided the essence of her being, and placed the acceleration spell in the core. The other half has been retrieved and mixed into the alicorn components. So the foal Celestia has only half a base field in her now." Fuhrich put on a pained expression, although the glint only seemed to worsen. "It is for the best, really. By placing the acceleration spell - we call it the Accelerat, by the way - deep into the centre, we can lessen the pain involved during her growth. It would be, ah, closer to the natural way of things, don't you agree?"

*I was wrong. Fuhrich didn't just want to engineer a faster-growing alicorn, he changed the constitution of her essence altogether. This is insane. But it also means that-*

""But when she's unified with the amalgam of characteristics, her essence will be rejoined, isn't that right?" asked Caughlin tersely.

"Yes, precisely. Spot on! Of course, that is why we need you to perform a perfect directorship once more, or else who knows what will happen to the dear?" The words were stinging, and it was all she could do to stop herself from lashing out again. "We believe that the tendencies of such things like essence to...*reunite* on their own should come in handy. I am told that they were like rubber bands, they just pull together if you stretch them. So her body would be much more accepting of the amalgam, and the Accelerat along with it."

"I understand. Thank you, Fuhrich."

"My pleasure, Caughlin."

She was trapped, now an unwilling pawn. Either she gave her full support into the second alicornification, and made sure Celestia survived, or she sacrifice her and leave her with half a field, with death the most likely option. It was most likely that her essence had already been divided, and was simply awaiting transportation. It was sickening. She was treated no better than a rock or a piece of research! But it also meant that Fuhrich was determined to have his way. Not even considering whether or not she had regained her memories, he would still resort to such measures, playing his trump card straight up. She felt the remainder of her hope dissolve. There was no way out, at least for now.

That night, after she made sure Luna was asleep, she told Whooves everything, and hugged it out.

"Sad, isn't it. Our initial plans have just shattered in less than a day," whispered Caughlin. "But it's okay, Whooves. We can make new ones, right? As long as we're living, there's hope for the future."

"But Caughlin, why would he lie to you?" asked Whooves. "If he wanted you to do a good job, then he'd have told you what to do with the Accelerat."

"I don't know, Whooves. I really don't." She let go of him at last. "I'm tired and I'm worried, Whooves. This is spinning out of control."

He clasped her hooves in his. "Even if that's the case, I want you to know that I'm in this with you, okay. If we spin out of control or whatever, we do it together."

After Whooves left, before she slept, she tried out something she had never done before.

*To anypony up there, anypony at all, she thought, if you can hear me, then please help us all I pray. I know this is a sudden request, but hay, I'm sure it's not the first time, and if you've heard me, maybe you could just spare a bit more time to work*

*yourpowers or something. Because I'd really appreciate it - I can't do anything anymore.*

# Chapter 10

## Enter The Answer

The Order had promised seventeen hours of safety on the fateful day of the operation. For formality's sake they had described the plan in a memo, given to everypony, a daring and almost-certain suicidal cat-and-mouse chase. Of course, it wasn't as simple as that; in every "leg" of the chase, they would set up spells and hexes to hinder, cripple or disable certain aspects of time-space. The sudden distortions of magic would be off-setting for a being so immersed in the thaumatical realm as Discord teleported in and out, and whenever possible they would take potshots at him using enchanted weaponry. Caughlin was torn between letting them know of Discord's vulnerability to physical harm and keeping mum about it. She finally decided against telling them. After all, they had it all ready already. No sense in complicating things for them.

The date inched closer. Caughlin could not think of a way to save Celestia except by completing her alicornification. Without the means nor ponypower to back up a mission to reclaim Celestia's split essence, the only chance she had of whole again was through that accursed process.

She had managed to sneak out a copy of Celestia's growth guidelines for after the operation. They did not hold much hope for her, either. While the deep embedding of the Accelerat offset most of the pain of cellular-level adaption, there was still the matter of nervous stress. Her five senses would be overwhelmed, possibly leading to brain shock, blindness and deafness. To overcome this Celestia would be dosed with drugs and magic every twelve hours until her vital signs stabilized. During the early periods of monitored development she would be read theories and the like, to make use of her rapidly-expanding thinking processes and to keep her hearing in use. The drugs and the spells needed to keep Celestia from going insane with pain were firmly in Fuhrich's hooves, so she couldn't whisk Celestia away from him just yet. But at least she could try to get the job of reading to her. If she could just shape her right, then Celestia would be at least resistant to Fuhrich's philosophical manipulation.

Luna, meanwhile, was growing well. She had mastered flying unexpectedly quickly, early by two weeks. Caughlin had rewarded her with her first present ever - an old but functional abacus, frame of oak and beads of polished stone.

"I'm going to have to teach you how to use this thing, won't I?" frowned Caughlin, realizing this moments after giving it to her.

"What does it do?" asked Luna.

"Well, you use it to count. The ancient ponies used it. We don't anymore, of course, thanks to the invention of the Calculating spell - a proud product of your family, did you know? - but the art of using an abacus shouldn't disappear. It was mine, you know, before they invented the spell, but now I'm giving it to you." Caughlin leaned over and pointed to the middle row. "So you start here. The four on the bottom are 'one's, and the one on top is a 'five'. So..." With slow, deliberate flicks, each one clacking loudly, she showed Luna, "that's one. Two. Three. Four." In a single motion she moved the 'five' and the four 'ones' down together. "Five. See? And then six, seven..."

"What about ten?"

"Ten is this one, the next column."

The alicorn had taken an unusual fascination to the device. To Caughlin's pride Luna was doing simple addition and subtraction on it like a pro two days later.

"See? You're learning things really well," murmured Caughlin, wondering how she would react to her younger sister's artificially-endowed steep learning curve.

The day came at last. While the R&D ponies continued their work, behind the guise spell a crowd of Order scientists huddled, double-checking the equipment. A couple of her colleagues had stuck around to observe. Caughlin stepped into the director's circle once more. There was a thick air of expectation that did little to ease her mixture of emotions, most of them rueful and jittery.

"Are you ready, Caughlin?" asked Fuhrich.

"Ready as I'll ever be," said Caughlin, doing her best to keep her voice from becoming a snarl. *How can I be, with you slipping traps in?*

"Alright. Everypony clear? Final checks on the triagram and and spell conduits."

"Final checks, complete," called out the chief asistant.

"Ethereal jaunt in three, two, one."

Caughlin took a deep breath, closed her eyes and let herself shift into the higher dimension.

*Now that I'm here a second time, you know, it does seem a tad empty, though Caughlin. Nothing but colours and swirls. Tourism must be thriving in these parts, eh?*

She approached the three characteristics. This time, a faint white aura clung about them in addition to their own colors. She figured it must be Celestia's essence. Trying not to vomit at the idea (if that was possible), she tried to meld the lot together. But something was stopping them from joining, more than the initial rejections. Looking closely, she could see that there was a second, acid green aura underneath the white. *That must be the Accelerat.* She cursed the Order and Fuhrich as she applied a greater force, to no avail. As she pushed, the green aura flared up; the Accelerat was repelling the characteristics with a vengeance.

Was it possible to back out and ask for advice? Caughlin tried to force herself back into the physical realm. To her horror, she could not. She was stuck here until she completed the union - maybe even after that, who knew? Maybe that was Fuhrich's plan, to lock her in the thaumatic realm forever. She began to

panic. *What do I do? I can't perform the union, I can't get out, what if I never do? Maybe I'll starve. Or maybe I won't, really, since I'm not in the physical* - She yelled, and slapped herself hard. "Shut up, Caughlin!" she scolded, panting. "Just calm down. Keep calm. Go with the flow."

The thaumatic realm was unnervingly silent around her as she mustered up her thoughts and focused once more. *Just do what you did before.*



*Mother?* asked a tinny voice out of the blue, just before Caughlin was to give it another try.

"Who was that?"

*Mother? Are you Mother?*

"Am I now? Who are you?" she called out, spinning around defensively. She then realized that it was coming from the characteristics.

*You must be Mother! Oh, I've waited for you! It's so queer, Mother, it feels so odd...*

"Ce...Celestia?" Caughlin hazarded a guess. "Celestia, is that you?"

*Celestia? I do not know who is Celestia.*

"Then who are you?" she asked, her surprise giving way to annoyance.

*I do not know. I am just a foal. There were ponies in black, and they were looking for me. There was a lot of shouting, and then darkness, and then a small space with a tiny sun, and a single other pony who told me to, ah-*

"Okay. Alright. I think I know," cut Caughlin wearily. "You don't have a name. But the only pony who's here, other than me, is you. Your name is Celestia. And that's who you are."

*And you are Mother. You are my Mother,* said the voice, full of joy. *I've been waiting for this moment for a long time!*

"Well...I suppose I am," said Caughlin, her expression softening. She could feel her curiosity take the better of her. "How is it that you can talk? You're only a week-old foal, maybe even less than that."

*Talk? What is that? I can think, but I cannot make sounds like the ponies outside,* answered the voice. *Aren't you doing the same?*

"Maybe it's different in the thaumatic realm," muttered Caughlin, impressed. "Hmm. Thaumatic realm, where thinking is a form of communication. Oh, wait, Caughlin! You're doing it again. Derpity derp." She sighed and facehoofed. "Celestia, do you know how to perform a union?"

*What is a union?*

Caughlin facehoofed again. "Great, Caughlin. Just great."

*Maybe I could leave with you. Is that okay, Mother? Can I leave with you? begged the voice. I feel lonely and empty like I'm in two pieces. Please, Mother, it doesn't hurt but it's so odd.*

"Leave with me...leave with me," repeated Caughlin, thinking hard.

*Fuhrich wants to trap me. Even if he didn't trap me, he probably intends for me to fail. That's why he's given me components that can't unify.*

*The Accelerat is a spell. The components are thaumatical. Celestia's essence is thaumatical.*

*And I'm a unicorn.*

"That's it!" exclaimed Caughlin. "Eureka!" Before Celestia could say another word, Caughlin lifted her horn. "Celestia, you'd better hold on tight. This may be a bumpy ride. But I promise you, I will not hurt you. Not if I can help it. Please, Celestia, you don't know me yet... but trust me."

.....

Outside, the scientists were trotting to and fro worriedly. Fuhrich was taking everything in with a quiet, unreadable demeanor.

Time passed at different rates in the thaumatical realm - rates being plural for a reason - and that aspect was something that the Order scientists had not considered important until now. Five of the seventeen precious hours had passed. They needed at least four hours to run the first recordings and tests, and to put Celestia's physical being into a sustaining medium. It was only natural for them to fret and worry so.

Whooves, too, was finding it hard to contain himself. He shot a dirty look at Fuhrich. If anything happened to Caughlin...

Suddenly, the empty director's circle began to glow. The chatter died down as everypony strained to see what was going on. Cold observation turned into confusion as runes began to etch themselves around the circle.

Amidst the hubbub, Fuhrich remained silent.

The light from the circle intensified and burst forth, blinding everypony. In the pure white Whooves strained to make out what seemed to be Caughlin's figure, except that her horn was longer and she had sprouted a pair of wings...the light soon engulfed even that, and Whooves had to turn away.

The triagram was burning white with light as well by now. The runes along the chamber began to glow brightly, their hues adding to the brilliance. When everypony looked up, the deed had been done. Celestia, suspended in the nutrient liquid, had a new pair of wings. The circles were back to normal. The additional runes were gone. And in the director's circle, panting heavily, was Caughlin, back in her gray, physical unicorn body, horn still glowing furiously with residue magic.

"She made it," whispered Whooves, voice escalating. "She made it, everypony, she made it!"

"Eh-" began Caughlin, but she was knocked down by a relieved Whooves. Slowly, the noise building up, the scientists began to clap their hooves on the floor, then cheer, then whoop with excitement. Caughlin had done it - the second alicornification was complete and perfected.

"Man your posts, everypony! Move, move!" shouted an elderly voice, and at once they scrambled. The pony approached the now-laughing Caughlin, tumbled on the floor with Whooves, and bowed.

"Miss Caughlin Mare. You are a genius," said the pony breathlessly. "I know exactly what you did."

"I know who you are," realized Caughlin, getting up. "You're Dr. Klipit, aren't you?"

"The very one," wheezed Dr. Klipit. "We may have had our discrepancies and doubts about you, before, but I want to apologize for all that. You are truly a worthy equal."

"I'm impressed that you know what I did," said Caughlin, adding meaningfully, "given not even I was sure of it. I wasn't given a memo."

"But it was brilliant! The spell execution. The cataclysm. The-"

"Will somepony care to explain what is going on?" asked Fuhrich, tone dangerously even.

"Well, *Fuhrich*," said Caughlin primly. "Allow me. *Your Accelerat was incompatible with the union*. The Accelerat was not only incompatible, but also geared towards the Horn. It was inappropriately placed and slotted shoddily. It may have looked fine on the diagrams, but the fact remains that the Accelerat refused to have any part of the union." Dr. Klipit positively shrunk at the words.

"That was when I began to think of the components in terms of nature. All of them - Celestia's essence included - were thaumatical. And as a unicorn I had the ability to control thaumatics to an extent. So, using my own body as a catalyst, I took everything into myself. The whole lot. It was the hypothesis that I had greater control over events within my own thaumatic field, rather than in their respective ones. And it turned out right." She gave him a sharp look before continuing.

"Of course, I had to absorb some of the Accelerat. It was not pleasant, I can tell you that. But I did redistribute it back into the amalgam, so none of that -" She was about to say "junk", but changed her mind - "spell was lost. Carrying it, and Celestia's essence inside of me, I re-entered the director's circle. Which reminds me, I noticed the conditional barrier clause in the circle there, a tiny but present thing. It wasn't there before, if I remember correctly. *Somepony* was making sure I did a good job before I came out, and I'm *bloody grateful* for that.

"Anyhow I think you saw me carrying the amalgam with Celestia's essence. I shifted into the thaumatic realm again - I was carrying so much extra field that it was easy - and slotted it into Celestia. And hay, you know what? You were right. The two halves of her essence stuck together like magnets. The implementation was quicker and easier than Luna's. The conditions were met and I was freed."

"Absolutely wonderful, miss Caughlin. Once again you meet and excel beyond our expectations," applauded Fuhrich with a cold smile. "I knew you could do it."

*Playing the fool? Hah. I see right through you,* thought Caughlin. She felt a reply itching at the corners of her mouth, but looking at Celestia - a foal that she had actually borne inside of her (strictly speaking), somepony who had come to terms with her as "Mother" before even laying eyes on her - she was reminded of her goal. She forced down her pride, and settled for as contemptuous of a flick of her mane as possible. "You flatter me, Fuhrich. Just doing my best."

That night, it was a very weary Caughlin that climbed in to bed early. Luna was already fast asleep. Gummy crawled up to her, taking his usual spot on her mane, and Caughlin patted it absent-mindedly.

"I did it, Gummy," she said softly. "I saved Celestia." She heard the sound of Gummy blinking, eyes slightly out of sync as always. "It feels good, do you know? Being able to do something right. Success." She sighed, and shifted into a more comfortable position. "I just have to do everything right from now on, eh, Gummy? Then we can go back to living our lives in peace." To her ceiling, she mumbled as an afterthought, "And thank you. Even if you didn't do anything, things turned out alright today. And I'm grateful for that."

# Chapter 11

## Enter Parenthood

The extra bed creaked as its inhabitant began to toss and turn, breaking out in spasms. Shining a weak light to guide her path, Caughlin got out of bed and administered the painkiller spell with a gentle touch of her horn. The alicorn loosened up and sighed before falling asleep once more. She glanced at Luna, who was still in peaceful slumber. The unicorn sighed contentedly and got back into bed to catch a few more hours of rest. As her consciousness drifted, she noted that she didn't even need to be waken up anymore. Tending to Celestia's special needs had become, like so many other activities, part of her routine, one that never ceased to bring a unique warmth to her heart. Or perhaps it was heartburn - Caughlin had a deep suspicion that she was getting old. Even though she wasn't even past half her lifespan (using algorithms and estimates, the average safe-from-chaos pony lived for just over 100 years), she could feel her muscles knotting, and an odd urge to call Whooves "young'un".

*Parenthood is such an interesting thing* were her final thoughts, as her horn dimmed down, the room returning to darkness.

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The first week after the implantation had been one of immense tension. Celestia's frail state could not survive outside of the nutrient chamber until it had grown; she would have to remain in the Laboratory until her organs and senses were strong enough to live in normal conditions. If Discord returned in that period, they could only hope that he did not pass through the guise spell. Fuhrich had ordered two unicorns to stay on guard at all times behind the illusion in addition to the usual on-shift scientists; should the tyrant approach, and his magic-distorting presence begin to shake the spell, they were to reinforce it with all of their power. The flimsiness of this plan was painful to even think about, and the only thing worse than that was the idea that the R&D ponies *couldn't see this*; then again, Fuhrich's memory hex was very competent and largely to blame. Caughlin had spent a few sleepless nights wondering how to deal with Discord in such a situation.

Then came one day when the devil himself showed up.

It had been a few weeks since they last saw him, and Caughlin was curious as to his state. She was grudgingly impressed with the Order's efforts - his crow lines were deeper, and his usual smirk had been replaced with a tight, pinched look. The scales on his tail had lost their sheen, and the fur on his body was messy and dirty with ash. Clinging to him was a rank odour of sweat, soured milk and - Caughlin had to restrain her gag reflex when she realized - innards. Not just blood, but organs filled with juices and enzymes and waste. The greatest change in him, though, was his demeanor - normally he carried himself with an air of mischievous intent bordering on malice, something that read "I do things for the heck of it". None of that remained. Discord was actually *weary* for once. He gave a loud sigh, and magicked a couch to fall on.

"Bother these rebels," muttered Discord. That was not a good sign, either - Discord had even lost the drive to be witty, succumbing to mere complaining. *You're over-thinking things*. Caughlin approached, and gave her customary greetings.

"Ah, Caughlin. What do I do, I ask you? Confound these ponies, they drive me to...to..." Discord shook his head. "To do everything short of Armageddon! I can't even muster up the energy to rant. Look at me!" sighed Discord. A bag of ice plopped on to his head with a soft crunch. "Why, the way these ponies have been treating me, it's just annoying! Won't they just give up?"

"What is it about them that's making it so hard?" asked Caughlin, putting on her best sympathetic voice. If she kept him engaged in a line of conversation, she could keep him from moving to the far end of the den, where the guise spell hung.

"Hard? Oh, puh-lease," said Discord, sitting up suddenly. He frowned and held Caughlin up to his eyes with a rough grip. "They're absolutely pathetic. Don't go around getting the wrong ideas, miss Caughlin, these ponies pose no problem at all to me."

"But I, well, thought that..."

"Ah, come on. I'm just playing with them. But it's becoming an *extremely* boring game." Discord put her down and summoned up a bag

labeled "Peanuts". "Do you know what they do, Caughlin? They find me, and start launching spells. It's aggravation, that's what it is. So I think, 'Well, I'll amuse them', and so I give chase. They try to run through crowds, hide in villages and the like. I destroy everything. *Everything*, mind you, except for the debris, because that would be pointless. And they teleport here and there, and leave little changes in the thaumatical flux. As if it bothers me at all! Pah! I gain on them slowly until I've got them. Then I eat them."

Caughlin froze in a stare.

"Oh, yes, Caughlin," continued Discord, munching on peanuts by the handful now. "But not raw, mind you. This one time I made muffins out of them." He began to hum as if it were the most regular thing in the world. "You know, all you have to do is take a cup of flour. Add it to the mix. Then take a little something sweet and sour. A little bit, perhaps a pinch. Not that you ponies can pinch with hooves, of course, but still. A little salt, and then the pony. It's a cinch, really, though you can never get your fill with desserts. Or was that cupcakes? I can't tell for the life of me what the difference is." He stopped and glanced at Caughlin, who had blanked out her expression completely. He snorted and laughed, spraying bits of peanut shell all over her. He rolled his eyes and dusted her off with a featherduster, pulled out from nowhere.

"I'm just *kidding*, Caughlin. You silly mare. Ponies taste horrible, nor do they go well with my digestive system. No, I just kill them. Simple as that." He ran a talon slowly along her throat. "Sometimes I do it fast, sometimes slow. Not that it matters, since they can't hurt me. Just depends on my mood. Which, come to think of it, has lightened considerably since coming back here." A wide, toothy grin stretched across his face. "You know, Caughlin, I wonder what I'd do without you science ponies, I really do. Ah, well." He gave a tired stretch. "If I go on at this rate you'll be the only ponies left in Equestria. I'd better lay off the hunting for a few days. Maybe make time spin a little faster so that they can re-populate. Appreciating chaos is not as fun when you're alone, after all." With a flick of his tail, peanuts, couch and Discord disappeared.

"Whooves?" she asked quietly, not moving from her spot.

"Yes, Caughlin," replied the stallion anxiously. "What is it?"

"Where is Luna?"



"I hid her as soon as he popped in. She didn't hear a word of it."

"Good. Good." Caughlin then turned to Fuhrich, who had been silently watching. She trotted up to him, eyes cold. "Those were your men, Fuhrich, acting under your orders. What do you have to say about that? I'm curious."

"That they died as heroes, for you, for us, for Equestria," replied Fuhrich, matching her glare. "For Celestia. Nor do you have any authority over them - as much as you are chairpony of the R&D, I am the leader of the Order. I appreciate your concern. The deaths of our comrades was certain, and we do our best to get over it, but hearing it from the killer himself is not easy, I assure you." He faltered, an uncertainty in his voice. "We feel it for sure. The loss is painful. But it isn't unexpected - they knew what they were to do, and the result of it. Everypony in the Order is ready to throw themselves into the fires of hell for freedom. We need to remove Discord. And the only way we can do it is through Project ALICORN."

"Do you really think that more power is the only way?" asked Caughlin.

"What else can we obtain to defeat such a being?" answered Fuhrich simply.

Due to Celestia's rapid maturation, within a week she could see, hear and recognize shapes. They took her out of the chamber for a tentative physiological trial; in two days, she had learnt to stand, and in another two days, walk. Measurements showed a triple increase in weight, and quadruple in height within the week. It was unnatural. But for Caughlin, who had a supervising role, it was a source of pride all the same - the foal was alive and growing and learning. She was not sure whether the term "healthy" applied in this context, though.

That was when the scientists took her away.

Caughlin knew that it was for the best. They had the necessary painkillers - the R&D's own drugs were far too weak to have the required effect - and the staff to deliver it regularly. Despite the various hazards, the Order possessed a few precious pieces of equipment to perform their own monitoring work vital to keeping Celestia's experimental rates safe. Most importantly, Celestia would be safe from Discord. Even so, it was not without pain that Caughlin said goodbye to Celestia. Who knew when she might see her again?

"Take care, Celestia. I'm going to miss you," said Caughlin, hugging the foal gently. "Luna, say bye to your sister."

"Why?" asked Luna. "Why can't Celestia stay?"

"Because she...needs to be somewhere else, Luna. This place isn't right for her," said Caughlin, carefully choosing her words. She did not want Luna to feel that she was in danger, just because her sister was leaving on grounds of safety.

"Then how will she see Mommy and Whooves and me?" persisted Luna, pulling at Caughlin's mane.

"She won't," said Caughlin, biting her lip. She felt her eyes water. *Get a grip on yourself, Caughlin. Not in front of the foals. And Fuhrich.*

"Mommy," said Celestia, to everyone's shock.

"Yes," stammered Caughlin, nuzzling the white alicorn for the last time. "That's me alright. Now you be good, Celestia. Be good. And don't forget us."

"What she said," said Whooves, giving Caughlin a sideways hug. She felt him tremble slightly. "Take care, Celestia. I don't know you very well. But I wish I did. If I get the chance then I will, okay? Uhh. Dang. Forget the 'uhh' part, will you?" Caughlin drew him closer and gave him a squeeze across the shoulders. The Order's transport ponies gave them a terse nod, held Celestia's hooves and vanished into the world above.

Caughlin had spent the subsequent week in a slump. She was worried for Celestia and frustrated at herself for many things. Somehow, it was in the settling of the moment that she remembered how un-hexed she must have sounded over the past few days. The intelligence, the snarky replies, the bold challenge...

*I really hope Fuhrich attributes all of that to my vibrant, dynamic personality*, thought Caughlin, rolling her eyes inwardly. She would have to stay in-character from now on.

Then there was her extended absences from the rest of the R&D team. Not that they blamed her or thought any less of her for it; they understood perfectly. It would be an insult, she felt, to think any less of them. But Caughlin still felt a pang of guilt at apparently ditching her team to join the Order's alicorn activities. Well, there would be no more of that - Celestia was gone from their lives until further notice.

The Order had scrapped the nutrient chamber within a day, and had dismounted the guise spell on the next. She spent a couple of afternoons showing Luna her reality bubbles, and attempted to explain to her the thaumatical principles behind it.

One day, Luna took Gummy out for a walk around the den - or rather, Luna took a walk around the den while Gummy watched. Disappointed as the lack of response shown, the alicorn huffily gave Gummy a poke in the eyes, as she had seen Caughlin do a few times before. To her shock, Gummy reared up and let loose a column of fire, and from it came a scroll. Caughlin picked up Luna's squeals across the den and quickly took the letter up.

"Oh, Luna!" exclaimed Caughlin, lifting her in a hug. "This is great news! Whooves, go and get me some paper and a pen! Your sister's coming back to visit in two days!"

The letter read:

*To: Caughlin Mare of the R&D Department*

*Greetings.*

*We request that preparations be made for the second alicorn Celestia's visit to the Laboratory. After one week of dwelling in Order conditions, she has stated firmly her desire to return to your place. We know that this is extremely risky, however, for the sake of her emotional health we are willing to discuss a compromise. Previous measures remain, most important being Celestia's confinement to a private room. Further discussions regarding this will be held in good time.*

*We will arrive in two days of your reply. On the day itself, please send another signal (blank) message via dragonfire, and we will take it as a safe indicator to enter. Expect us within five minutes of your signal.*

---

That had been six years ago. From then on, their routine had been the same - Celestia dropped in every alternate week, spending one above and one below. She simply wasn't happy living with the Order to the point that she had refused meals for days - somehow, her family instincts had won over. Even Fuhrich could not change her insistence on returning, such stubbornness she showed. Caughlin wasn't going to question it - she was just glad that they got to see her again. Luna had taken a great liking to her, and it warmed her heart to watch them play and study together.

Even so, there were parts of the arrangement that she could not stand, and one of those parts was the things the Order were teaching Celestia - things, Caughlin suspected, straight out of Fuhrich's book.

---

"What does my name mean?" asked Celestia one night, as they settled in after a long day of levitation practice (magic was the only thing they could work on inside Caughlin's room apart from theory; day sessions during Celestia's visiting weeks were therefore devoted to it). The days of snuggling together in the same bed had long past - the three beds, along with the alicorns' study materials meant that the room was more cramped than before - but the usual bedtime stories still remained. Caughlin had a repertoire of these from PEEP books, many of which came with morals, something she was intent on passing on to the alicorns.

"It's Old Pony for the sun. And Luna is Old Pony for the moon," answered Caughlin.

"That's nice. It also fits funnily, 'cos I'm a midnight blue and you're bright white, sis. And what's your name mean, Mommy?" chipped in Luna.

"I...honestly have no idea," admitted Caughlin. "I never got the chance to ask them. Caughlin Mare. Hmm. Well at least we know what 'mare' means, though I suppose it'd be awkward for everypony if I had turned out a stallion."

"While we're at it, what about Whooves' name? I doubt that it refers to his, well, hooves," noted Celestia. "It's odd, really. From most of your stories, ponies have names like Butter Cup, Blossom Bloom, that other green pony with the black mane whose name I can't remember. Blue Grass the

travelling musician. Littlepip and Velvet Remedy of that *really* long story you told us last time. I've also gathered that most conventional surnames stem from a characteristic of the family in ancient times - something-Apple, something-Silver, adjective-noun. I mean no disrespect, Mother, but everypony in this room seems to have unconventional names. Not that I don't like them, of course, I think Luna has a nice touch to it. And mine sounds regal, which is nice too," she added hastily.

Caughlin frowned. She had a point. "I think it's because back then, in the ancient days, ponies lived in peace, or at least without chaos. So they could call each other nice names like flowers and, er, bugs and things. These days - Luna, you wouldn't know, but Celestia knows what I'm talking about - cheery names don't really fit into the world we live in, don't you agree? It's almost ironic if you were a, say, Willow Tree living in the barren lands of Stalliongrad. Names like mine and Whooves just *fit* in today's twisted world, I guess."

"How was it like in days of peace?" asked Luna. "Was it really like in the books? Where plants grew normally and the skies were blue, and sometimes there weren't even clouds?"

"I wouldn't know." *Since when did my little ponies become so interested in ancient history?* "I can tell you, though, that peace and order did, and still do exist. The world has the potential to live in harmony." *With your aid,* thought Caughlin quietly.

"Harmony must be very nice then. What's harmony?" continued Luna.

"Well..." This was a difficult question. Caughlin gave it some thought, and considered whether to conveniently call it a night. Then inspiration struck her.

"Harmony is an abstract thing, sister," said Celestia. "It's an absence of chaos. You can't describe something like that."

"No, that's not quite right." Caughlin felt confident of her answer as she continued. "Harmony is something more. You could say it's made of of elements. There's honesty. If ponies were lying to each other there wouldn't be harmony, would there? And then there's loyalty, because when you trust somepony you feel much better doing things with them. Maybe laughter-" She suddenly remembered what Whooves had said back then about her

laugh, and felt her ears warm - "because it's a sign of happiness. Generosity, being willing to share with others who need it. You've probably seen that at work in the Order, Celly." *I hope.* "And kindness, because it's amazing what a little bit of care can do to somepony." *Like what the R&D team and old Macquarie Pie did forme.* Caughlin counted them up. "Yep, five elements. The elements of harmony."

Celestia did not seem satisfied with it, though. "How about magic? The Order ponies say that power is the most important thing to bring peace to Equestria, and magic is power."

"Magic is magic," dismissed Caughlin sternly. "You can have harmony without magic - it isn't a matter of thaumatics, it's a matter of your personality, who you are."

"But they argue that magic is necessary to defeat Discord!"

"That's true," relented Caughlin. "But again, harmony isn't an absence of chaos. It's when ponies get along, and live together in peace. Simply taking away chaos doesn't mean that they'll get along. Besides, where does that leave Earth ponies and Pegasi?"

"They say that uncle Fuhrich's an advocate of 'unicorn supremacy'," confessed Celestia, shrinking under the covers. "He's even written a book on it. It's a theoretical governing model with unicorn nobles and an enriched farming class. I mean, I may have read some of it..."

"Celestia." Caughlin sat up, biting her lip. "Listen to me, Celestia Mare. Uncle Fuhrich can believe what he likes. But you're my foal, and you do what I tell you to - you get that junk out of your head. Unicorn supremacy is corrupt and selfish and has no place in Equestria." She sighed. "Celly...you haven't done anything wrong. But I want you to focus - Luna, you too - and remember now that all ponies are equal. Everypony is to be treated fairly, regardless of how they look or what characteristics they bear, because each have their special gifts and talents. We have to rely on each other to make the best progress. How would you like it if ponies bullied you for being different? And you're not allowed to hex or harm them in retaliation."

"I wouldn't like it," mumbled Celestia.

"And would you look at me any differently, or love me less if I somehow became an Earth pony, or a Pegasus?"

"No, Mother, no!" cried the alicorn fervently. There were tears forming in her eyes. "Never!"

"Mmm," soothed Caughlin, magicking a handkerchief over to wipe her face. "It's okay, Celly. It's not your fault. I just want to be firm on that, because it's so important. Come on, stop crying. Luna, turn off the light please. We all need sleep. Tomorrow we're going to try out a triune, isn't that exciting? Us three. But you have to rest up, now..."

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She sat up, her thoughts waking her up once more. She could hear Luna's soft breathing, and Celestia's tighter gasps that she had almost learnt to get used to.

These were more than projects. These were her foals, and even though they were growing up fast - in the latter's case, literally so - they would probably still be that in her heart regardless of what happened from then on.

They had enjoyed around six years of harmony. But she could feel a nagging sense that it was about to come to an end. Like her bubbles, the dream would pop, and all that would be left was hard reality...

# Chapter 12

## Enter Project Alicorn, Phase 2

A soft whirring replaced the silence in the air as Team 4 switched on the new device, a sleek metal box connected to the test chamber via donor/recipient runes. It was a no-cables affair, which meant admirable neatness. A demopony stepped in, and once it was safely sealed, she raised her head high and let off a spark. Caughlin nodded appreciatively as the monitors on the device flickered, yielding numbers. She proceeded to let off two more sparks, one much weaker and another much stronger, the device listing new readings accordingly, before stepping back out.

The machine was the first magic-measuring instrument in history. It was still a prototype, but Team 4 boasted that it gave an estimated error of five units for large sources - fairly close given that they had worked at the concept from scratch, using cross-measurements, predictions and controlled experiments to define a unit and its nature as well as create a system that was sensitive to changes in these. Calculations regarding magical energy had been only theoretical until now; even during the planning of the alicornifications, the amounts of magic to be used in the union and implantation stages were not specified, merely thaumatical masses of the components, derived from physical mass using the Demetritic constant. She herself knew that it had largely been trial-and-error when it came to the strengths of the magic required. The device would be used largely for experiments involving magical resistivity and conductivity - "Would a rock retain more magic if zapped than say, a stack of paper of the same mass?" "Do all objects emit magic?" - the machine opened up plenty of new opportunities for discovery, and it was a historic day for the R&D department.

Of course, its immediate use would be to record the alicorns' current power levels. Team 4 were skeptical about it - they did not like the idea of losing their only prototype in the event of an overload - but Fuhrich had somehow managed to "convince" them after a "chat". So here they were - now that the functionality of the machine had been proven to the rest of the department, they were to get it going with the first commission of its life.



Discord had dropped in for another visit just moments ago. After berating Fuhrich for "greying up" the place, and slopping on to him a giant red nose (now removed), he had a look at the box. He soon found it boring, and after poking around at a couple of other projects, he left. His timing was perfect for once, and as soon as he had left Celestia eagerly came out of her room to see this revolutionary tool, standing with Luna behind the group.

Caughlin glanced at the leader of the Order, standing some ways behind her. Six years of laying low and doing apparently almost nothing during the alicorns' growth, save for maintaining the memory hex on her team, had taken a great toll on him. He had become thinner despite his lack of activity, and he had picked up a lethargic attitude to life, staying in his room for days sometimes and moping around when he did come out. Not that she cared, of course; all the better for them if the hex wore off at last due to Fuhrich's own negligence.

"I have to ask you," said Caughlin, turning to him. "How will we know when the alicorns are ready to defeat Discord?"

"This device should tell us fine," replied Fuhrich. "Later we'll get one of my stallions down here to fire off a damaging spell at full blast, and we can compare it to the alicorn readings. Basically we need enough power to counter-act Discord's own thaumatic field. He's a Draconequus, and pretty much half-magic; if we can neutralize those vital energies with a big spell, fast enough to stop him from regenerating, he's as good as dead."

Shrugging, Caughlin then nodded for Luna to step in. She briefed her on what to do - she simply had to build up as strong a magical pulse as possible, and release it when she couldn't safely contain it anymore.

The chamber was sealed once more. Everypony put on a pair of shades and earmuffs - safety protocol called for it - and a cautionary barrier was erected around them. Luna took a deep breath, and began to channel the latent power around her into her horn. Her eyes and mane began to glow with power. Suddenly she roared, and let loose the pulse with a deafening crackle. The recipient runes flared as they tried to convey the full amount of magic. The device shuddered, and out came a number.

"Eight thousand seven hundred and thirteen," read Caughlin, as Luna stepped out. There was a round of polite applause. She felt a surge of pride. "Well done, Luna."

"That was amazing, Mommy," she replied, shaking her head. "I'm still giddy from the shock. So much magic, like I've never felt before..."

"Can I not do this?" asked Celestia, pawing the ground nervously. "It seems overwhelming."

"You'll be alright, little sis," said Luna, rubbing her neck gently. "It's almost fun. Just do your best."

Unwillingly, the white alicorn went in. Her horn flared up quickly, and the chamber was once again filled with light. It did not help that her coat was pure white, either; soon she became painful to even peek at. She reached her limit; the room promptly exploded with sound. The chamber shook and the runes whined, flaring up in different colours with excess magic. When the ringing in their ears had finally stopped, Caughlin steadied herself to read the numbers. She heard the sound of somepony's goggles breaking into pieces - her own pair sported stress fractures at the edges.

"Ten thousand and seven," said Caughlin breathlessly. She was about to say something, but the rest of the sentence was quickly lost under the barrage of cheers.

"See? I told you it would be great!" exclaimed Luna, meeting her sister in a quick embrace. "That was like, bang, and boom, and there was that ringing sound and everything!"

"I...thank you?" stammered Celestia, swaying. "That wasn't very pleasant. I feel ill."

"Take your sister somewhere to have a sit down," said Caughlin. The two left, chattering excitedly. "Well, Fuhrich, what do you think?"

"Powerful, yes. But not enough."

"What?" She stared at him disbelievingly. "Buh?"

"I won't know until we get a regular spell measured, but it just doesn't...feel adequate. And it's better to be safe than sorry," said Fuhrich. "Can Celestia grow any more?"

"She's past her peak growth stage," replied Caughlin. "Sure she can, but it'll take another year at least." *And of course nobody else matters, just the strongest. Elitist idiot.*

"I see." Fuhrich frowned, and bit his lip. "Then it's about time we reveal to you Project ALICORN's Phase 2. Attention!" He lifted his head, and three guards swooped down through the ceiling, one of them carrying a bag of scrolls. *Well that's convenient, isn't it? Drama whorse.* "You, go fire your strongest spell inside that chamber. Have it measured. You two, give her a brief overview of the plans of Phase 2.'

"And what about you?" asked Caughlin sharply.

"I need to take a nap," answered Fuhrich. "All this excitement has tired me out. My apologies."

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*The Alicorn-Decageas Cannon, or ADC, is a system that harnesses the unique strain of alicorn magic and amplifies it. It is a modification of the classical Decageas, or union of ten. In a decageas, five groups of two, of equal power levels, join together to perform a spell significantly stronger than the sum of their components. Of course, this is unstable and impractical, as it involves not only a balance within and between each group during the duration of casting, but also the difficulty in obtaining participants of sufficient skill - controlling the often-large amounts of magic and keeping them in tandem with the other parties is no easy task.*

*In the ADC, there is a main pair that provides the bulk of the spell, or payload. Three of the five pairs establish a magnifying hex, while the one remaining pair channel and aim the spell through the hex, resulting in an extremely powerful spell. The main pair will obviously be manned by the two original alicorns. However, due to the intensity and alicornic nature of the payload, only other alicorns can participate in the ADC - regular unicorns lack the additional control of matter provided by the other two characteristics to properly handle it, and pegasi and Earth ponies cannot harness magic outside of their own bodies.*

*The arrangement of the ADC minimizes the involvement of these "other alicorns", or G2s, for efficiency, but still requires them - the magic used in the magnifying hex has to be of the same substance as the payload, lest*

*the payload disrupt it due to thaumatical density differences. The channeling pair needs no explanation. The arrangement does however remove the need for the G2s to use substantial magic (the hex is relatively simple).*

*For the ADC to function, therefore, 8 more alicorns are needed. We suggest using fully-grown unicorns who know the fundamentals of magic. After the adaption period, their magic and control thereof will naturally take on the desired alicornic form. Alicornification processes for the G2s are different given the subjects have a developed Horn; attached with this overview are the schematics, calculations etc. covering the process and methods to overcome the forementioned problem with others.*

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Caughlin went to bed frustrated that night. She had spent the rest of the day poring over the notes with her team to run through the technicals - as usual, the Order's work was complete, without any need for further input - but she could not stop thinking instead about the implications of this scale of alicorn engineering.

Fuhrich wanted power, and wasn't willing to wait another year for it. She grudgingly admitted that he had a point - to get rid of Discord, they had to do it in a single blow. Any less, and he would use the opportunity to wreck the world in an outrage, or worse, escape and recuperate before hunting them down. The magnifying hex plan made sense - it was the fastest way of achieving the desired results, and there was little way that Discord would survive after being dealt a shot from the ADC. But there was the issue of adaption, and while she had no sympathy for Fuhrich, she wondered about the other ponies under his command. They were willing to die, supposedly. *Are they also under a hex?* Fuhrich couldn't possibly keep maintenance on those, since he was stuck firmly down here. Perhaps they were just devoted to his cause, or brainwashed with his philosophies. Celestia had come close to that. She clenched her pillow tightly as she thought of it.

No doubt, she would be the director for the processes. Where would they hold it? Most possibly down in the Laboratory. *But surely the R&D team would at least suspect something by now. They're not stupid,* thought Caughlin.

*But then again they're under a strong hex*, she retorted quickly. *Dang*. There was a knocking at her door. She shot up nervously. "Who is it?" she demanded, as softly as possible.

"It's me," said Whooves. Caughlin sighed in relief and got up to open the door. "Can we talk about the cannon?"

"Not here, Doc. They're sleeping. You'll wake them."

"Oh. Right. The hall, then?"

"Too risky, Fuhrich's spies are on their rounds. Your place?"

Whooves' room was slighter smaller and a lot messier than hers. There were notes and books littered across his bed, and Caughlin mused on how he could sleep in such limited space. He shoved some to a side and bade her to sit down.

"You know, I enjoyed not having the Order around," said Whooves, smiling tightly. "It's been good, eh."

"Trust me, I don't want them coming back either," said Caughlin, sighing. "But this is it, Doctor. The moment of their lives, the reason for their existence. The freeing of Equestria." She made a mock spit at the last line. The words did not roll off her tongue well.

"Celestia's power level is a hundred or so times more than the Order's demo fighter," said Whooves. "I hung around to watch. The Order pony's blast was pretty strong. It would have broken a few ribs if it had hit somepony, but it only registered nine hundred-something units. With Luna and Celestia combined, I can't see why Fuhrich would think that we'd lose."

"He's taking precautions," explained Caughlin. "Obviously we'd want to finish it in one go, to stop the chance of him fighting back. We may be able to deal damage, but we can't take much of it." She remembered Discord's description of the chase, as if he had merely *drifted* along to catch up to those trained fighters, obliterating everything else on the way. "Besides, if we take any longer than a moment, innocent ponies will be hurt as collateral. A single shot, taken somewhere preferably far away from other groups of ponies - that's what he wants."

"The way you put it...won't the aftershock hurt *us*, then?" asked Whooves doubtfully.

"The ADC fires a focused destructive spell, not an explosive one," said Caughlin. "Destructive, meaning it destroys, focused, meaning it's contained to within the target aim. It won't harm anything that isn't in its way. Silly Doctor, I thought I taught you better than to overlook the little details."

"Well, anypony could have missed that," pouted Whooves. "Anyhow, even if it's a precaution, I still think something's wrong with the whole idea." His expression turned dark. "Didn't you notice anything odd about the runes on the director's circle in the blueprints?"

"No, I didn't." Was there something that she had missed that Whooves had picked up, for once? "There weren't any, were there?"

"That's right. Isn't it weird? The runes are pretty important, so why would they not list it in?"

"They did mention that they have some final adjustments to make. The letter was a rushed one, just before they packed up to another hiding place," said Caughlin, recalling the words on the "Supplementary" section. "It's as simple as that."

Whooves frowned. "Something doesn't feel right," he repeated.

"It's part of Fuhrich's plan. Of course it doesn't feel right." Caughlin ran a hoof through his mane. "But it's - dare I say it? - the only step possible. We either have Luna and Celly fight him with their current level, or we wait for a year, which isn't an option any longer, or we go through with the ADC."

"Don't you have any faith in their abilities?" asked Whooves ruefully.

This disturbed her. She thought back to the times when the two had moved on from fundamentals to advanced training, developing reflexes and stamina. The Order had sent guidebooks on combat skills and spells, revising their editions to include unique, fusioned alicorn techniques, and the sisters tried to make the best of them. Celestia had the double benefit of actually being with Order trainers half the time, as well as possessing the Accelerat; Luna was, however, by no means weak, for she had put in a lot

of effort to grasp and practice the concept of utilizing all her characteristics in battle, with help from Celestia. She had never seen them fight before, and part of her still did not want to. *I don't want them to get hurt. I sound so naïve, thinking that it's even possible, but it's simply what any mother would want.*

"It's not that," defended Caughlin. "It's just, what if Discord pulls some new trick, something we've never seen before? Or one of them has an accident? There's just so many things that could go wrong in a head-on fight."

"So you're doubting them."

"No! Ugh, Whooves, I've known you for so long now. You know me. You're frightfully dense at times, you know."

"I'm just trying to help," replied Whooves sagely. "It's alright to not have one hundred percent confidence in them. It's only natural to be unsure of the possible. But sometimes we just have to take a gander in somepony, leave it to them to beat the odds. Of course we help them as much as we can, but it's all about putting the matter into their hooves. That's what faith is. Now Fuhrich, I'm not going to put my faith in him, because he isn't worth it. But Luna and Celly? It's a risk, but I'd choose them any time over some supercannon baloney by Fuhrich."

"But what's wrong with going a few extra steps to be sure? Ignoring the dangers of Discord coming in on us mid-process and gutting us clean, of course," argued Caughlin. Some part of her did not like being lectured by Whooves, as much as she knew it was good-intentioned; it was late, she was cranky, and she would have to attend to Celestia in a couple of hours.

"Well, the idea of the cannon seems wrong," said Whooves. "Where are we going to set it up? What are the Gen-2 alicorns going to do after we beat Discord? And there's the runes, and the obvious dangers of handling this sort of spell. I mean, I can't even use magic. I'm not a professional, despite everything you've taught me. I wish I could be, but I don't have your smarts, Caughlin." He gave her a grin, which eased most of her annoyance toward him

straightaway. *Flattering me in a time when compliments are rare? Good job, Doctor.* "But to me, it just feels off for the Order, so many questions left

unanswered. Fuhrich isn't one who takes risks. He plans everything. So there's bound to be something amiss."

"What do you suggest we do about it then?" asked Caughlin.

"Why don't we try a vote of no confidence? No pony's actually decided whether to agree with this or not. It's a separate project with considerable risks. Even if they're hexed, I'm sure they'll realize that there's a lot that could go wrong with it if we point it out." He seemed pleased with his solution. Caughlin had to admit it was a good idea - it was the only way they could oppose the ADC without sounding un-hexed, thus tipping Fuhrich off. She was the Chairpony of the R&D department, faithful to protocol and whatnot. Yes, it would be perfectly alright to do so.

Still, the plan hinged on the decisions of a group of compromised ponies. There were ten of them, and Fuhrich made eleven. Whooves' and her own vote made two in opposition, and Fuhrich's made one in favour. That left eight, which could swing either side, depending on the severity of Fuhrich's hex.

"Fuhrich wants work on the ADC started as soon as possible. So, given that we're under a hex and inclined to co-operate with him, it only makes sense if we raise the voting issue tomorrow night, no later, so that we can 'get it over with'. That gives us not much time to persuade the others," Caughlin muttered to herself. "But it's the only window of opportunity we have. I guess we'll just have to trust the intelligence of our friends, won't we Doctor?"

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She carried out her routine the next day distracted by her thoughts. She ran through her side of the debate, how there were too many uncertainties involved, how the ADC was, with all due respect, a waste of space - it was unnecessary, it brought about too many risks, the cons outweighed the pros. She pondered on the Gen-2 alicorns, of all the problems that could arise from them. Where would they store them? *What if Discord came in in the middle of the process?* The chance of him discovering this time round was ten times higher than any previous alicornification. She tried to build a strong argument on the toll and stress such a task would put on everypony, from the subjects to herself. She crossed out lines, replaced them, double-crossed them. By the time it was



dinner, her weariness was so much that it showed through her eyes, earning a couple of sympathetic queries from colleagues.

They finished eating, and Caughlin stood up. With a flick of magic, she tapped a conical drinking flask and gathered their attention.

"Everypony, as you know, the Order has requested to carry out the second phase of Project ALICORN. As chairpony, I view this as a new event, something needing collective agreement before carrying on. Therefore, for urgency's sake, we will hold the vote now." She scanned her audience for tell-tale signs across their faces. Nothing wrong so far. "Before we vote, I will hold a debate, that our decisions may be informed and for the best. I will represent the side opposing the ADC." There was a ripple of murmurs across the table. "Shall we invite Fuhrich to defend it?"

"By all means," replied Fuhrich gravely.

She took a deep breath, and began to speak.

Experience and self-review had honed her public-speaking skills. For all her tiredness and tension, she portrayed a picture of level-headed confidence as she went through each point, keeping eye contact with everypony in turn. At last she finished, and she could see quite a few ponies nodding their heads to themselves. She motioned to Fuhrich, and he took over. He did not mention anything new from the set of memos, and most of his defense was based on reassurances and pleas to "take the leap of faith".

"We will now hold the vote," Caughlin said. "Those who oppose the ADC, raise a hoof." She lifted hers defiantly, and saw a few old-timers' rise as well. Her heart jumped. *We're going to make it-*

Her eyes rested on Whooves. He was looking down, as if afraid to meet her glare. His hooves were firmly on the table. She wanted to go over and scream at him: *What are you doing?* But this was a democratic process, and everypony was entitled to use his or her vote in the way they wanted to - she could not take action to shake him out of it, at least not in front of the team and Fuhrich. *But what the HELL is he doing? Whooves, wake up already! Wake up!*

She waited until her foreleg began to ache. There was no sign of him responding. "Five votes," said Caughlin, keeping her voice even with difficulty. "Those in favour?"

Six hooves raised. One of them was Whooves'. She felt herself plunge into confusion, and barely heard the words as she concluded:

"Then it's decided. Project ALICORN, Phase 2, will continue as planned. Thank you, everypony, and have a good night."

"Hold on," said Fuhrich, lifting a hoof. "I must ask you all of one more thing. I have received word today that Discord has struck hard on one of our major bases. If he finds leads that would lead him to the others, the Order and the project will collapse. I *beg* of you that we initiate Phase 2 *now*." To everypony's surprise, Fuhrich bowed his head and fell on his hooves. "This is very demanding of us, and you have every right to refuse. The original plan was that we do it according to the schedule. But my ponies are out there, chaos is wrecking out everywhere, and the sooner we have this complete, the more that will survive. Please!"

"I say we do it," said a pony. He was cheered by a few others, and even those that had voted against the ADC were biting their lips in cautious support. Some of them looked at Caughlin expectantly. As for herself, her heart had sunk to new depths, to the point that she could no longer feel anything. Whooves had just opposed her out of the blue. *We just talked about it last night! It was supposed to work, and almost had! Stupid, stupid Whooves!* The degree of shock she was feeling was outmatched only by her surprise at it - only now did she realize that she had expected Whooves to follow her all the way without a doubt. And he had faithfully done so, up till now, that is.

*Whooves...actually betrayed me.* "You do as you please," said Caughlin, sounding hollow.

"Then let's do it!"

"My sincerest gratitude, everypony," said Fuhrich, his voice shaking. "Yes, please, let us." He got up and trotted to Caughlin. "Miss Caughlin, I must thank you personally. You are not only virtuous and intelligent, but you are also a good sport, and so willing to join us for the greater good."

"You want me to play director again," said Caughlin flatly. She didn't care that she was blurting out her unveiled thoughts. She just didn't feel up to fighting anymore. "But I'm tired. It's been a long day, and I don't think I can take up this *honour*, Fuhrich."

"Then please rest up. We will await your return with baited breath."

"Yeah, sure, whatever." She turned and left for her room quickly, before anypony could notice the tears forming at her eyes.

---

A few hours of uneasy sleep later, Caughlin walked back into the hall feeling no less depressed. She was met with anxious expectation.

"Are you ready now, Caughlin?" "You alright?" "Caughlin, are you up to it? You don't look so good..."

She waved these off with a hoof. She was trapped once more, this time by her own team. She put on a weak smile. "Of course I'm ready. Let's do this. For Equestria." She did not even need direction as she walked up to the chamber, noticing Dr. Klipit amongst the rest of the Order ponies around. A scientist passed her a memo. It was a hastily-written thing, with an apology beforehand - due to Discord's direct hit, they had to work overtime non-stop to solve the remaining issues with Phase 2, hence the scrawling. There was an explanation of the modifications done to the chamber, union processes and implementation to-dos. There was even a warning on the addition of the conditional barrier clause this time, meaning she was well and truly stuck with going through with this.

"Alright, fine. Let's go. So all of these are unicorns, right?" she asked, stepping into the circle, the feeling of defeat overriding any other emotion.

"Yes," replied Dr. Klipit. "You simply have to slot in the Wings and Potential, and have them join within the subject's own Horn thaumatics. Any more questions?"

"No." She closed her eyes as Dr. Klipit nodded and began the countdown. There went the familiar shift of essence, and she was back once again in the thaumatical realm. Before her lay the two characteristics. They seemed much larger than the ones they had used before, though. She tried not to

think about it as she half-heartedly pieced the two together. As expected, they resisted strongly - the lack of the third characteristic caused an imbalance. The union simply collapsed.

She sighed. The answer was simple enough - take the two into herself, rush back into the director's circle and re-enter the subject's field, then perform the implementation. She lifted the masses to herself and ingested them. Focusing hard, she felt the two wild energies struggle under the superior control of her Horn within herself. *Now to exit and re-enter.*

She felt herself fall back into the physical realm. Blinded by the light of her own energy, she kept her eyes closed and fumbled about in her conscience to find the thread to the next circle. It was a thin, frail line of direction magic, poorly-drawn, probably because of the rushed rate things were going at. She reached out to it and sent the characteristics through before her...

Then she was hit with a huge retaliation force, striking her from the inside out. She gagged just before an immense pain racked her whole body. She screamed until her throat failed as *something* bubbled inside of her, meddling with her essence. She had no idea what was going on, but it felt like her very being was being restructured, ripped apart and pieced together. Simply the physical pain was on a whole new level. She thought she could feel her backbone breaking as unknown things emerged from it. Her skin stretched and pulled, triggering every nerve. The pain behind her eyes was much, much worse than Discord's image implement, as if her brain was threatening to blow up. Her gut, meanwhile, felt as if it was expanding, raw energy lashing out through her stomach to her legs and back. To say that it was discomforting would be the understatement of the century.

She was not sure how long it lasted before she finally passed out.

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When she finally came to, the first thing she saw was the ceiling of her room. It was a petty thing, she knew, but she felt that she could cry for joy at the familiar sight. The next moment, she felt her throat sear as she tried to swallow. There was a soreness all over her body, but it was nothing compared to those moments. She lay there, content to think about nothing, just feeling, and soon noticed that she was lying on something hard. She shifted to one side and gave the object a tug with her magic. Promptly, she

learnt two things - firstly, her magic had somehow strengthened in multiples. Telekinesis was as easy as breathing now - the little activity required merewill, and it had been done. The second was that this object was attached to her back. It was a part of her that had never been there before. She was suddenly aware of the delicate sensations on her back as she moved against the covers. She gave an experimental pull of her muscles, and the object - *objects* - shot out from under the blankets, rigid, yet light. She could even feel the draft from these things. From the corners of her sight, she could see wing tips...

*I have wings and stronger magic*, she wondered. *I have wings. **Wings.***

Any further thoughts, however, were drowned out by a sudden squeal and the relieved sobs of Celestia as she threw herself onto Caughlin.

"Mother, Mother, you're alive! You're awake, and you're alive!..."

# Chapter 13

## Enter the Decageas

Celestia's very audible cries of joy had triggered a rush of responses throughout the Laboratory. In ten seconds flat, Caughlin found herself surrounded by R&D ponies, clamouring around the bed to see and express relief at their leader's return to the living world. She herself did not know what to make of this, and settled with the first course of action that came to mind.

"I feel faint," groaned Caughlin. "Everypony, go away." She sat up and put on her bravest smile. "Really, I'm fine. I just need some more rest. Get back to work. I promise I won't spend any more time in bed than deemed necessary, and we can get back to our usual routine for the rest of our lives then." She scanned the crowd quickly. Neither Fuhrich nor Whooves were there. With an insistent wave, she watched as her team shuffled out, the two alicorns lingering behind, unwilling to leave. She beckoned to them and they readily drew up to each side of the bed.

Now that they were standing side-by-side, Caughlin noticed that Celestia was actually taller than Luna. Her legs were longer, and so was her pink mane. She had surpassed Caughlin's own height a long time ago, she knew, but since when had she outgrown her older sister? *Of course*, reasoned her brain, *the modifications in her planning*. Celestia was, bluntly, an improvement of Luna; her larger body must have been deliberately engineered to become so. She wondered whether Luna resented the fact; she did not know it firsthand, but a few PEEP stories had featured sibling rivalry and jealousy as a source of conflict (despite having multiple foals being a fanciful luxury in the current day and age).

"So," said Caughlin, breaking the silence. "How long have I been out for?"

"A week and three days," said Celestia. "Nothing much has happened since then."

"Celly had a fight with Fuhrich," said Luna gleefully.

"I thought we had promised never to speak of that again!" snarled Celestia, but Caughlin waved it off.

"Go on. What's all this about a fight?"

"Celly wanted to stay and wait for you to get better, but it was time for her to go back up. She refused. There was a big argument but Celly finally won." Celestia looked away, ears flushing. She thought she could hear her mutter the word "tattle-tale" as she shot Luna a look.

"So you mean it's just been you two, watching me all this time?" frowned Caughlin.

"Yes. We wanted to ask Whooves, but he's been acting all weird," replied Celestia. "You were flailing around and screaming when whatever it was went wrong in the director's circle for several minutes. I caught him whispering to himself, 'It's all my fault', and he looked positively horrible. He was frightfully pale. Bluebell and a few of the other mares said that Whooves likes you really, really much, and your spell backfire caused him to fall into depression." Celestia dodged Caughlin's gaze, embarrassed at mentioning the stallion's feelings. "He's cooped up in his room, eats little and doesn't talk. I hope somepony's told him you're back, I think he could do with cheering up."

*Do I really want to see him now?* As her brain kickstarted, she remembered his actions vividly. Whooves was acting suspiciously. He had blown their only opportunity, and she had suffered because of it. She bit her lip. Of course there would be explanations, but was she in the mood to hear them?

"Mother, can you get up?" asked Celestia suddenly.

"I don't see why not." Caughlin gave her legs an experimental stretch. They hurt briefly from lack of use, as expected. Then a strange warmth filled her stomach, and a strength that had not been there before flowed into her four limbs. She cautiously got out of bed. "Woah. Can't say I like this. I've gotten comfortable with my old height," she muttered, testing a few steps forward.

"Can you fly?" asked Luna.

*Now there's an idea.* Anticipation danced across her nerves. Since their little talk, Caughlin admitted to having daydreamed occasionally about soaring in the sky with her foals, imagining the sensation of flight and doing tricks. She tried stretching her wings, and gave a couple of feeble flaps. She focused and shut off her other senses, and discovered the minute currents of air flowing around her. With every movement, step, even speech, the air changed. It was amazing. She tried to catch the upswings around her, but it was literally as effective as grasping for the wind. She shook her head. "No. Not yet."

"We could teach you," grinned Luna. "One hour a day after magic lessons. You have to, Mommy, the feeling's unbelievable. You almost never want to walk again."

"We'll see about that," said Caughlin, giving her a quick nuzzle. She turned and magicked a full-sized mirror before her, examining herself from different angles. She was still gray, and her eyes were still yellow. Her body was simply that of an alicorn, winged and taller, imbued with greater magic...

There was a knock at her door. "Caughlin? Caughlin, it's me, Whooves," said the voice. It was thin, both desperate and relieved at the same time. It reminded her a little of when they had first met. "I know everything seems wrong, and I was a bloody *idiot* for doing what I did, but you have to let me explain-

Her apprehension soon turned to fear as his voice was drowned out by the sound of crashing rock, followed by an enraged bellow.

**"Caughlin Mare, show yourself this instant!"** roared Discord, as a bolt crackled and demolished the wall of her room, leaving a clear path between himself and her, paved with rubble and smoke. Before she could react, a talon stretched out and grabbed her, dragging her out into the main hall. The lighting was flaring brightly with the overcharge of magic in the air, and she could see wreckage everywhere. Tables were smashed, papers and equipment lay scattered and destroyed, and there were glass shards all over the floor. Ponies were either unconscious or running for cover. There was still no sign of Fuhrich, and had little opportunity to find Whooves as Discord lifted her up face-to-face.



"You're an alicorn," he hissed, sounding more surprised than angry. He paused and examined her. "You're an alicorn yourself. My word, I've never seen anything like it. Look at your essence and thaumatical field, it's a downright mess - so the spy was telling the truth after all, as ridiculous as it sounded."

*Spy? What the hay is going on here?* She wanted to scream, but fright had left her numb and immobile. This was the first time he had handled her with force, and common sense told her that anypony who received such treatment did not last for long. She could not even think; all she could do was stare into those evil, yellow eyes.

"You've been naughty, Caughlin. You've been running experiments behind my back," continued Discord, the displeasure creeping back into his voice. "And what is this we have over here? A second alicorn, but this one's white. How...boring. What's your name? Not that I care, but it adds personality to that extra stain I'll be getting on my coat." She strained to turn, and managed to see the two sisters staring in horror at the scene.

"Run!" choked Caughlin. "Run, now!"

"Oh, be quiet, and let me have some fun," said Discord. He flung her to one side as if she were a doll and turned to face them instead. "Since I'm going to utterly destroy all of you, I might as well enjoy the last moments of chaos I can glean from this place. You were wrong to defy me, Caughlin! Aiding the rebels? Making alicorns? What do you think you could possibly achieve?"

"Celestia, now is the time!" shouted a third voice. Caughlin picked herself up and saw Fuhrich, standing at the far end of the den behind a pile of boxes. "This is what you've been training for! Go!"

"Wait, no! Fuhrich, what are you trying to do? We have to run!" yelled Caughlin, but she was largely ignored. Celestia's face steeled with anger.

"Were you going to kill Mother?" seethed Celestia.

"Is that even a question?" sneered Discord. "You'd think that Caughlin's foals could be a bit brighter. You and everypony here will die, not a matter of 'will', but 'how.'"

"Stay out of this, Celestia!" screamed Caughlin. Her blood was pumping, and her senses were becoming sharp from the adrenaline rush. She concentrated her energy and fired a raw blast at him. The spell glanced off his scales and exploded in a corner of the ceiling. "Your fight is with me, Discord! Leave them out of it!"

"Oh, you silly little things. So that makes, you, the white one, that noisy one hiding behind and you, the first alicorn. Very well. Four on one. This should be fun." Discord snapped his fingers and cackled as blackness began to swirl around him. Caughlin suddenly felt cold as the void expanded rapidly, engulfing the entire den. She closed her eyes and braced herself. She felt a chill pass over her, but that was all.

"Open your eyes, *chairpony* Caughlin. Nothing to fear except your certain death."

They were in empty space. There was nothing around them, just endless black. They immediately locked their sights on Discord, watching him warily. The Draconequus took long glares at each of them and yawned mockingly. "So, you want a fight? You're going to get one." He flickered forward and grabbed Caughlin, taking to the skies above. Celestia gave a shout, and the two gave chase.

"Let go of me!" Caughlin was making a habit of biting her lip. Right now, she was sure there would be teeth-marks when she next let go. *I'm hurtling into the air, carried by the most powerful being in all of Equestria. He is definitely going to kill me. What do I do?*

*Of course. Plan number 1.*

Caughlin felt an insane grin grip her face as she took a deep breath. *This might just work - no, this is very likely to work!* She reached within her, and from the depths of her magic she grasped for the one spell that came naturally to her. It made sense, after all - its property was to reverse the effect of Discordian influence on reality. It was the bane of chaos itself, and her enemy was the very embodiment of this. She felt her horn power up with magic, and yet somehow it felt...hollow?

Nothing happened.

*My reality bubble. It's gone. My one true skill, the source of my cutie mark, our shot at ending Discord...and I can't use it anymore?*

"Get back here, Discord!" shouted Celestia, wings flapping furiously in pursuit. "Give us our Mother back, and fight us properly!"

"You can have her," said Discord, and stopped abruptly, flinging Caughlin downwards.

Caughlin yelled as she free-fell. She had never been up any higher than the director's stand in the span of her life. Such a height, possibly a couple of miles, was something she never wanted to experience again. She felt the pressure build up in her ears as Fuhrich's helpless figure grew closer and closer. Suddenly she stopped mid-air, yanked back by a force. She was surrounded with a dark blue aura, which she recognized as levitation magic.

"Good job, Luna," came Celestia's distant voice. "I'll handle Discord! You get her and Uncle Fuhrich somewhere safe!"

"Sister, no! Not alone!" pleaded Luna, but her cries were washed under the subsequent series of explosions. She landed on the ground unsteadily. "Mommy, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Caughlin turned away and gagged uncomfortably. Her insides felt like they had been turned inside out. At least her stomach was empty. "I'm...fine," said Caughlin. "You need to help Celly. She can't do it on her own."

"But she told me to take you somewhere-"

"Where else is there?" asked Caughlin desperately. She slumped to the ground, too burnt out to stay upright. She had to find some way to help. She could not fly, nor could she attack. "Discord took us to a new area. This is probably a closed control sample, something like an alternate segment of time-space," she said, thinking aloud. "He needs to maintain this space, or else it will collapse, and we either disappear with it, or return to the Laboratory. We were yanked out of our original segment - the Laboratory - most possibly via physical shift. That means there's a gap in our segment, and therefore a tendency for us to return to fill that gap..."

"So we defeat him and then we can go home?" asked Luna, trying to follow.

"We *most probably* will go home. And we only have to weaken him, so that he doesn't have the energy to sustain this place." Caughlin looked up above. "Think of it like magnets. Two are stuck together. You pull one apart slightly. If you let go, then the magnet will return. It's basically like that. We're banking on physics pulling us back to where we belong." The fighters were simply blurs amongst a fireworks display now, flying and maneuvering faster than anything she had seen before. Spells of spectral colours lit up the black above, trailing paths of excess magic and imploding in spheres of light. It was the first time too, Caughlin realized, that she had seen a magic battle before, one that lasted so long against Discord no less. Even so, in the distance Caughlin could tell that one side was favouring well above the other. There had been several near misses. She did not want to stay around to watch one finally hit. They needed a guaranteed win.

"I have an idea. Luna, cover Celestia and get her down here. We need to be on the ground before Discord reaches us. Fuhrich," she said, turning now to the stallion as Luna took off, "I need your help. I know you're a powerful unicorn, and I can't do this alone."

"What do you have in mind?" he asked, his voice infuriatingly calm.

Caughlin gave him a wry smile. "The four of us going to set up a decageas. And you and I, we're going to be erecting the magnifying hex."

"But our magic is incompatible! Are you sure it will hold?"

"Shut up and just do it for Equestria," snapped Caughlin. She lowered her horn and drew from the essence inside of her. *A hex is three pairs of two...but can it be two setsof three?* "I'll do a set of three magic threads, and you do the other set. That's what I expect from you. Got it?"

Fuhrich made an apprehensive snort but complied, the sound of his horn flaring up and joining hers. As a unicorn, she had an idea of what spells were shaped like if they were physical; as an alicorn, this sense was heightened, and she could almost imagine the structure of Fuhrich's pairs as if it was a jigsaw puzzle. In her mind's eye, the hex was a regular hexagon with a hollow centre, and each of them had one half. She

struggled to establish a balance within her own trio of threads, and molded it at the edges until it fit with Fuhrich's. Once their sets matched, she toned her energy output to reach a balance with the unicorn's lower power level, lastly enveloping the entire setup with her own magic.

"Wait, what are you doing?" choked Fuhrich.

"Alicorn magic carries alicorn magic. The hex will breach on your side when the main spell passes through due to difference in sustainable pressure, unless I layer it with my own magic. Think of it as a patch-up for a plastic flute with a side made of paper. It's not the best, but it's better than nothing."

"Mother, what are you planning?" asked Celestia, landing wearily with Luna. Caughlin heard her gasping for air, and her heart tightened.

"I need you two to charge up the largest spell possible. Just like in the testing chamber. Fire it through the hex when you see Discord. Now!"

They did not say another word as they nodded, and brought their own energies together. Mere moments later, the spell was fired, and Caughlin felt the hex bulge under the strain. She pressed on her trio, containing the blast and forcing it through the mechanism. There was a loud shriek as the charged spell erupted from the hex, shooting upwards in a blinding beam of light, so hot that she felt her eyelids hurt even though they were closed. The burden finally lightened, and she tumbled to the ground, exhausted, spinning to face Discord.

It was not a pretty sight. The sisters had timed their shot well; Discord had taken the spell head-on. The disruptive effect of a destruction spell on his being was nothing she could have imagined. He collapsed right next to her, his facial features a mess, looking like melted ice-cream. She could not bear to look at the rest of him, and turned her gaze away. She felt a queer feeling in the pit of her stomach as he tried to pick himself up. *I know this feeling...*

"Looks like we're going home," she said, as the laws of reality kicked in and pulled them back into the Laboratory.

The process was more painful than expected; instead of a tempered ushering by a being completely in control of the shift, they were now being

recalled by the unfeeling forces of tapestry physics. The pony-shaped holes in the flow of everything needed filling fast. She was simply thankful that they managed to make it back on the floor of the Laboratory in one piece. A fleck of dust tickled her snout, and she tried to reach for it, but keeping the hex up had taken more out of her than thought - she could not move her limbs at all.

"...that's it. It's over," she sighed.

A mirthless laugh rang out from behind her. All her relief melted into denial. *It's all over. This can't be happening.* "That was surprising, I have to say. That actually *hurt*. And you confuse me, so, so much now." She heard exaggerated patting and dusting coming from Discord's direction. *My body can't move. Why not? Getup, Caughlin, getup now!* For the third time that day, she felt the talons grip her sides, digging cruelly into her ribs. "Oh, Caughlin, I knew you were intelligent, but to come up with such a setup and plan in such short notice? That was an impressive show indeed." He dangled her at arm's length as if she were a piece of trash, and looked at her critically. She watched as Discord's face slowly rearranged itself into its original form. "Your energy pool is sadly limited though. Using such a higher form of magic - learning it solely on the power of desperation - must have drained you dry. Neither have you tapped into the full potential of your newly-acquired triune nature, since you haven't even had the time to get it sorted out, I see."

The sounds of groaning and a lot of scrabbling drifted from behind. Discord spun slowly to see the alicorns struggling to stand up, staring at him with glares that wished death as sincerely as possible. "You two," he continued, "are more boring than I thought. Stay put until I'm done gloating and rubbing my victory into your overpowered but inadequate snouts." With a swipe of his paw, the two collapsed as thick stakes shot out of thin air and pinned themselves into their backs. Caughlin tried to scream, but her throat had long failed. She tried to muster up a spell, any spell that would hurt, would annihilate, but she lacked the strength. She was at her limits. That was the simple truth.

And now they were really going to die.

"Trigger two-oh-five. *Accelerat*," whispered Fuhrich's trembling voice from further behind. It was the only sound in the now-silent facility. Everypony

who was still alive heard it. As soon as he uttered the last word, light burst forth from Celestia's eyes and mane. She whimpered as the stakes dissolved in the burst of magic. Both Discord and Caughlin watched, dumbstruck as her wounds closed up. Her thinned mane grew back to its old, flowing state, and her weak legs grew strong, hoisting her upright. Her horn flared up once more, filled with fresh magic.

With a roar, Celestia charged forward and slammed into Discord, catching him squarely on the chest. He gripped Caughlin tighter as another pulse of light burst forth from her horn, ripping away a chunk of his front that splattered on the ground with a squelch. Bathed in her aura of power, Celestia began jabbing him with her horn, pushing forward inch by inch, each stab accompanied with uncontrolled blasts that barely missed until she had pushed him up against a wall. Despite suffering partial blindness by the brilliance, Caughlin could make out in the corner of her sight something she thought she would never see.

Discord was *scared*. The wideness of his eyes and his careless, trance-like dodges told her that much. Whatever Fuhrich had done, it had given Celestia even more power, and the supreme ruler of Equestria had never seen anything like it before. Something was genuinely threatening his safety. His claws began to shake as he swung her up and held her between them. Caughlin found herself staring into pure white, and shut her eyes in pain. Celestia gave a startled grunt.

"What are you waiting for? Finish him off!" shouted Fuhrich. "Go, Celestia! Take revenge for your family, your sister, your mother! Deliver the final blow!"

"I have your precious mommy," wheezed Discord. "You may have got one over me, but there's enough in me to take her out. Do you want proof?"

"No," breathed Caughlin, trembling. "Whatever you're doing, no..."

"Watch this, Celestia." He flipped her over so that her belly was exposed, and passed his paw slowly across it. Caughlin squirmed and grimaced as she felt her characteristics entwine and topple against each other within her being. Discord was applying some sort of chaos to her already-unstable essence. She felt the strands of her soul twinge and strain. Her body had become numb to pain, but this was new - it went deeper than that, a collapse of something within her bones and guts. She bit her tongue hard

to stop herself from showing it. She could not speak, but wished with all her heart that her thoughts would reach her: *Just kill me. Celestia. Do it now and take both of us out. Just end this once and for all.*

"I..."

"You don't believe me? I'm enraged right now, yes! I hate this pony for what she's done! Do you think that it could get any worse, because I'm just getting started! I'm bloody imaginative, after all!" shouted Discord, brandishing his hostage like a ragdoll. "Step back now if you don't want your mother to suffer anymore!"

"Stand your ground!" retorted Fuhrich. "You have him cornered! Don't listen to his lies, he's only trying to distract you!"

"I am *not* cornered! Your mommy is just a toy to me, and I will break her! I am in control!"

Caughlin tensed as he made another swipe. He might as well have been tugging at her innards. As far as she was concerned, both would feel the same. *I could really use a good sleep*, she mused. *Just let go, lose the pain, lose everything. I just need sleep, a little bit will do. I won't mind if I wake up.* And yet part of her wanted to stay awake, to see Discord finally fall...

*There's still Celly and Luna. They're waiting for me so that we can be a family again.*

*And there's Whooves. I...guess I forgive him. Yes, I should really forgive him before I go.*

She felt soft fur rub against her horn. "Eh?" she burbled.

"Wait, Discord, what are you-" *That's Celly's voice. Oh my.*

"I'll show you all, I will!" *And that's Discord's. What's happening?*

"No, don't do it, I *order* you, don't-

" *Celly's yelling. Don't do that, it's bad manners-*



She was suddenly fully conscious, a sickening, crunching sound ripping through the air. It took milliseconds before the pain came crashing through her system, followed by the inner turmoil and agony of an unbalanced, collapsing thaumatic field. She felt her throat break as she uttered a final cry, and her eyeballs spun wildly in their sockets. The last things she heard was a cacophony of wailing, yelling and deranged laughter...

# Chapter 14

## Enter the World Above

*I could have sworn that it worked.*

*It was simple, really. The Decageas was supposed to be a surefire shot. It only had one weakness - the aiming. Such a powerful spell would not be subjected to steering. It would propagate in the direction it was fired at, and that was straight.*

*Discord is a being that teleports at free will. This would pose a problem. The thing is, though, that he is a schemer. He's more cautious than he lets on. He doesn't like the idea of running on near-empty; he will conserve his energies as much as possible, unless fury overtakes his better senses. But even then, an enraged Discord wouldn't think of using teleportation as an added edge to fights. Who would, unless you've been disciplined to do so? Teleportation is a ridiculously complex thing and takes considerable effort regardless of the magnitude of displacement. "Simply" shifting your being from point A to point B does involve, after all, skipping the millions of points in between instantaneously.*

*When Discord was fighting with Celestia, he did not teleport. He opted instead to fly. I observed as much. He cannot fly faster than her - their speeds were almost equal - and he would have figured that out. Whatever the reason, I was confident that Discord did not show a tendency to teleport. That was why the Decageas was applicable in that case.*

*Where did I go wrong?*

*I refuse to believe that Celly and Luna are to blame. They are powerful, amazing creatures. They showed bravery, grit and resilience, far more than I give them credit for. I realize that now. No, the failure wasn't because of their weakness.*

*That leaves just me and Fuhrich.*

*I can't blame Fuhrich either. He's a unicorn. Sure, he can erect a whole hex by himself on a whole team, but...*

*I really, really want to blame Fuhrich, I do.*

*Why couldn't he have undergone the alicornification instead?*

*The payload was strong. It simply wasn't magnified enough. That's the only possibility left. And the magnifying hex was largely my creation.*

*I came up with this plan, and it failed. I failed.*

---

Caughlin could hear noises, but she could not see. She felt a soft lump lying on her tummy. She could hear muffled rattling of trolleys some distance away, and a slow but steady beeping much closer. Her head felt oddly light, and her stomach was in knots.

She tried to speak, but all that came out was a barely audible croak. She felt her throat sting. Her mouth was dry.

*I didn't know hell was like this. Not that this isn't hell, of course, just...*

A door creaked open, and next to her curtains were pulled back. There was the familiar sound of scribbling, and then a rustling of what seemed to be plastic.

"Doctor, you've arrived just in time," said a pleasant mare's voice. "The patient seems to have awakened."

"Alright then," replied the doctor gruffly in baritone. "I'll dim the lights. You unwrap her bandages." There was a small click. He approached her and murmured, "Now I want you to stay perfectly still. Don't panic. We're medical experts, and we know what we're doing. Right now, your eyes are wrapped up. We're going to take them off. I want you to *keep your eyes closed* until I tell you to, okay? And when we do, I'll take some measurements and see whether you can, well, see. Most likely you're going to have to stay blinded for a few more days, but we'll have you back to all senses in at most a week. Nod if you understand."

Caughlin nodded. It hurt her neck to do so.

"Nurse, if you would be so kind."

Sturdy hooves propped her head up. She waited as she felt the tug of of the gauze wind around and around, and tried to envision the scene from the doctor's eyes. She thought back to the medical bay of the Laboratory - under-staffed and under-stocked because it was under-used. Discord had actually never harmed anypony seriously with the exception of Macquaire and herself, and experiment-related injuries had been rare up till now. *A year of firsts*, she thought grimly. She cringed as, despite the nurse's best efforts, the last strip pulled out several strands of her mane. She felt a wet cloth rub against her eyes, followed by a horn. There was the inexplicable sound of burning paper, and then the doctor called:

"Now, please open your left eye."

She did so slowly. As if expecting it, the nurse held Caughlin's hooves down firmly to stop her from rubbing away the eyecrust, dabbing away the nuisance herself with magic. *Two unicorns. Ah.*

"What do you see?" asked the doctor.

"Blurry," muttered Caughlin. Her throat still hurt, and she was dying for a drink. "Water?" She made out the shape of a glass hovering in front of her. Instead of letting her hold it, it dipped down to her mouth level and, after a cautionary nudge, tipped its contents gently. "Thanks."

"What you see," repeated the doctor patiently.

"Right. Well, it's blurry, and really dark. I can barely see a leg pinning me down at the bottom of my sight, and a very fascinating ceiling. Nothing else."

"Please work with us, miss Mare. We're only trying to help," said the nurse. Caughlin nodded and mumbled an apology.

"Now please close that eye and open the other one. Tell us what you see then."

She obeyed, and the trusty wet cloth was back to partially relieve her discomfort.

"Blurry as usual. I see both legs pinning me down. I guess they're green?"

"Anything else?"

"I see the sheets of my bed. Other than that, nothing."

"Thank you. Now in either instance, could you see your snout?"

"I...couldn't." That was when it struck her. She had lived all her life, as everypony did, seeing with her snout just peeking under her range of vision. The sudden lack of this detail immediately drove itself into her mind, where it began to nibble at her sense of security.

"I see." *There's a frown somewhere in those two words*, mused Caughlin. *He should win a prize for voice-acting. And I'm delirious, aren't I?*

"Is anything the problem, doctor?" she asked aloud.

"It seems that the...attack has caused your eyes to swivel out of position. You will not be able to see it in a reflection for various reasons, most of which pertain to your sight and retina focus, but you can imagine it sufficiently - one eye looking up, one eye looking down. I believe they call it 'wall-eyed'."

"I must look like an idiot," she blurted.

"I don't believe idiots see things blurry," deadpanned the doctor, "but we will be able to rectify it once your eyeballs are mapped out and we can decide the methods to use. Don't worry, the prints are in development. That brief flare you heard was me imprinting imagery onto magicked paper. The wall-eyed condition, though, is a bit harder. In fact we will not be able to do anything about it."

"Why not?"

"You see, your eyes have swiveled out of position. This, we received, was an involuntary action caused by immense pain, as well as ah, unique head injuries. The nerves and blood vessels behind your eyes have literally twisted into the new shape leading to your condition. We can fix up your sight using magic, but we cannot untangle the nerves. It's too risky. One wrong move, and you're blind in that eye. And that's not including the blood vessels." He sighed. "But I doubt that your appearance will take top priority,

in light of your other causality. As the doctor assigned to you, I have a responsibility to tell you what you should know. And-

She barely noticed the door slide open. She tensed at Fuhrich's voice: "That's enough, doctor. How is she?"

"Eyes functional, but they need delicate readjustment. As for vital signs, she seems fine, though I insist that you let her stay on longer! Who knows what could happen?"

"I doubt that miss Caughlin would appreciate laying in bed for another month," replied Fuhrich. *Another?* "Please leave for a moment. Let me do the telling."

"Who are all the ponies behind you?" asked the doctor warily. "You know that the patient needs rest. Crowds tend to disrupt that, do you know?"

"They are her colleagues, and what I have to announce concerns them all. It is for the best. Now please, doctor, if you would be so kind."

When they had left, the door was slid shut and the crowd surrounded her. She could make out familiar figures and voices, but no more. Fuhrich cleared his throat and silence fell across the room. "I know that this is sudden. Not everypony remembers what happened. I shall give you a recap." His voice was low, and it lacked the stiff authority from before. He almost sounded *not* unlikeable. "After the fight with Discord and our failure to defeat him, he proceeded to injure Caughlin greatly. You all know for yourselves the extent of this; miss Caughlin, you have been out for four and a half weeks. Following that, Celestia lost all morale and will to fight. Discord then did something we have never seen before."

He seemed unwilling to continue. Caughlin slammed an atrophied hoof as hard as she could on her bed. "Continue," she croaked.

"He put her under some sort of illusion. From her recollections afterwards, it was as if he had tortured her for days even though it was a matter of ten or so minutes in real time. He re-opened a closed control sample, just him and her. She was crushed when they finally re-emerged. Her will to fight was gone."

"How did we get out then?" whispered Caughlin, forcing the words out. Her mind was rebooting, and already questions were brimming. "How?"

"I ordered my stallions to take us out," Fuhrich murmured in reply.

"You what?"

"I had them take us out!" His tone was soaked in guilt. "I lied to you. My ponies were perfectly capable of carrying additional weight with them during phasing and teleporting. The whole idea of them only being able to transport their own bodies was just a story to keep you in the Laboratory, where it was safe to develop the alicorns. We could not win; to save what we had left, I ordered them to execute our fail-safe backup plan. One team of ponies would phase in and take us out. Another team of phasers from the surface, carrying teleporters, would meet them mid-way, in the ground itself. Upon receiving their charges - you ponies - the teleporters were to focus energies and bring you here. Discord had no way of following us - not only were we embedded in the ground, we were utilizing multiple complications in reality. He couldn't perform such a maneuver on his own, not without practice. Of course this overlapping of Discordian influence does not come without cost; almost all of our surface-to-midground phasers lost body parts and even lives with the uncontrolled teleportation radius. But it was a necessary sacrifice. Because this team and the alicorns are the key to winning this war."

The following void was broken only by the beeps of the machine next to her. After what seemed like hours, Caughlin finally spoke.

"Water," she murmured. There was a scuffle and a glass was soon raised to her lips. Annoyed, she muttered, "I can do it myself, can't I?"

"Caughlin...I don't think you can." She recognized the voice as Fritters', Team 4's youngest member. Her usually mild voice sounded like she was about to burst into tears. "You can't, Caughlin, you...you can't!"

Fritters did. And soon, Caughlin realized why.

She couldn't grasp the cup. She knew where it was, but she could not reach out to it. She couldn't reach out to anything. It was like she had lost her legs; she felt crippled, having lost her main means of carrying out basic activities. She tried to focus. There was nothing where the familiar energy

was supposed to build up. It was as if something had stoppered the canal-like veins of her essence, and she was ramming her mind's power against it.

She had lost her magic.

Immediately her stomach began to churn. She tried to piece together her last memories before fainting in the Laboratory. *Discord's paws on my horn. Blood everywhere, and this horrible headache.* It only made sense to conclude that he had torn off her horn. It was the only explanation. Yet somehow, she refused to believe it. It couldn't be. *It just isn't possible. No!*

"We spent the first two weeks trying to re-establish an equilibrium within your thaumatical field," continued Fuhrich. "We tried to have you undergo an alicornification, but the Wings and Potential were embedded too deeply within your essence. They repelled any and all attempts to introduce a new element - the Horn, or any combination of union. To keep you alive, we had to supplant your being with magic to balance out the two. Then we slowly decreased the amount until the system worked itself out. Please, your aggravation will only make your condition worse-"

The beeping began to increase, and the door opened with a bang. "Dang it all!" roared the doctor, shoving his way through. "Fuhrich, get them out of here! I told you, didn't I? She's not ready for this sort of news!" The sound of unicorn magic added to the clutter, followed by the tossing of paper. "It was hard enough controlling her when she didn't know; now that she does, her essence is going to freak!"

"What is going on here?" demanded Bluebell's voice.

"Look, miss mare, I don't have time for this," said the doctor.

"We won't leave until you tell us what's wrong," sniffed Fritters.

"Okay, fine. Look, these characteristics are part of who we are are ponies, right? It's how we identify ourselves. We see ourselves as pegasi, unicorns or Earth ponies. It's in our very being. At the same time the characteristics have their *own* characteristics, almost like personalities, and these further influence who we are. Pegasi are generally more flighty in spirit and less practical than Earth ponies for deeper reasons than 'just because', you



know. A union - triune - works because each characteristic keeps the others in check, and the typical alicorn knows full well what she is. She's at peace with herself after overcoming the initial adaption stage. Now, when Discord ripped her horn off the remaining two struggled for power." Caughlin felt the sheets and the lump on her tummy being replaced with paper. "So we introduced our own magic to 'calm down' the two. That's considering the characteristics alone. Now that she knows what's happened, the inevitable distress channels through her essence, aggravating the Potential and Wings in her once more. You could say that they're having the thaumatical equivalent of a hissy fit, after barely making up." She felt a queer sensation flow from the papers, past her skin and into her bones. It felt both cold and hot and washed over the pain.

"I understand that you're all worried." That was the nurse. "She's in capable hands. We know what we're doing. Even if you don't want to trust us, have faith in *her* - like the doctor said, whether or not she makes it through comes down to how she deals with the situation. And I'm sure that she will." Caughlin imagined the mare scanning the room with a serene gaze. "Judging by all of you here, she has a lot to live for. She's not going to give up that easily."

---

*Am I alone?*

*Depends on how you describe alone, I suppose. Right now there's nopony but me in here. Even if there was somepony I won't be able to see them. But then again I have my team, or what's left of them.*

*I really hope Whooves is okay. I wish he was here. Surely he'd have said so mething if he was, right? It can't be that he was left behind. Why would they leave him behind?*

*Did Discord...kill him?*

*I don't know about the casualties. We've definitely lost the Laboratory and everything in it, and that includes the magic-measuring machine. Such a pity. At least we have our knowledge, and the Order's HQ seems well-equipped. We could pick up where we left off.*

*Not that I feel like doing science. Dang. That's a first. I don't feel like doing anything. Not that I can, of course. I'm atrophied by the feel of things. Muscles wasted away like differentiation on an exponential.*

*A blind, horn-less alicorn. Hah. What a thing to be. What am I, anyhow? I'm not an alicorn anymore. I'm not an Earth pony - I have wings - but I can't honestly call myself a pegasus. How about "ex-unicorn"? That's truthful enough.*

*No, silly Caughlin, that's not important. You're first and foremost...**you**. Caughlin Mare, former chairpony of the R&D department. Friend, tutor, mother, refugee and rebel. What part of this involves the type of pony you are? Now, now, I feel your derision. Withhold your sarcasm and give yourself a chance.*

*Oh, me. I'd roll my eyes if it weren't physically impossible.*

*But just think about it. Everypony still trusts you. They believe in you. They want you back. And there's Celly and Luna who still need you. You're not going to just leave them behind, are you? You need to protect them, from Fuhrich. You still haven't lifted the hex.*

*But I can't! I don't have my magic anymore!*

*Maybe there's a way. I mean, you've spent your life in a hole all these years, and look at what you've achieved. How much more there is waiting for you now that you're outside!*

*Discord, that's what. Bucking invulnerable Discord.*

*He's not invulnerable. He feels, he hurts. He fears. That's all we need, a chance. So the makeshift Decageas didn't work. They weren't using their full potential. If they did he wouldn't have stood a chance. We can still win. But you need to get up and get going. You need to help your foals come back. They're still foals, after all, Caughlin. No pony should have to undergo what they have. The least you can do is be there for them.*

*I...*

*You need to rest. Oh, and don't worry, you're not going crazy. You're perfectly sane, yes? Crippled and immobile, but still sane. You can make it, for everypony.*

*For Equestria.*

*...ye gods, you are really tempting me with the eye roll here.*

---

When she next woke up, it was to the sound of Luna's voice.

"Hello, mummy," she said. "We're here to visit you."

"You and Celly?"

"Who else?" Caughlin was suddenly swamped in mane as the two alicorns leaned in a tight embrace. She gasped for air and buried her snout into their necks.

"I'm so glad you're alright," said Caughlin, swallowing a lump. "I'm...so glad."

"It's okay, Mother. It's all going to be okay," murmured Celestia, her tone distant. "I'm stronger now. And I'm going to get revenge for what he's done."

"Celly?" started Caughlin. "Are you okay?"

"It's simple. We - I wasn't strong enough. We could have won, but I failed. I caved in. So I've been training since we escaped." Caughlin tried to reach for her as she drew back. "I'm not ready yet, but when the time comes...I will be. And we're going to bring peace and harmony to the world. We can settle down. Explore the surface that we've been dreaming of, and gaze at the sky in its entirety, not just through a glass."

"Celly, you don't have to do this," said Caughlin. "It's not your fault, do you hear me?"

"But if not mine, then whose?" She impatiently tapped a hoof. "You relied on me to deliver something strong. It wasn't enough. Even when Fuhrich

did *whatever* that was - he called it a 'release command' - even with that second chance, I couldn't finish him off. I can't fail you anymore!"

"You haven't failed me, Celly. Neither of you have-

"Then why are you in here?" burst Celestia, biting back a sob. "What are you doing without your horn and your eyes, lying in a cold bed alone? Why did this happen to you?"

"I..." The beeping began to quicken once more. "I have no idea, Celly. But come here. Come on down here." She waited and breathed deeply until she picked up Celestia's scent. "Whatever the reason, it's not you. Don't blame yourself. It only hurts me when you do that. Just...live. Live, and appreciate each tomorrow. You're not alone, Celly. You have us."

"Yes, Mother," replied Celestia, sounding dissatisfied. "Look, I...have to continue training now. Luna, are you coming?"

"Just a moment, sis. I'll catch up." Luna waited until Celestia had left before speaking. When she did so, it was in a soft voice that she said: "Mommy, can I ask you something?"

"What is it, dear?"

"Do you love Celly more than me?"

Caughlin stopped and stared in her general direction. This was the scenario that she had been tossing to the back of her head every other night, in happier days. She had not given this any pre-meditation. All she had was the truth.

"Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Well, Celly's...strong. She's smarter, bigger and just better than me. She can learn stuff really quickly, and she flies faster, and-"

"Stop. Luna, come here." Caughlin strained as she lifted her forelegs up to hold Luna close. Her nerves were screaming. She bit her lip. "Luna, all those things don't affect how much I love you two. You're you. You're special in your own way, just like she is in hers. She could never replace you. You're sisters, and I'm your mommy. That's all it comes down to."

"I'm...I'm so sorry," stammered Luna, beginning to weep. "I...I couldn't do an-anything. I just sat there, looking. Too sc-sc-scared. Celly was fighting alone. And I just s-sat there, like some *foal*. I watched her. That's all I did. She almost got hit so many times, in the closed-whatever. I wanted to go, but I was frozen stiff, thinking about what would happen if I got hit instead. I was almost happy when Fuhrich used the release, because it meant that I didn't have to deal with him. It's not Celly's fault, it's *mine*. I'm useless. I'm so sorry, mommy..."

"It's okay, Luna. It's okay," soothed Caughlin, trying hard not to cry. She felt her eyes flare up in pain. "It's not you. It's neither of you." Her forelegs flopped down, too weary to stay up. "Trust me. I'll always love you, no matter what happens or what you do. I promise you. Calm down now. There, there. It'll be fine."

*Now I know what I have to do. No, wait -  
now I remember what I have to do. It hasn't changed since day one. I've just forgotten.*

*I have to live, and I have to make it out of this ward. I have to be back at their sides, to care for them and support them as much as possible...*

"You know, it's funny," sniffled Luna. "Since Whooves disappeared, it's just been us, me and Celly. The doctor wouldn't let us in at first. We're not supposed to be here, really, we just snuck in. And the first thing we see is Gummy, the lucky thing."

"Gummy?"

"You didn't know?" Luna lifted up the weight on her belly. "He's been here all this while. Apparently he refused to exit this room. They've tried removing him on a couple of occasions, but he keeps finding his way back in. They've given up trying."

"That's loyalty for you," chuckled Caughlin. "Who knows? He could be an embodiment of an element of harmony." Then she thought back, and shot up. "Whooves disappeared?"

"He...yes," admitted Luna. "He didn't make it out. No pony's gone back to check, but since he's not here, he has to be still down there."

"I...see." *So I couldn't apologize to him after all. I...* Before she could wallow any further, she was caught off-guard with another faceful of mane. "Eh?"

"It's a hug," said Luna, gripping her tightly. "I...you need it, don't you?"

"Yes," relented Caughlin, letting the tears fall at last. They soaked through the gauze and stung her eyes, but she didn't care, simply letting herself be lost in the sensation of Luna's silky mane. "You're right, Luna...I need it a lot."