

# Merely a Mare

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# Prologue, Part 1

## Envy and Forgiveness

"How can I forgive you? Dear sister, how can you forgive me? It was your envy that turned you into Nightmare Moon, but it was my envy that allowed it to happen. You believed that our children loved my day and shunned your night, but your power, though strong, has always been focused inward, and introspection can teach little about the feelings of others. Your ignorance was a terrible affliction, but my knowledge was a terrible burden, and one that I should not have borne alone.

"All things touched by the sun were known to me, and the sun warms the hearts of ponies. I am able to see what is in my subjects' hearts, during the day, but only on the surface. There is much in the minds of ponies that lies deep beneath the range of my sun-granted magic, hidden depths of loves and fears and needs and desires that I can never see, but enough was known to me that for a long time what I had suited my purposes. There was only one pony in all of Equestria that was fully closed to me, one heart that my gaze could not touch, and it was the heart I most needed to see: yours, little sister.

"My ability was our undoing, Luna. I relied on my knowledge of the emotions of our people; when I needed something from my subjects, in those days, I simply manipulated them into providing it. I knew what to say and when to say it, I treated our children as though they were my tools, and I paid them as little mind as I would a horseshoe. I believed that if they thought to disobey or betray me, that their hearts would betray them first. In those days, I'm sorry to say, I was a tyrant.

"Truth be told, on some days, I fear that I still am.

"And so I was wholly unprepared when the betrayal came from you, the only one I cared even a sliver for, rather than from one of them. The signs were all there; I should have seen you descending into melancholy, noticed your loneliness and despair, felt the vitriol of the envy that raged within your eyes when you looked upon me then. I was blinded by my own light. Any emotion I could not discern through my power was not known to me;

empathy was beyond my ken.

"When you became Nightmare Moon and declared your reasons for war against me, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. You thought ponies loved my day over your night? Sister, you were more blind than I was, if that's possible. You thought the attention they paid to me was proof that they loved me over you. No, dear sister, they gave me their adulation and obedience and awe, and though you did not know it, they gave me their resentment and jealousy and fear. They gave so much to me that only one thing was reserved for you: Their love.

"In those days, ponies lived in the day, but they lived for the night. With my power, I saw that when you did not. Every morning, I would know of every pony who opened their eyes and saw the sun and begged the universe itself for just ten more minutes, every pony who resented the light of dawn as a call to resume their work, every pony that woke in the hooves of a lover and knew that my rays were their cue to abandon sweet embrace. At sunrise, I caught the barest echoes of those parts of a pony's heart that only come out to greet the night; their deepest dreams, their darkest desires, their most cherished fantasies, the very essence of their being, these were hidden in the day, from myself, and from the ponies that held them. My sun is for work and school and drudgery, that which is normal. Your stars are for dreams and hopes and lovers, that which is exceptional.

"I could have told you. You would never have become Nightmare Moon, if you had known. But I didn't tell you; I didn't know that you needed to be told. If I had viewed ponies as friends, rather than subjects, I could have seen it all coming.

"I failed you, dear sister."

Celestia closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to look at the moon anymore, to see the mark of her sister's prison. A thousand years had passed since she'd seen Luna, but every time the moon rose, she'd spoken as though her sister was there before her, and spilled forth the depths of her heart. She knew the question her sister would ask her, the next time they were alone with each other, and so she had practiced her response.

At first, they had been words of hatred, resentment, vengeance. She had spoken so that she would never forget her sister's betrayal, so that the

flames of hate would rage in her heart, to remind her always of what needed to be done to conquer her sister. But she'd learned since then; she had found the fatal flaw in her vision of the hearts of ponies, and found a better way of learning the true measure of a pony's self.

Friendship. Empathy. Love. After she'd used the Elements of Harmony to defeat Nightmare Moon, Celestia had learned their lessons. Now, she cared for each and every one of her ponies, and that caring brought her an understanding of their hearts that she could not have dreamed of a thousand years before. When the goddess of the sun had finally begun to feel empathy, she had thought back to the actions of her sister, understood where they both had gone wrong, and saw clearly the mistakes that she had made. Celestia had wept at the revelation, and her sorrow had quenched the rage within her.

But the words continued, every night.

Since then, Celestia had spoken words of sorrow, forgiveness, and reconciliation. She spoke so that the pain of memory's lance in her heart would remind her always of what needed to be done to save her sister. On that night, a thousand years after she'd sealed Luna away, the goal was within Celestia's reach. She looked down at the letter that she'd prepared for her most faithful student. After a moment's thought, she spoke again to her absent sister.

"In three days, dear Luna, you will be free, and I know that the bitterness within you will have grown. Once the power born of your envy and resentment are gone, I know that you will only need one thing: a true friend. I can be your friend, if you'll let me, but I cannot strip you of your power. Fortunately, I have found somepony who, if my understanding of what is hidden within her is correct, can.

"If I had relied on my old power, known only the topmost layers of her heart, I would have seen her only as an awkward, bookish introvert. In many ways, she reminds me of you, dear sister. I would have considered her notable only for a better than average talent in magic. I would have been a fool to think such. Through friendship and understanding, after years as her mentor, I've seen the spark deep within her being, a spark that even I lack; she has the potential to be the truest and most dedicated friend a pony could ask for, and the potential to understand and wield the Elements of

Harmony to full effect.

"It is unfortunate that I must manipulate her into action; it is essential to my plan that she not know what she needs to do, essential that the friendships she finds are genuine. I know what she will read, I know what she will write, I know how I must respond, and I know what will happen in Ponyville. Isn't it ironic, little sister, that the empathy and understanding that makes me detest my old methods also makes me so much better at them? It hurts to use her this way; it hurts more to know how she will feel when she realizes that she has been used. I only hope that this betrayal of my closest student is worth it; if I can atone for the wrongs I committed against you so long ago, then it just may be.

"If all goes according to plan, Twilight Sparkle will redeem us both.

"I only hope that she can forgive us both as well..."

# Prologue, Part 2

## Solitude

The last rays of sunlight had long since faded when Celestia alit upon the highest balcony of the tallest tower in Canterlot. She rarely came to this particular corner of her castle; some error in design or construction had left it without a door, making it impossible to access without flight. The princess of the day had little use for the deserted balcony, but she suspected that it was the solitude that had attracted its other occupant. Princess Luna stood across from her, back turned, wings tucked at her sides, head raised toward the heavens. If she had noticed Celestia's landing, she gave no sign.

The white alicorn moved to her sister's side, hooves clopping slowly on the rough stone. "Good evening, little sister."

Luna sighed, continuing to gaze up at the heavens as she responded absentmindedly, "Is it? I do like when the moon is a waxing gibbous. I did my best tonight. I always try my best, but some nights are better than others. Isn't that odd?"

"Sister," Celestia ignored the question, "I haven't seen you at court. You need to come back to the world, learn to live again. You've avoided our subjects so much that I fear your desire for solitude may be consuming you. How long has it been since you've moved from this spot?"

"Since the last full moon, sister. Since the last full moon."

Celestia felt guilt at that; she hadn't realized how time had run away from her. She should have come sooner. Since her sister had returned to Canterlot, they'd spoken only a few times; Luna hadn't taken the revelation of her old knowledge of the hearts and love of their people well. Still, the princess of the sun felt as though if she could just find one crack in her sister's shell of bitterness, she could have the old Luna back, the Luna that had loved to laugh. She attacked the problem from another angle, "Why don't you try some sleep? I found it to be a very pleasing experience, the first time I did it five hundred years ago, or so; I'm no longer surprised that

most ponies do it once a day."

The princess of the night looked toward Celestia, raising an eyebrow, "I remember when you would have considered sleep to be beneath you. You've become similar to our subjects in so many ways since you imprisoned me."

Celestia smiled down at her sister, despite the alicorn's hostile words, "Being like the ponies is not a bad thing, dear sister, as you well know. The fact that you ate and drank and traded jests and wit, the fact that you seemed like one of the herd while I stood apart, partaking in none of it, that was one of the things that made the ponies of Equestria love you."

"Well, sister, I'm afraid that my wit is somewhat dulled; I am a thousand years out of practice, after all. I believe my verbal jabs leave bruises where once they cut to the quick," Luna smiled wryly, sadness obvious in her eyes, "Loved, did they? In the past. They used to love. Sister, I was moved by your forgiveness, after all I'd done, but when you told me the truth about how things were... I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you. For keeping it from me then. For telling me now, when it's too late. That love is a thousand years dead."

The white alicorn turned her head away from her sister as tears began to form in her eyes, "I don't blame you, Luna. It took me centuries to find it in my heart to forgive you for what you did as Nightmare Moon. I only hope that you're a wiser being than I am. If you want to love me as you once did, sister, if you want to forgive, then connect with our subjects. It is their forgiveness, their empathy, their friendship, their love, that taught me a better way than plotting vengeance. Centuries ago, when a few ponies found it within themselves to forgive me for the tyranny I inflicted upon them, to be my friends, that was what started to melt the ice in my heart. Frozen things are brittle; they break easily, sister, and the heart is no exception. Think on it. Goodnight." She flapped her wings, soaring away from the balcony; she feared that anything else she said would do more harm than good.

From behind her, Celestia heard a whisper on the wind, "The forgiveness of our subjects..."



# Chapter 1

## Honesty

"Twilight, tell this here madmare what a terrible idea it is to pull that there stunt over Sweet Apple Acres!" Applejack begged the unicorn that had become the voice of reason in Ponyville. Rainbow Dash had just finished explaining her trick again for Twilight's benefit. Applejack didn't understand more than a bit about the pegasus' talk of barometric pressure, humidity, dew point, and all the rest of that Cloudsdale nonsense, but she knew a terrible plan when she heard it. She stood in Twilight's library, surrounded by books, but the earth pony didn't need to read a single one of them to know that lightning and apple trees don't mix.

Rainbow Dash gave a dismissive snort, "Come on, Twilight, I've been up in the clouds for years and I know weather. Applejack doesn't know the first thing about lightning; if I practice at her farm, the weather conditions are perfect most days, so it won't be anything more than a bit of a flash. I'm sure there won't be any fire. Well, no fire I can't put out quickly with a spare cloud."

Applejack was not at all reassured by Dash's statement, and the pegasus' disregard for her livelihood grated on her, "Any fire is too much fire! It takes years of hard work to grow an apple tree, Dash, not that you'd know anything about that."

Rainbow Dash was in Applejack's face as quick as wind, shouting, "What? I'm up there every day, busting my flanks to give your trees their sun and rain!"

"Girls," Twilight Sparkle tried to interject.

Applejack studiously ignored the unicorn, preferring to argue, "Busting your flanks when you're not too busy napping most of the day away. I can't get my day's work done in ten seconds flat like you, Rainbow Dash. Have you ever even seen the sun rise? Or is it always noon when you set to work?"

Twilight's patience seemed to be thinning, "Girls."

The pegasus seemed to be enjoying herself. Grinning, she countered, "I'm the best at what I do, so I can get it done quickly. Some ponies can't handle that sort of thing. You really shouldn't brag about how slowly you work, Applejack. Unless you're asking for help."

Applejack's anger flared at the low blow. "That's it! Hoof-wrasslin'. Now."

Rainbow Dash's smile only grew. "You're on." The two began to look around, searching the library for a suitable surface.

"Girls!" Twilight shouted, her voice amplified by magic. Her friends winced at the painful volume, and turned to look at the unicorn, who had put on her 'no nonsense' face. Applejack sighed; things had just started to get fun. Seeing that the belligerents were paying attention, Twilight Sparkle continued in a normal voice, "I'm going to do some research on this sort of trick. I've seen the Wonderbolts doing it, so I know it's possible. I'll just make sure that it's safe, and then we can all talk about this again. Does that sound good to you two?" The unicorn smiled hopefully.

Applejack made a non-committal noise, but was distracted from her effort to find a way to extend the argument by a knock at the door. The three ponies looked at each other in confusion; the library was open and the door was unlocked. Spike was usually on door duty, but the dragon seemed to have slipped away at some point, presumably to avoid getting caught up in the argument. For a few moments, the door went unanswered. Then, Twilight shrugged; her horn glowed as she magically opened the door. Paying no mind to the customer, she shouted, "We're open, come in!"

It had been a month since the Summer Sun Celebration, but Applejack recognized the newcomer immediately. Midnight blue cloat, light blue mane. Wings. Horn. Applejack barely had a glimpse before she found herself staring at the floor, bowing deeply toward Princess Luna. It had been instinctive, the same sort of reaction that most ponies experienced when Princess Celestia was nearby. There was something about the alicorns sometimes, some aura of majesty, that could do strange things to ponies caught unaware.

The Earth pony glanced at her friends. Rainbow Dash was grounded, nearly prostrate, and the pegasus looked quite shocked about it. Twilight,

apparently accustomed to Celestia's presence, merely stared at Luna. There was a hardness in the unicorn's eyes the like of which Applejack had never seen there before. The apple farmer gathered her resolve and stole a glance at Luna, who merely looked surprised.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" The Princess exclaimed. Something nearly imperceptible changed, and Applejack felt as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She straightened up, no longer feeling an irresistible desire to worship the dark princess. Applejack had perceived the princess as being something amazing, something literally awe inspiring, but now she just looked like a pony, if a particularly well-formed one that happened to have both wings and a horn. The urgency in the alicorn's voice was replaced by a distant tone as she continued, "That was rude of me. I used to hide that all the time without thinking about it, but I fear that I'm out of practice. I'll remember to keep it away from now on."

"What are you doing here?" Twilight's words had an edge to them that Applejack hadn't thought the mild, bookish mare was capable of.

Rainbow Dash, of course, was capable of far worse, and she cut in before Luna could respond, taking an aggressive step toward the princess, "Yeah! Did you come for revenge? We'll stop you again if we have to! Your night isn't welcome here!"

Luna recoiled as if struck, but regained her composure quickly. "No. I don't want revenge. You were right to stop me when you did; I was misguided. I was wrong to want to bring eternal night to Equestria. Wrong for so many reasons...." The alicorn looked at her feet as she trailed off, sorrow etched upon her face. Applejack couldn't conceive of Princess Celestia ever allowing herself to look as vulnerable as Luna looked at that moment, and the Earth pony found herself feeling almost sorry for the princess. It felt strange to pity one of the rulers of ponykind.

Twilight's voice broke the silence, "True or not, that doesn't exactly answer my question."

"I suppose not," the alicorn sighed, "The reason I came is... well... I wanted to apologize. To apologize and to beg your forgiveness. The forgiveness of all the Elements of Harmony. I want... I want to try to be a friend to all of you."

The three mortal ponies were silent for a moment, trying to process what they'd just heard. Rainbow Dash reacted first: she scoffed, "You tried to kill us. You sicked a manticore on us! A manticore and trees! Well, more the manticore than the trees. Do you know how much a manticore's tail hurts when it whacks you out of the air? You dropped my groundbound friends off a cliff! You made me think... I thought I had to give up..." She trailed off for a moment, her eyes distant for a few seconds before they snapped back into focus, narrowed on the alicorn, "You think you can just walk in here and expect us to forgive you?" The pegasus hovered angrily, forelegs crossed over her chest, a scowl on her face. "I don't forgive so easily. I bet the others agree. We're not omnibenevolent like Celestia."

Applejack and Twilight stared at Rainbow Dash in disbelief. Twilight managed an incredulous, "Dash, where did you learn the word omnibenevolent?"

The pegasus rubbed the back of her head with a hoof, looking sheepish. "Word a day calendar."

"And here I thought I knew ya, Dash," Applejack shook her head, smiling in amusement. She hoped that the word meant what it seemed to mean; she didn't want to ask. Quiet returned to the library for a few heartbeats.

Luna's whisper cut through the silence, "My sister is not all-forgiving. She had her own reasons for welcoming me back to my old place at her side."

Twilight's voice darkened, "Reasons she didn't see fit to share with her most trusted student, of course. They must be some truly amazing reasons, to cause the Princess to make such a tremendous error in judgment, to ignore justice so fully. You escape from your prison and lock Celestia away, threaten to bring eternal night to Equestria, try to kill my friends and I, and what do you get for it? A crown and a throne, and your sister's best efforts to return you to the glory and position you abdicated through betrayal so long ago. Oh, and a welcoming party, of course. We stop you, and save Equestria, and what do we get for it? A small thanks followed by a large cover up. No reward. No pony outside of Ponyville knows what happened on the night of the Summer Sun Celebration. We aren't even allowed to mention it to ponies that weren't in Ponyville that night. Oh, how we could have put that bragging Trixie in her place.... All because the Princess didn't

want your reputation ruined. Like ponies won't figure it out. It doesn't take a teleportation magician to realize that the moon looks a lot different these days, and there's a new alicorn around, and maybe, just maybe, there's something to those old stories. You won't be able to escape from the stigma of what you've done for long. When it all catches up to you, you won't have a place at the Princess's right hoof anymore."

Luna had looked more and more devastated as Twilight ranted, but something in the last bit seemed to catch her attention. Applejack could barely hear the alicorn ask, "Are you... jealous?"

Twilight Sparkle seemed to swell, shaking with rage. She set her teeth, jaw unmoving as she spoke two vicious words, "Get. Out."

Luna looked as though she were about to speak, but thought better of it. The alicorn turned and walked out slowly, shaking her head. Twilight stared out the door after the alicorn for a long time as Applejack tried to think of something to say to the unicorn, some comfort. Before she could even try, Twilight shouted, "Everypony out! The library is closed for the day. Out!" The unicorn turned away and began levitating stray books, propelling them into bookshelves with loud thunks. Some of them managed to find their places without knocking everything else on the shelves off. Others were not so successful.

Rainbow Dash and Applejack were the only other ponies in the library. They looked at each other, but Dash seemed to be as confused as she was. With a dark look, the pegasus flew out the open door, leaving a rainbow trail in her wake and shouting over her shoulder, "I'm going to warn the others. She's back for revenge, I know it." Applejack wasn't so sure.

The Earth pony walked out, glancing back at Twilight before closing the door behind her. The unicorn still hadn't stopped shaking; Applejack had never seen the librarian in this kind of mood; she seemed inconsolable.

Outside, the noonday sun beat down on what had been a bustling ponyville. Princess Luna sat alone and unmoving in the clearing in front of the library, staring at the ground. Many of the ponies that had been going about their business were now gathered in small groups, whispering in hushed tones and surreptitiously glancing at the newcomer, fear or anger written on their faces. Rainbow Dash was already well out of sight.

Applejack sighed. If what Twilight had told her and the other Elements about Luna's past was true, this was just the sort of thing that had led to her becoming Nightmare Moon in the first place. The Earth pony knew that she had to do something. She just wished that she knew exactly what it was.

Applejack approached the princess and dropped to a knee in a bow, and got her attention by stating in a shaky voice, "Princess Luna."

The alicorn turned her head to look at Applejack and gave a shallow smile, "Stand up. My sister was the one fond of ponies bowing to her; I've always found it to be a bit distasteful. I don't recall your name, but I do recall that you were one of the ponies who subdued me in my madness. Honesty, right? Thank you."

Applejack rose slowly to her hooves, somewhat put off by the wandering of Luna's thoughts. She managed to reply, "Yes, Princess, Honesty. My name is Applejack."

The alicorn broke eye contact and looked up, gazing directly into the sun's glare. "Good to see you again, Applejack. Please, call me Luna. Just Luna. I'm glad that the circumstances of our second meeting are somewhat better than those of our first. The ponies here are afraid to approach me, but you are not. You must have a purpose; what is it?"

"Rainbow Dash thinks that yer here to get revenge for what we did to you."

The Princess nodded, "I know."

"Twilight Sparkle seems to hate you, but she didn't at your welcome celebration, and I don't know what changed."

The Princess nodded again, "I do know what has changed for her. Or rather, what changed within her. She has her reasons. Everypony has their reasons, even if the reasons are unreasonable."

Applejack paused. Luna's eyes hadn't left the sun; a normal pony would have been forced to look away in pain long since. The Earth pony supposed that the alicorn must have been used to her sister, or something. She tried not to let the oddness of it distract her as she continued, words

spilling forth uncontrolled, "I... I know the value of honesty because I know the value of trust. My friends are all ponies that I know I can trust, but yeh've got to give the trust before you can get the knowledge. I'm not certain that yer not plottin' some sorta revenge. I can't know for sure. But I think that you're being honest when you say that yer sorry. So I'll trust you. And I'll forgive you. And I'll help you convince the others, even those two stubborn mares back there. Just don't betray my trust. Got that?" The orange mare paused for breath.

The princess was crying. Applejack doubted that the tears had anything to do with looking at the sun too long. The alicorn spoke, whispered words that barely reached her ears, "Yes. Thank you. You won't regret it."

Applejack looked away. She wasn't good with tears, her own or those of other ponies. Not wanting to remain silent, she said the first thing that popped into her head, "You look like you haven't eaten in a spell. You hungry? How about some apples? My treat." Shocked at herself, she looked back at Luna, fearing the alicorn's reaction.

The princess replied with a wry smile and dry words, "I would love some apples. It really has been a spell since I've eaten. In fact, it feels like I haven't had a bite to eat in a thousand years."



# First Interlude

## Apples

Applejack set another basket full of apples in front of Princess Luna. The alicorn levitated two of the fruits and popped one into her mouth, chewing slowly as she rotated the other. Luna studied it from all sides, humming softly to herself. Applejack smiled appreciatively. No pony had ever been this interested in her apples before; the princess couldn't seem to get enough of them. She had already emptied three baskets, and the Earth pony estimated that the slight alicorn had eaten at least her body weight in fruit over the course of the afternoon. The businesspony in Applejack was irked by the value of what the princess had eaten, but she couldn't help but be fascinated by one pony eating in a few hours enough food for a week of generous meals. "Enjoying the apples, Princess Luna?" she asked.

"I thought I told you that it's just plain 'Luna'," The alicorn murmured softly. Applejack might have thought she'd offended the princess, if it hadn't been for her subtle smile. The apple that she had been examining began to lose its outer layer; large sections of bright red skin peeled off the fruit and began to orbit around it. The princess spoke almost absentmindedly as she concentrated on the apple, "In any case, I am enjoying the apples very much. I haven't eaten in a long time, and I had forgotten what a delight it is. Most art is concerned with the satisfaction of one sense at a time, usually sight or hearing. The culinary arts must engage all five senses to be truly effective." Her magic removed the last of the peel from the levitating apple, leaving an off-white orb surrounded by a ring of red debris. Applejack was entranced by the magical display. Luna continued to stare at her work as she spoke, "And of course, many of the most beautiful things in this world are to be found in very unassuming places. Consider the apple: it is a thing of nature, but no longer fully wild, guided by the hooves of ponies to its current form. It is pleasing to the eye, a wonder to every sense, but for all its beauty it is also functional."

Thin black lines began to appear on the apple, diverging and meeting in no obvious pattern as the alicorn continued her distracted murmuring, "Art at work, keeping ponies alive; many from my time would have dismissed it as common, pedestrian, and many more would have taken such things for



granted, but I imagine that they'd miss them very quickly if there were none to be found." The off-white orb floating in front of Luna broke apart into a cloud of expertly carved pieces. Applejack could see right angles, sinuous curves, jagged edges, each fragment unique and minutely detailed.

Applejack had never thought of apples as items of beauty before; far as she saw, grub was grub. Still, she wasn't about to argue with a princess, and though she hadn't understood everything that Luna had said, she still swelled with pride to hear such kind words about her life's work. The farmer didn't consider herself qualified to discuss beauty with one of the immortal rulers of Equestria, so she changed the subject, "Uh, Luna... where do all them apples go? If I ate half o' that many apples, I'd be burstin' at the seams, but ya downed at least a hundred apples without slowin' down, and ya still look like one ah them Canterlot runway models. Do you alicorns have four hollow legs or somethin'?"

Luna glanced up from her project; the pieces of the core had begun to come back together in a shape quite unlike the original orb. She blinked at Applejack, looking confused, then glanced at the empty baskets around her. "A hundred apples?" she asked.

Applejack nodded, "Pips, core, and all."

"Well. There goes my diet. Sorry about this. I didn't realize how many I'd eaten. When alicorns eat, the food just sort of goes away. But we do enjoy it! Still, I feel bad about wasting so much of your crop. At least it'll be good for advertising." The alicorn said. As she spoke, the new form of the apple pieces became recognizable. Applejack marveled at the miniature trunk, roots, and branches that the fragments had formed; bits from the core served as knotholes on the rough, irregular faux bark. Luna's magic seemed to be keeping the fruit from turning brown with exposure to air, and the construct retained its ivory coloring.

"Advertising?" The Earth pony asked.

"Yes," Luna replied as the floating bits of peel tore themselves into ever smaller pieces, "Advertising. Ponies still advertise, right? Why, I recall that I couldn't even walk into a shop without them putting an 'Approved By Princess Luna' sign in the window. It got a bit annoying sometimes, but I never wanted to explicitly tell anypony to take such things down; I didn't

want to feel responsible if their business went under." Tiny bits of apple peel formed a swarm that converged on minuscule branches. When the red blur stilled, a perfect model of an apple tree floated between the two ponies. White apple flesh formed roots, a trunk, and branches covered in foliage of red apple peels. Here and there among the branches, seeds hung in imitation of ripe apples.

"I'd never do somethin' like that without your permission, Luna," Applejack said, entranced by the unorthodox sculpture, "An' that. That tree. That is amazing. I've never seen anything like it, or anypony do magic like that."

The princess raised an eyebrow and spoke dryly, "Every night, I seem to move an unfathomably large object a distance that you'd be unable to put into words, and this, among all my feats, is what impresses you?" It sounded quite stupid to Applejack when Luna put it that way, but once again the princess didn't seem offended. She continued, "You have better taste than I gave you credit for, Applejack. As for advertising, I admit that I don't have quite the same name recognition that I did before, so I'll have to repay you another way. Wait here."

With that, Luna trotted to the nearest apple tree, one that had been mostly bucked clean to feed her, and sat down. The glow in her horn intensified as she considered the tree. A purple halo formed around it, humming with magic, then faded. Where shadows fell on the fruitless branches, blossoms as dark as night bloomed, and fruit began to grow from them. In mere seconds, a new crop of apples had fully grown; to Applejack, the lustreless black orbs looked for all the world like holes in the air. Then, with a final pulse of magic, the dark apples began to sparkle.

Luna plucked one with magic and levitated it to Applejack. She balanced the strange fruit on a hoof and gazed at the lights that danced across the black peel.

Stars.

A sea of stars filled her vision, unfamiliar constellations spinning slowly across a window to a night sky. Spiral splashes of milky white whirled in the distance while pinpricks bloomed in brilliant flashes before they disappeared. The apple glowed momentarily as a sun seemed to pass close to its surface; Applejack could see what looked like huge plumes of

flame flying from the orb, all seemingly frozen, moving too slowly to be perceived. There were more stars than Applejack could ever hope to count. She didn't know how long she stared into the apple, but she was only broken from her reverie when she heard Luna's voice, "You're supposed to eat it, you know."

So she did.

And it was delicious.

# Chapter 2

## Kindness

Luna could think of nothing to do after she left Sweet Apple Acres that afternoon, but Applejack had told her where to be the next morning, and so she had gone to wait. She flew over Ponyville, spotted the Forest Road, and landed nearby in a suitably clear field. The view was not as good as it had been from her balcony, but the alicorn found it to be a worthwhile change of scenery. The sun set, and Luna raised moon with an imperceptible magical effort. Her work done, she relaxed, standing motionless in the sea of grass as she enjoyed the night.

Dew formed on the alicorn's fur and feathers in the early morning chill; the newly risen sun had nearly dried it by the time she saw Applejack walking up the road. The Earth pony called out a greeting, and Luna's lips curved slightly in an unbidden smile. She waved a wing and trotted out to travel beside the other mare. Applejack had a serious expression and got down to business immediately, briefing Luna as they passed one of Ponyville's outlying farms, "We're headin' out to Fluttershy's cottage; Fluttershy is the Element of Kindness, and just about the nicest pegasus you'll ever meet. She doesn't have a grudge holdin' bone in her body and she'll forgive you lickety split, as long as you can get around one big problem: that pony is a coward. She's a close friend of mine and dear to my heart, but the biggest scaredy-pony I've ever laid eyes on. She'll probably bolt the moment she sees you, on account of that whole Nightmare Moon thing, especially if Rainbow Dash got to her first. Unless, o' course, we give her nowhere to go. So we're going to catch her when she's in her house; there's only one door and she won't fly out the window on account of her wings lockin' up when she's scared."

Applejack paused, and Luna took the opportunity to cut in, "You say that she's a coward, but she didn't balk at facing me when I was Nightmare Moon. She didn't flee then; why should she do so now?"

The Earth pony nodded, "Well, that's one of the admirable things about Fluttershy; she can be very brave when she needs to protect her friends. Of course, you're not gonna to be a threat to her friends, of the pony sort or of

the critter sort. You'll be taking care of the animals for her while she's cooped up. She'll be watchin' you, and if you're nice to her animal friends, I'm sure she'll warm up to you. Eventually."

Luna raised an eyebrow, "So your plan is to trap her in her house until she's forced to talk to me? That doesn't sound very... kind."

"Well," Applejack replied with a nervous chuckle, "We're just gonna call this 'tough love'."

"And what if one of her other friends shows up?"

"Oh, that's taken care of," The Earth pony stated, a mischievous smile spreading across her face, "I left notes for others sayin' that Fluttershy got called off to help with an emergency with some critters in another town, a real bad outbreak of somethin' or other. I told em' I'd come round once a day to take care of things here and make sure all the animals got fed an' everythin' while she was gone. It's not worth this long trip to go to the cottage if Fluttershy isn't around, so they shouldn't bother us."

Luna's lips curled in a sardonic grin, "Some Element of Honesty you are." She couldn't keep the amusement from her voice.

Applejack laughed, "Well hold on there, missy! Honesty means bein' worth trustin', not sayin' no word that isn't true. A pony can speak only the truth and still be slippery as an eel, using carefully chosen facts as a weapon against you, and a pony can tell only lies and know that every one of them is worth believin', and lift your spirits with falsehood. Which pony do you think is more worth trustin'? More honest?"

The two ponies traveled on in silence. They passed empty fields and stands of oak and elm, and the land began to look a bit more wild. The sounds of nature, bird calls, brooks, and the wind in the trees, all became more noticable as they left the din of Ponyville behind. Luna thought on what the farmer had said. The princess found that she did not mind being called 'missy.' It had a charming informality to it. As for Applejack's view on trust, the princess was unsure, but it was certainly a question worth asking.

After a few minutes, the two mares spotted the cottage. Its surroundings teemed with wildlife; squirrels chattered in the trees, ferrets played in the

fields, and there seemed to be a bird on every branch. The calls of the animals filled the air with song. It had been a long time since Luna could enjoy such a menagerie. Even the old royal gardens couldn't compete in sheer number of animals. It seemed to the alicorn that Fluttershy must have been extremely skilled, or incredibly charismatic, to attract so many animals to her care. Possibly both. Applejack put out a hoof to stop her a few hundred yards from Fluttershy's home and spoke in a rather unnecessary whisper, "You wait here. The animals shouldn't give us away; I've got a bunny on the inside. I'll go in alone, in case Fluttershy is watching out the window. I'll tell her what's goin' on, and that should distract her. Give me a ten count after you see the door close behind me, then trot out to the clearing where she can see you. Once she knows you're out here, she probably won't leave the house. I'll tell you more after that's all done. You got all that?" Luna was rather pleased by how seriously Applejack was taking this; she nodded.

The Earth Pony set out toward Fluttershy's home with a determined stride. The princess watched her cross the clearing, knock on the cottage door, and disappear inside. She counted slowly, then trotted swiftly out to a visible area, and waited. It wasn't long before Luna saw the curtain on the front window twitch aside, and the face of a pink-maned yellow pony peek out. They made eye contact for just an instant, Fluttershy's eyes as wide as saucers, before the pegasus dropped out of sight. Luna found herself smiling.

Eventually, Applejack emerged from the cottage, closing the door behind her, and approached the princess. "That went about as well as I expected. She wants to talk to you, but she's afraid. If you go in there, she'll just clam up and shudder in a corner. So, we're going with my plan. Have you worked with critters before?"

Luna tilted her head, thinking. "Well, I created a lot of animals, but that was a long time ago. Most creatures are very different now. I haven't had a pet in.... Well, the species is extinct now, to give you some idea."

"Uh...huh...", Applejack replied, raising an eyebrow, "I guess I'll have to show you everthin', then. I've taken care of things 'round here before, so it shouldn't be too bad. Fluttershy keeps most of what you'll need in a shed or the chicken coop, so you shouldn't have to get anything from the house." The Earth pony spent the next few hours showing Luna everything

Fluttershy did for the animals. The Alicorn rather enjoyed herself, feeding birds, helping a family of voles with their burrow, letting mice ride on her outstretched wings, and generally assisting however she could.

Around noon Applejack gave a final speech, "I've got my own land to take care of, so I'll leave you to it. Just try to stay away from the house; no need to spook Fluttershy any more than she already is. When you need to sleep, I've got a guest room that you can use, if you'd like to fly over, but try to wait until Fluttershy is already asleep."

"That won't be a problem," Luna interjected, "I don't sleep."

The Earth pony's voice was completely flat, "What."

"My sister and I don't need to sleep. It's like eating. We can. Celestia has, and says it's fine. But we don't need to. I've never tried it. It can't possibly be as good as eating. Is it?" Luna was genuinely curious.

"Uh... no, Luna, I guess it's not. If you don't sleep, what do you do at night?"

"I look at the stars. That's kind of my thing. I was known for it. Ponies even named a science after me. I guess Lunastronomy didn't last through the time that I was imprisoned in the moon?" Luna was disappointed; there had always been at least two or three Lunastronomers alive, studying the stars. Before her banishment, at least.

"You have got to be the weirdest...", Applejack muttered before she caught herself, "Uh, no, not by that name. I think it's just astronomy now. That's a hobby of Twilight's, but y'all don't seem to be on speaking terms, yet. Still, that's good, common ground could be useful. I'll think about that, but for now, we have to focus on Fluttershy. I'll leave you to it. Have a good day. And night, I guess." With that, the orange pony trotted off toward Sweet Apple Acres.

Luna spent the rest of the day feeding, helping, or just spending time with Fluttershy's companions. The animals seemed to mistrust the alicorn at first, but food and softly spoken words won many of them over, and eventually all were accustomed to her presence. Every so often, the princess thought that she could feel the pegasus watching her from the



window. Whenever Luna turned to look, she saw only a gently swaying curtain.

Eventually, it was time to raise the moon, and the lights in the house came on as the sky grew dark; the work, however, continued. Nocturnal animals emerged, and Luna found herself surrounded by owls, bats, and other creatures of the night. A strange furry creature that looked like a cross between a rat and a monkey stared up at her. Its huge eyes seemed to glow like lanterns in the dim moonlight, and its disproportionately large tail twitched restlessly. It was quite possibly the cutest thing the princess had ever seen, and she greatly enjoyed feeding it. Untiring, she tended to the new pack, long after the illumination in Fluttershy's cottage was extinguished. Luna wondered how their normal caretaker could handle all of this; the pegasus couldn't possibly have twenty four hours a day to dedicate to her work.

Eventually, dawn came again, and the nocturnal animals returned to their dens, branches, holes, and other miscellaneous dwellings. She was a bit sad to see them go; anything that lived its life under the moon, any citizen of the night had a special place in her heart.

The second day of her task began much like the first. Applejack came by in the late morning to deliver baskets of apples, one to Fluttershy and another to a particularly intelligent-looking rabbit. When Applejack reemerged from the cottage, Luna told the Earth pony about her progress with the animals, and the orange mare nodded, smiling, "Fluttershy ain't so certain you're scary, now. Keep doin' what you've been doin', and you'll be just fine." Her tasks complete, Applejack left.

It was late afternoon when Luna heard it; a weak caw from across the field. She wandered toward the cry, looking for the source. Soon, she could see a raven in the grass, walking slowly in circles as though it had no idea what to do with itself. Both its wings were twisted unnaturally, flesh and bone showing where one had been partially severed; its feathers were devastated, sticking out at odd angles where they were not slicked down by blood. The bird had been mauled, and clung tenuously to life. Luna's horn glowed as she approached it, scrying its body to determine the extent of the damage. Before she could get close, the raven noticed her, and she felt its heartbeat increase; her large, unfamiliar form sent the mortally injured animal into a panic. The alicorn knew that too much of a shock could kill it



outright, and that she would have to be very close to be able to heal the bird without inflicting enough pain to be a death sentence. Mending living tissue correctly was a monumental task; even the best unicorn healers could only speed natural regeneration. The raven needed more than that.

Luna lowered herself slowly to the ground, trying her best to be nonthreatening. As she inched forward, she called out softly, hoping to reassure the bird, "Please come here. I want to help you. I can make it better." She knew that it was the tone, not the words, that mattered; the raven couldn't understand her speech. Despite her best efforts at coaxing and crawling, the raven kept its distance, the grounded bird hobbling away whenever she came near, unapproachable in its confused panic. Luna could almost feel the seconds ticking away as the raven weakened, approaching death.

The princess collapsed as she realized that there was nothing she could do; trying to approach quickly could shock the poor thing literally to death, and grabbing it with telekinesis certainly would. Tears welled in her eyes as she contemplated the futility of her efforts. She didn't think of her attempt to win over Fluttershy or what the black bird's death would mean for it. The raven had become just one more creature that recoiled when she reached out, one more thing that feared her, one more subject whose trust she could not win, and that drove her to despair. Luna wept into her hooves. Her failure would cost the creature its life.

"Come here, little one," A soft voice called out from beside the alicorn. She looked up, and through misty eyes, she could see Fluttershy standing beside her, motioning with a hoof. The raven was slowly but intently making its way toward the pegasus, giving the pink-maned mare as much of a look of devotion as its solid black eyes were capable. Fluttershy looked down at Luna, concern etched on her face, "Please don't cry, Princess. Can you help him?" The raven was huddled against one of the mare's hooves.

The alicorn nodded, adding, "Just try to keep him still." Her horn pulsed with magic; she held it nearly touching the raven's head, its dark aura washing over feathers and blood. She could count on her hooves the number of times she'd mended living flesh. The difficulty didn't lie in repairing damage, but rather in doing so without causing permanent deformity. If the sinew and muscles came together wrong, the raven would never fly again. Time seemed to slow as Luna's magic enhanced her

perception; she saw each cell, each fiber, every ruptured blood vessel as she traced nerves, shutting down cells to numb the wounds. She didn't bother with subtlety; any cell with a hint of damage was banished as she summoned a healthy copy in its place. New blood vessels bridged the gaps in the raven's flesh as conjured blood began to flow through them, replacing what had been lost.

The muscles were a different challenge; trauma had deformed the tiny threads of muscle tissue. Luna burned off the ends, tracing back to relatively undamaged flesh on both sides of each wound. Cell by torturous cell, she reconnected the sides, one fiber at a time; each ending had a twin, and connecting them incorrectly would weaken the muscle. She mended the tendons, and tested their elasticity, making adjustments. Splinters of bone came together around restored marrow, new calcium mending them on a level that natural healing could never have recreated. Skin grew over the wounds, and Luna set the raven's feathers aright, growing new ones where old plumage had been lost. Finally, Luna restored the nerves, returning feeling to her charge.

Nearly a second had passed.

The raven appeared stunned, but Luna could feel its heartbeat return to normal as it tested its new flesh. Soon, with a caw, it took off and circled above the ponies' heads, gliding on mended wings. Satisfied, it returned to perch on Luna's horn.

Fluttershy giggled, "Oh, Well done, Princess. Good as new. I think he understands."

Luna, her eyes crossed as she looked at her new horn ornament, smiled, "I'm glad. And please, just call me Luna," the alicorn paused, "I wonder how long he's going to stay there."

The raven cawed, twisting its head to look down at the alicorn with one black eye. She was sure that if it weren't for the beak, he would be smiling at her.

Eventually, the bird went on its way. In that time, Fluttershy managed to work up the courage to invite Luna inside for tea. They drank in silence, the pegasus appearing nervous and the princess just not seeing any

significance in the lack of words. After finishing a third cup, Luna spoke, "Thank you for the tea. It's very good," she paused, "And thank you for helping me with that raven."

Fluttershy responded quietly, "I was watching from the window, and saw what you were trying to do. I couldn't just stay inside with you trying so hard to help that poor little guy. I'm sorry I was too afraid to talk to you earlier."

Luna examined her empty glass to avoid looking at the other pony, "It's alright. A lot of ponies are afraid of me. I'm just glad that you're able to talk to me now."

Silence returned, but after a moment, Fluttershy broke it, "Luna, can I ask you something? Why did you become Nightmare Moon?"

Luna tilted her head, "My sister's student didn't tell you?"

Fluttershy looked away, "I'd like to hear it from you," her eyes moved to meet the alicorn's, "If that's okay."

The princess sighed, "You love these animals, do you not? You want to help them, care for them, guide them. You provide only your best for them, as well as you know how. Their affection is your only reward, but it is more than enough. Am I correct in all that?" Luna paused, and Fluttershy nodded, so she continued, "What would you do if you wanted to show your affection for some creatures, to guide them and provide for them, to play with them and enjoy their company, and they shunned you? Fled from your domain and presence? Rejected your gifts and spurned your love? How well would you take it?"

"I...", the pegasus looked down, gaze locked on the floorboards, "I... don't think I would take it very well," her eyes widened, "Not very well at all."

"So you understand some part of my pain," Luna sighed, "These creatures are like family to you, but I created the ancestors of your ancestors, long, long ago. Ponies are my children by more than adoption, and I love you all as such, but it is easy to become angry when your children don't do as you think they should. When they forget, and abandon you."

Fluttershy's bashfulness faded as her interest grew, "You created ponies

with Celestia?"

"I created many things with her. Ponies, though, as they are now, are more mine than hers. The three separate forms, as well as...", Luna paused, and her eyes grew distant as a cloud of sadness passed over her face, "...well, there are other blessings that separate my ponies from my sister's, things that are essential to ponies as you know them. Just hope that you never meet one of her children, if any yet remain."

And then they were silent, as Fluttershy traced a hoof along the floor, seemingly deep in thought. Eventually, she spoke again, "Luna, if you don't mind my asking, are you going to become Nightmare Moon again if you, um, don't get the love you want from, er... us?"

Luna shook her head, "No, child, and not just because it would be evil. I've learned that you can't win love with threats and violence. The path to the sort of love I want is the path of patience and kindness. The hoof that helps, not the hoof that harms. I've done enough harm already."

Fluttershy murmured, barely loud enough to be heard, "Applejack said that you came for forgiveness. I forgive you, Luna. Just remember- be kind."

# Second Interlude

## Stars

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*I miss you.*

*I want to hate you, I want to hurt you, I never want to speak to you again, but still, I miss you.*

*I've been in Ponyville nearly a month now, enough time to send you a few reports on the magic of friendship, and in that time the bonds I share with the ponies here have only grown stronger. By many measures my life is better here than it ever was in Canterlot. I spend time with my friends, I laugh with them, I learn about their interests, and I help them when I can. I'm known around town for my level head and strong magic, the very qualities I take the most pride in. Running the library is a dream come true for me. I should be happy with what I have.*

*And yet, I miss you. The old you. The you I thought I knew. I'm tired of trying act like nothing is wrong. I'm tired of you pretending that everything is the same, as if a few lines in a letter about your duty to your sister and how I should feel honored could make me forget what you did. I had read ancient texts that mention you as a master manipulator, but I dismissed them all. How could the cold-hearted mare they described be the benevolent princess who had been so true to me for so many years? Oh, what a foal I was.*

*It started as a tiny suspicion, but you know me, princess: I can't help but try my best to find every minute detail, to get the clearest possible understanding. You taught me that. You taught me so many things. The more I thought, the more the evidence piled up.*

*You gave me a break from formal study knowing that I would take the time to pursue my own interests, which inevitably means the library. The librarian just happened to have a new book to recommend to me that day, on one of my favorite subjects. You've always told me that the myths and*

legends of ponies have some grain of truth to them, and so my curiosity was piqued by the story of those alicorn sisters, and I had to look into the Elements further. I still don't recall when you told me about them, but it must have been you; no other source could have made such an impression on me that I remembered a mere mention years later. When I read about the Mare in the Moon in the copy of Predictions and Prophecies that you'd given me for some birthday long ago, I sent you a letter. Your immediate reply was surprising at the time, even with my hope for a quick response. In retrospect, you must have had it prepared.

Am I so transparent that you don't even need to read my letters? Are my friendship reports merely wastes of ink?

In any case, you replied in the only way that could have guaranteed that I wouldn't drop the issue, that thoughts of the Elements of Harmony would stay with me: by dismissing my concerns completely, in the most supercilious manner possible. I was concerned for Equestria, concerned for you, and you mocked that concern. What better way to ensure that I would remember the Elements of Harmony and the details of the legend than to kindle within me a burning need to prove myself to you? It was masterfully done. If you'd told me that you'd made arrangements for the Mare's return, or that you'd strengthened the wards, or that you knew of an error in the book I read, and perhaps thrown in a word or two of praise for my diligence, I would have dropped the issue in an instant.

But I couldn't drop it, and you sent me to Ponyville, and a tiny library that happened to have just the book I needed. The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide? How many copies of a treatise on an artifact lost for a millennium could possibly exist? But of course I didn't find that until after I'd gone over the checklist of celebration preparations, and met the ponies that you'd chosen to oversee preparations. The only one of my friends that you didn't set in my path was the one that would have found me and thrown me a party no matter what I did. How long did you know that those were the ones? How long did you know that they'd make great friends for me? How long did you keep that knowledge from me, knowing how alone I was?

You knew what I would face at the Summer Sun Celebration, but you didn't warn me. When I noticed that duplicity, it opened the flood gates; there were so many elements of your plan that had to have been set up years in advance. You wrote that letter to get me to do what you wanted. How much



else in the time that you've been planning this has been a lie? Did you stage my entrance examination to the royal academy? Did your words of encouragement follow a secret script? When I did well at my studies, were the looks of pride and affection that you gave me coldly calculated? If I write an autobiography, will it end up in the fiction section?

We elements acted out our parts, following the script you wrote, and now your sister is free. You've even managed to rid yourself of me. By my own request, no less! Congratulations. Your grand design, come to fruition. At least I was a useful tool. I suppose we all have a role to play.

Every life is a story, and every story has a plot, a theme, a goal, something essential at the center of the narrative. Was saving Luna the great goal of my life? Was my character written for your plot? I wouldn't be surprised. I've known for a long time that you're the main character in my life, though I never dreamed that you would also be the antagonist.

You were my world. Your voice, your approval, those were the reasons that I got up in the morning. Everything I've done, from the first time I saw you at that Summer Sun Celebration so many years ago to the present day, has been for you. Through good times and bad, you've been a fixture in my life. You're my teacher, my mentor, my ruler, and my goddess, but you mean even more to me than that. So much more. I wasn't even old enough to know what a schoolfilly crush is when I first saw you, raising the sun and filling the world with radiance. I fell in love with you then, and I've loved you ever since. All of my studying was for you. First it was just to get into your Royal Academy. Since then it's been the fact that when I succeeded, when I read the books, and did precisely what they said, and worked the magic better than anypony else in the class, you would smile at me. A simple constant that I built my life around: you smiled at me, and your eyes filled with pride. Were you proud of me, or were you proud of yourself? I'm afraid to even consider that it might be the latter.

I feel so betrayed. I've read half the royal library, and yet I still cannot find the words.

Even so, I miss you. I feel a deep pit somewhere within me whenever I see the sun. I feel it because you're missing from my life. The rays cannot warm my heart the way your presence always did. Its beautiful radiance is no substitute for your radiant beauty. It gives me life, but it does not make me

*want to live. The sun is yours; I must shun it, lest I be reminded of you.*

*So much reminds me of you.*

*I saw Luna today. She had no part in what you did. I hate her still. She's here because you used me. My anguish was the cost of her salvation, and you gladly paid. I don't know if I can ever forgive either of you for that. I know that I certainly can't forget it; the moon reminds me every night. Her presence seems like a pale reflection of yours. She is cold and distant, but there is an undeniable beauty. The moon is hers? I can believe it.*

*You are like the sun and she is like the moon. With those celestial bodies barred to me, what can I strive for? My cutie mark, of course, bears my answer.*

*I must be the stars.*

*My trust in you was my downfall. The fact that I love you is what made your betrayal hurt so much. I won't let that happen again. I can't live with another wound that hurts this much. And so I won't trust, and I won't love, and I won't be hurt. The moon and the sun dance through the sky, but they do have no effect on the course of the stars; the stars care not for them. That is how I will protect myself. Apathy will be my armor. No matter what may transpire with the sun or the moon or Equestria below, my course will be unaffected, and I will not feel the pain. That is my goal. I must become like the stars. I must give up trust and love. I will dedicate myself to this.*

*But I may still miss you.*

*With all the love in my shattered heart,*

*Twilight Sparkle*

\* \* \* \* \*

Flames consumed the letter, hot and red. Twilight Sparkle's magic held the paper above a candle as she watched smoke rise from the message. She could not bring herself to send it. A clean cut, she reasoned, was best.



But reason had little to do with her actions. In truth, deep within, she felt that as long as she didn't send the letter, the contents wouldn't be true. They couldn't be true. She desperately wished that it were all just some dream, that she'd wake up in her bed in Canterlot with a jolt, already forgetting the details of her vivid nightmare.

The letter burned, but its words did not. They stuck in the unicorn's mind, and played over and over again. They sounded like the world crumbling.

Twilight stared at the ashes, thinking of the bridges she'd tried to burn along with her letter. She whispered to herself, "I've got to be like the stars. And the stars don't cry...."

And indeed, the stars did not cry that night. But Twilight Sparkle did.

# Chapter 3

## Laughter

The morning sun shone over Sweet Apple Acres, and Luna whistled cheerfully as she chewed on an apple. Applejack tried not to think about that too hard; she couldn't even whistle with an empty mouth. She suspected that whistling and chewing at the same time was not quite possible, but didn't feel the need to bring it up with the princess. Impossibilities seemed to spring up like weeds wherever Luna went. In the presence of a goddess, the Earth pony reasoned, there is no need to take special note of miracles.

The alicorn polished off her second basket of apples. Applejack was glad that the princess insisted on growing new fruit to replace any that was bucked for her; Luna's ability to eat as many apples as the rest of Ponyville combined had been worrying, at first. The regrown apples put any possible objection to rest; each and every one was exquisite. Sometimes Luna's apples were even better than natural ones, like the intriguingly sour blue-skinned fruits or the batch from the day before that had grown in fermented. The Earth pony smiled at the admittedly fuzzy memory. Those had sold well.

The alicorn stared at the third basket in front of her, her brow furrowed in concentration as though it were filled with puzzles instead of apples. Seeing that she had paused, Applejack coughed to get her attention, "So, Luna, how're'ya likin' Ponyville?" After Luna had spoken with Fluttershy, Applejack asked her to spend some time in town. Anything the princess did there, other than laughing maniacally and trying to bring eternal night to Equestria, could only improve the residents' opinion of her. From what the Earth pony had seen on the occasional visit, the alicorn just sort of wandered around, looking at plants and playing with animals. She only seemed to speak during her daily visits to Sweet Apple Acres, where Applejack shared stories and apples with her.

"It's quite nice," she replied with enthusiasm, "the architecture is so modern. In my time, I was never really one for small communities, but they have their own charm. I've always been more at home in the crowds of

whatever capital we had than in the outlying villages. Towns are terrible for solitude; it's much more easy to be alone when you're in a crowd. Towns are also terrible for socializing; it's much more easy to find a friendly face when you're in a crowd."

Applejack nodded and smiled. It was her normal strategy for when ponies said things that she didn't quite understand and didn't really want to, and she'd found herself using it quite often around Luna. "How 'bout the ponies? You make any new friends?"

The alicorn's face fell, "No. But at least they don't go out of their way to avoid me anymore. Mostly. It's a start."

Applejack had expected that; even the ponies that didn't resent Luna for being Nightmare Moon would be too nervous to approach a princess in most situations. Today, things would be different. Applejack had a plan. The idea had come from an offhoof comment about common ground. She'd thought about what her friends had in common with Luna, and it had become obvious to her the next time she'd seen the princess devouring apples with reckless abandon.

The Earth pony explained her plan to the alicorn, and as Applejack spoke, Luna's smile grew. By the end, the princess was positively beaming. Then, with a flash of magic, she was gone.

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The long hall glimmered in the morning light. In place of walls, thin marble columns rose, spiraling, fluted, and intricately carved, framing views of royal gardens below and sky all around. The ceiling, high above, was a flawless surface of gleaming white marble, interrupted only by the brilliant silver of a crescent moon and countless stars. It was mirrored below by the unbroken expanse of the floor; Celestia's golden throne, shining like the sun on its stepped dais, was the only furniture, the only object in the room. A sunburst of gold inlay radiated from it; the widest beam extended to the entryway, an arch on the only closed wall, leading back to the palace proper.

The throne room was designed to fill ponies with hope, awing them with its beauty and inspiring them with its majesty. It was meant to be a joyful

place, of contemplation or convocation, a place from which the princess could rule her subjects with wisdom and generosity, sharing in their joy and comforting them in their sorrow. A place from which the light of the princess could shine all over Equestria.

Celestia brooded on her throne; the atmosphere could not have matched her mood more poorly. In less than an hour, the audiences would begin, and she would have to put on a mask of cheerful benevolence. The ponies of Equestria looked to their ruler for confidence and tranquility; the princess hoped that they could find it, even now that she could not.

A shadowed spot appeared amidst the blinding brightness of metal and marble. Luna was dwarfed by the size of the hall, but it was impossible to miss her; the contrast between the dark coat of the night princess and the brilliant white of the floor drew Celestia's eyes immediately. For a moment, neither spoke.

The day princess stepped down off the dais to meet Luna on even height, "Welcome, sister. This is the Grand Audience Chamber, and my throne room. It will be our throne room, when you wish it to be. You've been gone; rumors have come from Ponyville, saying that you're spending time there. Are they right?"

Luna raised an eyebrow, "Your faithful student hasn't mentioned me in a letter? From what you've told me of her, I would have expected you to know the very day I saw her. I'm fairly certain that my visit made some sort of impression. Did she forget me so quickly?"

Celestia looked away, her face darkening, "Twilight Sparkle is not - I have not corresponded with her, of late," she looked back toward her sister, feigning serenity, "Sister, I apologize if Twilight has been hostile to you; I fear she may blame you for some of my indiscretions."

"I see." Something in the flat words made Celestia suspect that her sister had seen far more than she wanted to reveal.

"In any case, dear sister," the white alicorn said with a smile, "What were you doing in Ponyville? And to what do I owe this visit?"

"In Ponyville, I am working to gain trust and make friends. As for my visit,"

Luna looked a bit sheepish, "I came to ask to borrow money. I apologize for the horrible cliché. I just need a modest sum, a pittance by the reckoning of the treasury."

Celestia felt a strange mix of confusion and pity at that, assuming the worst. "Money cannot buy trust, or friendship, or happiness. You haven't forgotten that, have you, little sister? It's very nearly as bad as power for that purpose."

Luna nodded, "I know. It is, at this point, necessary but not essential. I will use it wisely, with the knowledge that the things most worth having are obtained by a more valuable currency than notes and coins."

"Very well. Take what you need." Celestia expected her sister to teleport to the treasury at that, but she did not. The princesses were silent for a time, each lost in their own thoughts.

Eventually, Luna spoke again, "You are sad, sister."

"As are you. It is said that tragedy leaves one sadder but wiser. We have seen much tragedy in our lives, sister, and gained much wisdom. Isn't sadness to be expected?" Celestia let her mask slip, just a little, and the light of the throne room seemed to dim in kind.

"For me, perhaps," Luna said, "But you never showed sadness, and I don't think you even felt it, before my exile. Even during the fall of the alicorns, you were detached, analytical, unfeeling. Did you shed even a single tear for your favored creations? I suspect not. I didn't understand then, and I still do not."

"Be glad of that. I was different, then. When sadness became possible for me, the tears came. I mourned my children. I mourn them still," Celestia sighed, "But I never understood your actions during that disaster either; in the darkest years, when we thought that nothing could be done, you yet smiled and joked and laughed with those doomed ponies."

Luna's unfocused eyes stared off into the distance, "And died a little inside, every day, as I cried where those that were left could not see it. Even when I was sad, I tried to be happy as well, because laughing with tears in your eyes is better than weeping in undiluted sorrow. And where your detached

analysis failed, my laughter found a solution. A solution worth laughing at."

"A solution I could not have imagined on my cruelest day," The day princess said, her eyes shimmering with repressed tears, "But it serves. As detestable as your blessing is, sister, it serves. Laughing while sad, you say? A wise lesson. Why have you forgotten it, my melancholy, mirthless little Luna?"

Silence filled the throne room once again. Neither alicorn could meet the other's eyes. Eventually, Celestia noted the position of the sun, and spoke in a grave tone, "Beware, sister. A terrible event approaches us."

"What?" Luna asked, eyes widening.

"Go now. If you're here when they come, then you will share my fate," the white alicorn whispered urgently.

"What fate, sister?"

"I will be forced to sit on my throne all day, and listen to the most boring ponies in the land talk. My court comes into session soon." And with that, the ruler of Equestria began to laugh.

Luna shook her head, but smiled despite herself as magic took her away.

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"This building looks delicious."

Applejack chuckled at Luna's observation, "If you think that's appetizin', wait 'till you see what's on the inside." The two ponies walked into the overgrown gingerbread house that was Sugar Cube Corner, and found that it was mostly deserted. They'd managed to arrive after the breakfast crowd and before the lunch rush, just as planned. Luna's saddlebag seemed to have enough bits for the operation, the farmer noted, judging by how the princess clinked when she moved.

The only occupant of the store was the pink Earth pony behind the counter. Pinkie Pie grinned when she saw Applejack and shouted, "Welcome to Sugar Cube Corner. How may I fill your day with deliciousness on this

delightful... day?" Her grin disappeared when she noticed Luna standing behind her orange friend. It was replaced by a suspicious scowl, "Oh. I see you brought Black Snooty. Welcome to Sugar Whatever, how may I yadda yadda yadda?"

Applejack's brows furrowed, "Pinkie Pie! Is that any way to talk to a payin' customer?"

"But Applejack! I've got to be rude. Rainbow Dash told be not to 'be all Pinkie nice to her' cause Luna wants to," Pinkie Pie's eyes became distant and her face scrunched up in thought, "wreak horrible vengeance upon us," Her bright countenance returned, "which is bad because I don't have any perfume."

Applejack raised an eyebrow, "Rainbow Dash said that. Exactly that? 'Wreak horrible vengeance?' That sounds more like Twilight than Dash."

"That's what I said! But she just grumbled something about a calendar and flew off. Woosh!" Pinkie Pie threw a hoof in an arc in demonstration.

"Do you believe everythin' Dash says, sugarcube?" The orange pony asked.

"Yep," the pink mare replied with a nod and a smile.

"Do you believe everythin' I say? How about that?"

Another nod, another smile, "Of course I do."

"So I say that Luna isn't here to... uh... whatever with the vengeance," Applejack nodded, satisfied with her logic despite the momentary stumble, "What now? We can't both be right."

"Sure you can," Pinkie insisted, looking quite pleased with herself. Applejack and Luna waited for the pink pony to elaborate on that, but she just sat there, smiling.

"Riiiiight. Well, I know y'all can't turn away a payin' customer, in any case. The Cakes won't let you. Luna, go ahead and buy somethin'." Applejack waved a hoof at the displays and the diverse array of cakes and pastries

just behind the glass.

Luna rushed forward, eyeing the bounty hungrily. She walked slowly back and forth in front of the counter, examining each row in turn. Suddenly, she stopped, staring at a cupcake. Her eyes grew wide as she examined it. Dark cake was visible though a thin, white wrapper. It was topped with a towering spire of scarlet frosting; how the item managed to stay upright was a mystery. Little blocks of chocolate and ripe raspberries were embedded in it, barely clinging to the sides of the heap. The princess seemed mesmerized. She tapped the glass with her horn, "Is that... raspberry chocolate?"

"Precisely," Pinkie Pie proclaimed with perceptible pride. The price was pronounced, payment passed from patron to proprietor, and the pink pony presented the pastry to the princess.

Luna levitated the cupcake closer and began to rotate it. Her eyes seemed to trace every line of the frosting swirls. She sniffed it, then sighed contentedly. "This is going to be good," she whispered, apparently to nopony in particular. Finally, she opened her mouth and, with one huge bite, devoured the pastry. Her eyebrows lowered as she chewed thoughtfully, and Applejack wondered how it would compare to her apples. Part of the businesspony didn't want to lose the monopoly on princess-feeding in Ponyville.

Luna swallowed, then sighed contentedly, "Please give my compliments to the baker. That was exquisite."

Pinkie Pie giggled, "I baked that one, silly. And thanks." Applejack resisted the force pulling her hoof toward her face; leave it to Pinkie to call a princess 'silly.'

"You did?" Luna asked, "Well, then thank you. The rice paper wrapper was an interesting choice, but did not go amiss."

"You liked that?" The pink pony seemed overjoyed, "I do that all the time, ever since one day I thought to myself, 'Pinkie Pie, what's the one part of a cupcake you can't eat?' and then I was like 'the wrapper!' and I put my plan into action as soon as I got out of the well."



Luna nodded and smiled, her attention once again focused on the display case. Her horn glowed, and a red aura appeared around several pastries. "How much for these, my good mare?"

Bits changed hooves and baked goods disappeared in a frenzy as the night princess consumed a dizzying array of sweets. Luna had a comment or question for each, and Pinkie Pie was delighted to respond with information of varying relevancy. The princess praised a sour blue apple, boysenberry, and lime pie, and the pink pony lamented a failed pineapple, potato, and pickle pie experiment that she described as, 'Not nearly as popular as I expected.' In response to Luna's lamentation that there were only a dozen cinnamon cookies available on the display, the baker produced a box from the back room with scores more; they lasted less than a minute. Applejack couldn't begin to understand how the alicorn managed to avoid being covered in crumbs.

Luna purchased a gigantic three layered vanilla cake, and devoured it in one bite. Applejack objected on principle, "Land's sakes, how'd you get that down like that? It was bigger than your head! It don't make no sense."

Pinkie Pie laughed, and Luna just shrugged, "Magic or something. I wasn't really paying attention to the how of it. Cake is far more important."

"Your horn didn't glow!" The farmer said, "The world follows some simple rules. Apples fall down. Ponies grow old. Horns glow when unicorns are doin' magic. You're gonna drive me crazy one of these days, Luna. Messin' with my trust in the rules."

The pink pony behind the counter laughed all the harder at Applejack's confusion, and Luna's mouth twisted into a wry smile. Her horn began to glow, "There. My horn is glowing. Happy, Applejack? Am I allowed to ignore the rules now?"

The orange mare grumbled and turned away, only to find that the approaching lunch hour had provided an audience; nearly a dozen ponies stood in a rough line behind her. They were obviously waiting to be served, but were all too entranced, awed, or just plain confused by the spectacle that Pinkie Pie and Luna were providing to complain about the wait. Applejack suddenly felt a bit guilty for bringing the princess. Luckily, clapping from the stairs heralded the arrival of Mrs. Cake, who greeted her

shop with a, "Oh, hello dearies. Busy day today, I see. I'll take the next customer over here, please." She swiftly took her station next to Pinkie Pie and smiled, motioning to Applejack with a hoof.

The farmer blinked, confused for a moment. "Oh," she turned to the pony behind her, "You can go ahead. I'm with the princess." Applejack moved to an out of the way corner and watched as Mrs. Cake sold to a seemingly endless stream of ponies. The ponies in line couldn't help but stare at the spectacle of the alicorn, who seemed hellbent on running Sugar Cube Corner out of baked goods. Many patrons even stayed after eating their lunch, murmuring to each other and taking in the show, forming a crowd around the edges of the room. Luna didn't seem to notice them; the food and the baker kept her thoroughly distracted. Bread, cakes, anything that Pinkie Pie suggested added to the growing pile of bits on the counter. Sometimes, suggestions became a bit... exotic.

"Oh! I know! You've got to try cupcakes with hot sauce. They're my favorite!"

Luna raised an eyebrow dubiously, "In all my years, I've never heard of that particular combination. It sounds absolutely insane." She leaned forward, eyes wide, and nodded eagerly, "What kinds of hot sauce do you have?"

Pinkie Pie's face scrunched up in concentration, tapping one hoof against another to count out her list, "Well, from least spicy to most spicy, we've got eh, mild, hot, very hot, hottest, inferno, 'I'm not kidding seriously Pinkie I just breathed fire what is wrong with you why did you let me eat this', rainbow, and double rainbow. Some of them are named based on taste-tester feedback!" She grinned, "Rainbow and double rainbow use real rainbows, as fresh as I can get. I hear they're spicier directly out of the pools of Cloudsdale, but I've never been there, so I just use the ones at Dash's house."

"Double rainbow?" The princess asked, "What does that mean? What's the difference between rainbow and double rainbow?"

Pinkie Pie shook her head, "That's a trade secret." She paused, "But, since you're a princess and all, I guess...", "The pink pony looked to each side before leaning forward conspiratorially and whispering at a volume that probably carried her words halfway to Canterlot, "I use twice as many

rainbows." She returned to her previous position and raised a hoof to her mouth in a shushing gesture, winking at the princess.

Luna just blinked, "Okay, double rainbow it is then."

After she managed to extinguish the majority of the flames, the alicorn gave her mixed compliments to the baker, "That was delicious, but you probably shouldn't serve those to your mortal customers. Repeat business comes primarily from ponies that remain fully intact inside after eating your products."

Pinkie Pie nodded, seemingly awed by this revelation, and thanked Luna profusely for the advice.

After a few dozen tarts, Luna pointed to what appeared to be a decoration on the counter. It was a short cylinder of black marble, encrusted with gems of all shape and color. It almost looked like a stylized cake. The princess asked about it, and Pinkie Pie's face fell, "I baked that when Spike moved into town, because I know how dragons love to eat gems, but Twilight Sparkle won't let him buy it. She says it's unhealthy because it has too many empty carats."

The princess bought it, and ate it. Applejack shook her head. Why was she surprised? She grinned and called out from her resting place, leaned up against a wall, "Are you gonna eat the counter too, Luna? I'm shocked there's a moon left, now that I know y'all can down rocks."

The princess just smiled, looking in equal parts both sheepish and amused, but Pinkie Pie yelled back indignantly, "Hey, you'd be pretty hungry too if the only thing on your menu for a thousand years was moon pies!"

It was impossible to tell whether or not the pink pony meant it as a joke.

The ponies spent the remaining time before closing talking and cracking jokes. The energetic inanity of the baker, the straightforward semi-seriousness of the farmer, and the dry wit of the princess complemented each other well, and the customers that passed through often lingered to chat with the trio of ponies. Pinkie Pie and Applejack laughed loudly and often, but Luna just smiled enigmatically, breaking into a grin when anything particularly amusing was said.

Eventually, the sun began to set, and Pinkie Pie locked the door, the day's business done. She turned to Luna and said, "You know, I've been thinking. We should throw you a party! Like a, 'hey, remember that other princess?' party or a 'welcome back to Ponyville' party. Or something. We could have it tomorrow!"

The princess tapped a hoof against her chin in thought. "Well, my birthday is next week. We could throw a birthday party...."

Applejack raised an eyebrow, "Y'all have birthdays?"

Luna blinked at her, seeming slightly confused as she asked, "What? Don't you? I thought that would still be around," completely missing the point.

Before Applejack could answer, Pinkie Pie, bouncing with excitement, interjected, "How old are you gonna be? It's gotta be over a thousand, right? Is it a thousand and one? Two thousand?"

"Four hundred and eighty seven million, seven hundred and ninety two thousand, four hundred and twenty one," the princess recited.

The Earth ponies' jaws dropped. Pinkie Pie seemed to be, for once, speechless.

"But I've been told that I don't look a day over five hundred thousand," Luna added with a wink.

Applejack gave a weak laugh, "Heh. Good one. You really had us going there for a second. Four hundred million. Heh."

"That part wasn't a joke."

Applejack blinked, "You mean... really?" Luna nodded. "That don't make no sense. How's that possible?"

Luna smiled wryly, "Immortal, remember? I don't age. I don't die. In a billion years, I'll still be counting off birthdays. What makes you think that you caught me in the first few thousand years of my life?" The princess sighed, "Ponies have no sense of scale. They measure all things against

themselves, a measurement that for many purposes, I'd find quite lacking. Ponies always think that 'distant' means 'just a bit past the furthest I've gone', and that 'ancient' means 'just a bit older than me'. Try to understand that the stars are more distant than you can possibly fathom, and that I am equally ancient. If you can't, just take my word for it."

Just when Applejack thought that Luna couldn't surprise her anymore.

Pinkie Pie whispered to herself, "Four hundred million... I don't think I have that many candles...."

"Maybe just one big candle?" Luna suggested.

Pinkie Pie's usual energy returned, "That'll have to do. That many birthdays just means that I'll have to try extra hard to make sure that this birthday is your best birthday ever!" She nodded to herself, smiling. "Anyway, I've got a lot of baking to do to replace what we sold to our best customer today! Come back tomorrow. We've got so much to plan!"

Applejack and Luna said their goodbyes and left the shop in good spirits. As they headed toward the road out of town, Applejack paused to glance back at Sugar Cube Corner. She whistled, "Well now, Luna, look at that. That's at least one more pony that respects your name." The princess turned around, and in the light of the setting sun, they could see that Pinkie Pie had hung a plain black and white sign in one of the windows of the Corner. A smile spread across the alicorn's face as she read the words:

Approved By Princess Luna.

# Third Interlude

## Slapstick

Luna watched as the light of the sun dimmed, the last rosy touches of twilight slowly dwindling. Night had begun to fall as she escorted Applejack back to Sweet Apple Acres, and so the alicorn's horn lit up with a milky glow. As she set the moon on its nightly course, the light from her horn danced, sending out tendrils and flares of brilliant illumination. None of it was necessary for the task, of course, but the princess found it amusing to indulge her Earth pony companion's faith in the 'rules'. Horns always lit up when magic was done? Sure, why not? She noted with satisfaction that the farmer had assumed the dumbfounded stare that always came when Luna brought forth beauty with her spells.

When stars emerged from the deepening darkness of the night sky, Luna let her own light dim. The princess found that she couldn't stop smiling. Even so far from Sugar Cube Corner, the sense of playful joy that had filled that place lingered within her. "Your friend has very powerful magic, Applejack," the alicorn said.

The Earth pony blinked, tilting her head in confusion, "Twilight?"

"My sister's student? I suppose she does," Luna replied, "But I was talking about our friend at the bakery."

"Pinkie Pie? Uh, Luna, you do know that Pinkie's an Earth pony, right? She ain't got no magic," Applejack chuckled, "Leastways, no more than I have, and I ain't noticed any parts of me glowin' or things around levitatin' or nothin'."

The princess shook her head, "All ponies have magic, Applejack. Unicorns have one kind, but only the most obvious. Pegasi have their own power, to touch the weather and bend it to their design, and to allow them to fly. The wings alone could not hold a pony aloft; it is magic that allows that. Only the most powerful of unicorns can hope to replicate, even for a short while, the gifts granted to a pegasus at birth." She paused.

Applejack took the opportunity to interject, "Pinkie Pie can't fly, neither. Well, except when she has that contraption...."

"Contraption? That lets her fly?" Luna doubted it, but many things could change in a thousand years. She didn't pursue the issue, "In any case, Earth pony magic is nothing so flashy. You were given the most subtle form of it, one that you cannot control, one that can neither be seen nor heard. It is unsurprising that most ponies know nothing about it, though they feel it every day. Earth ponies provide something of themselves to those around them, sharing their greatest advantages with other ponies. In such a way, an Earth pony can become, for her colleagues and companions, a fount of cheer and laughter," the princess turned her head to meet Applejack's gaze, "Or of confidence and resolve."

The farmer looked away. She remained silent, and Luna was content to let the rest of the journey pass quietly. In time, they found themselves once again among the apple orchards. As they passed a familiar clearing, the princess paused, contemplating the basket of apples that she had abandoned that morning. Applejack continued on for a moment, then stopped and turned, "Luna? What're you waitin' on?"

"I just got a good idea for what to do with those apples. Come on, I want to show you!" The princess shouted as she took off running. Applejack angled her head to keep the wind from taking her hat and followed, remaining just behind the alicorn. Eventually, Luna slowed to a trot, then stopped when she reached her goal. The basket was right where she remembered. The princess noted with satisfaction that it was still quite full of apples.

Applejack came to a stop beside her, breathing hard. Luna smiled at the Earth Pony, "Watch this." She lowered her head and touched her horn to the apple on top of the pile. A red aura appeared, spreading from the tip down to the apples below. The fruit on top began to glow a brilliant red, and one by one the others lit up, dozens of them, in orange, yellow, green, blue, and deepest violet. Applejack squinted and turned her head, protecting her eyes from the overwhelming light. With a satisfied nod, Luna turned away from her work, lowered her front, and kicked her target high into the air.

The basket flew in a lazy arc, spreading a cloud of glowing apples across the sky. The container dropped gracefully after the apex, falling to the



ground, but the fruit seemed to hang in the air before drifting slowly downward. Each time one struck the ground, it bounced in a seemingly random direction, though their paths never took them far from where the basket had landed. The grass beneath them became a prismatic sea of flowing light, its colors ever-shifting as the orbs' complex pattern played out. Applejack fell to her haunches near the edge of the illuminated area. The mare's shadow flickered and danced as the occasional apple passed near her.

Luna smiled. All was going according to plan; she twisted her magic just a bit. One apple detached itself from the crowd and began to float toward Applejack. The farmer's gaze locked on the slow projectile, tracking it as it descended toward her. The orb's orange glow pushed the shadows away from her, its brilliance nearly blinding. She was so entranced by the spectacle that she didn't even try to avoid the fruit. It bounced off the tip of her snout with an audible zap.

There was no force of impact, but the discharge of magic and electricity must have been quite shocking. The princess grinned at her inward pun; the greatest acts required a lot of setup, but they yielded the finest reward, and Luna found herself very pleased with the results thus far. Applejack had not moved save to allow her jaw to drop. She could do nothing more than blink in shock, her eyes crossed as they remained focused on the point of impact.

It was the most ridiculous facial expression that the alicorn had seen in quite a long time. She snorted in amusement, but waited for the real payoff. She knew better than any that the most important part of comedy was....

Applejack turned to look at her, shock and disbelief playing across her face. Just as the Earth pony closed her mouth, preparing to speak, a wave of magic and static washed across her coat, causing each hair to grow several inches and stand on end. A single, confused word emerged from what appeared to be an orange puff-ball wearing a cowboy hat, "What."

...Timing. Luna's shoulders shook; her lips pressed tightly together as she tried in vain to contain her mirth. Then, like a bursting dam, the alicorn's laughter spilled forth, booming in the quiet of the night.

"Did I jus' get pranked!?" Applejack's question only drove the princess to

new heights of amusement, and she nodded an affirmative, too busy laughing to speak. "What the hay!" Luna sank to the ground, pounding a hoof into the grass repeatedly. "A whole day with Pinkie Pie with not even a chuckle, and now you're laughin'?" The princess flopped over onto her back, still shaking. "Hush already! It ain't that funny!" Luna shook her head and waved a hoof, and a conjured mirror appeared in front of the Earth pony. The still-bouncing apples provided more than enough illumination to see by. "...Okay, maybe it is that funny. But that don't mean you gotta keep laughin'." Luna ignored her appeal. "Can you at least fix it?"

The princess subsided into giggles as she undid her act with a fiery flash. The flames consumed the extra hair but left Applejack unharmed and back to her accustomed grooming. The alicorn finally fell silent, but a pleased grin remained on her face as she awaited further commentary from the other mare.

"If you'da told me two months ago that a princess would be playin' tricks on me, I'd'a called you a madmare," the Earth pony said, grinning as she shook her head slowly.

Luna rolled from side to side, freeing her wings from where they had been folded beneath her. She spread them out along the grass, stretching them, and sighed, "I always loved pranks. Before the banishment, humor was my constant and treasured companion. I was known as a trickster, a mischievous foil to my sister's stony seriousness. I'm sure that the capitol has been frightfully dull in my absence, though Celestia seems to have taken up some of the slack, I'm proud to say. I was concerned for her, even when I resented her for what I thought she had," The alicorn's smile slipped a bit, "But now she laughs."

Silence hung between the two ponies for a time. Eventually, Applejack spoke, "I've never heard you laugh before, Luna."

"It has been quite a long time since I have," The princess frowned as her eyes grew unfocused in recollection, "As Nightmare Moon, I laughed only to mock, and I took no true pleasure in it. When you rid me of that part of myself, the jokes and jests and jabs returned, but the joy did not come."

"Until today?" The Earth pony asked.

"Until very recently." The alicorn replied, gaze locked on the stars above.

Applejack smiled, "So now you can laugh?"

"So it would seem."

The farmer began to walk toward where the princess rested, "I reckon I need to get you back for that prank you just pulled."

The princess looked at her, raising an eyebrow, "And how do you plan to do that?"

Applejack stopped just beside where Luna lay, and she leaned forward to loom over the princess, a wicked grin spread wide across her face, "Bad jokes, of course," the alicorn blinked in confusion as the Earth pony continued, "What do you say when a dog runs away?"

"What?" Luna asked, more out of confusion about Applejack's way of getting her back than as a response to the joke.

"Dog-gone!"

"That was a terrible joke!" the princess managed, her laughter giving lie to her assertion.

The farmer scoffed, "You ain't heard terrible yet. Did you hear about the fire at the circus?"

Luna shook her head, eyes wide in a silent plea for mercy.

"It was in tents!"

The alicorn managed to laugh and groan simultaneously.

Applejack managed to look more and more pleased with herself with each joke, "What did the apple say to the carrot?"

"Was it 'my farmer is a sadist'?"

The Earth pony ignored Luna's jab, "Nothing... apples don't talk!"

The princess covered her eyes with a foreleg and tried to keep her mouth closed. She hoped that the other mare would mistake the shaking of her shoulders for something other than repressed amusement.

The farmer's voice lit up with excitement, "Oh! Here's one that you should know the answer to, Luna: how does a stallion on the moon keep his mane short?"

"Please don't tell me."

"Eclipse it, o'course," the Earth pony said with a satisfied nod.

Luna curled into a ball and rolled over, her sides shaking, "Such awful puns. Why am I laughing!?"

"Because I'm... uh... what was it... oh right, I'm wreakin' horrible vengeance upon you. And now for the final blow!" Applejack paused for effect, "Clop clop!"

The princess looked up at her tormentor in stunned disbelief. That joke form had been begging for a merciful death since long before her imprisonment on the moon.

The Earth pony's brow furrowed and mock impatience filled her voice, "I said 'clop clop'! I know you know the response, I can see it in your eyes. Clop. Clop."

Luna, resigned to her fate, responded, "Who's there?"

Applejack uttered a single, grave syllable, "Ya."

With a sigh and a shake of her head, the princess said, "Ya who?" and winced in anticipation.

"Don't go cheerin' yet, I ain't even finished with the joke!"

Luna went limp on the ground, "I think that one actually killed me. Is this what death feels like?"

Applejack put a hoof on the alicorn's shoulder and puffed out her chest in a triumphant pose, "I've slain the prankster. My vengeance... uh... I got it. Got vengeance. Is that right? Whatever."

The princess chuckled appreciatively, "You have great delivery; why don't you tell good jokes instead of using your powers for evil?"

"'Cause I learn most of my jokes from Pinkie Pie. And they don't got to be good, sugar cube. You just gotta laugh. I like when you laugh; you should do it more."

Luna smiled up at Applejack. "I should."

Sugar cube... she could get used to that.

# Chapter 4

## Generosity

Twilight sighed. Another night, another pile of ash upon her desk. She wondered idly if she would ever have the courage to send one of her letters to the princess. The thought of how Celestia might respond filled the unicorn with fear. The possibility that Celestia might not respond at all? That filled her with absolute terror. Ever-present panic tainted her writing; the words came forth twisted and malformed, anguish in ink spilled out across a page. They carried a truth too weighty to ignore and too devastating to acknowledge. Fire was Twilight Sparkle's only defense against them.

Twelve gritty grey hills. Had it really been less than two weeks? It felt like an eternity.

Her nightly ritual complete, for good or ill, Twilight retreated to the words of others. They were a cold comfort, but one of the few that she allowed herself. Research and studying seemed pointless to her now, but she continued by rote, hoping that the once-pleasing actions would bring her at least an echo of the joy of her past. She'd had no success, but she couldn't bring herself to stop trying. The writing drowned out the words inside of her, words that formed a darker narrative than any she kept in her library.

This time, she selected her most treasured tome: The Journal of Heavens Sparkle. It was a family heirloom, indescribably ancient, its pages preserved by magic and the care of generations of loving hooves. Despite the title's claim, it was clearly a work of poetry.

A journal was meant to deal with the mundane, but Heavens' writing touched only upon the extraordinary. It spoke of fortunes gained and lost, star-crossed lovers fighting futile battles against capricious fate, bloody feuds begun over trifles, and the reconciliation of mortal enemies. Passages told of children that were born, grew into their own, and died in their parents' hooves, of the pain of burying one's mate, of lost opportunities and failed ventures, of confusion and despair. But for all the tome's tragedy, there was also joy. Twilight could practically feel wind

beneath phantom wings as Heavens described the exhilaration and freedom of soaring amongst the clouds, and she nodded in recognition as she read a page describing the heady rush of bending powerful magic to one's will. There were treasured friends and moments of triumph, and all throughout, even in the darkest sections, there was an undeniable, infectious zest for life.

Her ancestor must have had quite an imagination; if the journal were to be believed, he'd experienced more than any dozen unicorns of Canterlot. Twilight Sparkle lost herself in another life, and, for a time, forgot her pain.

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Rarity opened the door of her boutique and was greeted by a familiar sight: Pinkie Pie waiting outside, positively beaming with enthusiasm. The pink mare clutched a small, black paper in her mouth; it was undoubtedly a party invitation. Eyes pleading, the Earth pony leaned forward, humming insistently. The unicorn smiled and greeted her friend with a, "Good morning, Pinkie Pie. How do you do?" as she levitated the item out of Pinkie's toothy grasp.

She was rewarded, by some loose definition of the term, with an explosion of speech, "Hi Rarity! You're invited to a party! A super-duper fun birthday party with balloon animals and cake and candles and balloon animals. It's for Luna! She's turning...", Pinkie Pie paused, bringing a hoof up to her chin as her face contorted with thought, "She's turning a lot. She's really old. But don't tell her I said that, okay?"

"Oh. Well. Alright, then," Rarity stared at the pink pony, who gazed back expectantly. It was far too early for this; what a week to give up coffee!

"Well?" The pink menace asked, drawing the word out.

"Well what, Pinkie!?" Rarity snapped.

If the other pony noticed the shortness of the designer's demeanour, she did not show it. If anything, her grin grew wider, "Aren't you going to look at the invitation?"

Rarity sighed. "Of course, dear. Sorry for that... unpleasantness." Too early



for this by half. She looked down at the card that had been presented to her. It was black. A perfect, featureless black. She looked up at Pinkie Pie.

"Other side."

The unicorn flipped the card. The back was black. A perfect, featureless black. She shot a long-suffering glare at her tormentor, who merely waved a hoof at her with a giggle.

"No, silly, the other other side."

"Pinkie, there are on-"

"Do it!" the pink mare interrupted.

Rarity reluctantly indulged her friend, wondering where the prank was going. On what she could have sworn was the first side, there was a single full moon in the center of the card. She looked up, brows furrowed.

Pinkie Pie just nodded toward the card, "Wait for it...."

A vertical line cut the moon in two, and the halves began to drift away from each other. The one on the right began to wax, growing as it neared the edge of the card, while the other waned, traveling to the left. In the space between, stars appeared, slowly at first, then more quickly. When the tiny sliver of a crescent disappeared and the full moon passed beyond the far reaches of the invitation, the stars had formed words. Rarity read aloud, "You are cordially invited to the birthday party of Luna, to be held in six days' time at Sweet Apple Acres. Please arrive at dusk. Do not bring gifts; your presence is the greatest gift that I could ever hope to receive."

With a quiet pop, the invitation turned into an apple. Rarity blinked. Far, far too early for this. She managed to smile at Pinkie Pie, "Thank you for giving me this, darling. I assume that you have more to deliver, so I'll leave you to it." She began to close the door, hoping that she'd be safe if she didn't make any sudden movements.

"Hey!" the Earth pony shouted, thrusting a hoof into the path of the door. Rarity was overcome by a sense of dread.

Pinkie Pie smiled sheepishly and pointed at the floating fruit that had taken the place of the invitation, "Um... are you gonna eat that?"

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For the second time that day, Rarity opened her door. It was a much more civilized hour, a morning of needlework had driven away the last remnants of sleep, and the mare finally felt herself ready to face the day. A wide-brimmed sun hat shaded the unicorn's eyes, protecting her from the afternoon glare. Locking up the shop behind her, she set out toward her favorite weekly treat at a brisk yet dignified trot. It certainly wouldn't do to keep Fluttershy waiting.

Rarity slowed to a leisurely walk as she neared her destination. The sweeping pink roof set her favorite building apart from the shops and homes of Ponyville. She could practically feel herself relaxing already, just from proximity to the blessed place. She pushed open the door and stepped inside, ready to greet her friend and gush about how much she had needed their weekly spa treatment.

The words died on her lips. Where she had expected to see a yellow pegasus, there sat instead another pony, one only slightly less familiar. Rarity's eyes quickly took in the wings and horn, the crown and night-blue coat. Though she could not manage to form a coherent thought through her shock, well-practiced etiquette saved the unicorn from embarrassing herself. She dropped into a precise bow, removing her hat with levitation, and managed to say something resembling correct words, "I am at your service, Your Grace."

"Thank you for the offer; it is generous, just as I would expect from you, but I believe I have things well in hoof. Your service simply won't be necessary," Luna said. The prostrate mare tried to determine what the appropriate response would be to such a dismissal. Was the princess being rude? Was it deliberate or not? Rarity should have known that she'd run into the alicorn at some point; she wished that she'd tried to get more information from Fluttershy. Where was that pegasus, anyway?

Rarity's train of thought was thoroughly derailed by an insistent cough from the princess. She glanced up to see the other mare looking down at her with a raised eyebrow and a wry grin. Luna spoke, "You can stop bowing

now."

The unicorn blinked and was still for a second before her eyes widened and she scrambled to her hooves. She laughed nervously, "Of course, princess Luna, I'm sorry. I just... wasn't expecting to see you. Here. Now. Not that I mind!"

"Ah, yes," Luna nodded, "I suppose this would be a surprise. I was visiting our kind friend this morning and happened to mention wanting to speak with you. She offered to let me take her place at your weekly spa session. I didn't want to intrude, but she was insistent," the alicorn paused for a moment, smiling, "Well, as insistent as she ever seems to get. I regret not informing you ahead of time, but I wanted any discussion to take place in a relaxed atmosphere. In any case, I'm quite looking forward to it; this sort of thing was just catching on a thousand years ago, and I never got around to trying it out. I hope you don't mind."

As soon as the information sunk in, Rarity beamed. A day at the spa with a princess? Fluttershy knew her too well; she'd be impressing Canterlot nobles for months with this story; nopony outside of Ponyville knew about the whole Nightmare Moon fiasco, after all. Luna was just another princess to them; a new one, and not as prestigious as Celestia, of course, but still a princess. "Why, I don't mind at all, princess Luna. It would be an honor to accompany you."

"Please, I prefer not to use my title. Just 'Luna' will suffice. So... um... how does it all work? What do I have to do?" The alicorn asked, looking around. She didn't seem quite aware of the fact that they were in the waiting room, rather than the spa proper.

Rarity hung her still-levitating hat on a convenient rack. "Don't you worry, pr- Luna," she said, "Aloe and Lotus will take care of everything. Just relax, go where they point, and let them work. Lotus!" the unicorn called to the blue Earth pony stationed at front desk, "The usual for me, and the full treatment for Princess Luna."

"It would be our pleasure," the spa pony replied as she ushered them through the inner door.

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Aloe poured water on the rocks of the sauna. The customers spoke as though she weren't there, just like they always did. So much the better.

"So, Luna, what do you do to keep your mane in such amazing shape? Is there some spell?" Rarity asked, leaning toward the princess. The spa pony hoped not; such a thing could be bad for business.

"I don't really do anything to it," Luna said.

"Just basic washing and brushing?" The unicorn asked. Aloe knew her customer well enough to hear the hidden disdain behind the words. She created a bit more steam and took the opportunity to get a closer look at the alicorn's mane. The pink mare didn't know what Rarity's problem was; whatever the regimen, it was clearly working for the princess.

Luna let out a weak chuckle, "Not exactly. Why do you ask, in any case?"

"How could I not be curious, darling?!" Rarity gushed, "Your mane, your tail, your coat, your hooves, everything! They're all perfect. Not 'the stylist just finished' perfect, either. Truly flawless. It's like..." Rarity tapped a hoof against her chin, lost in thought for a few seconds, then brightened, "It's like you're some figure of ideal beauty, and everypony else is just a flawed copy." The unicorn frowned, seeming to consider what she'd just said.

The alicorn's ears folded back, and she looked away as she mumbled, "That's an... interesting... comparison."

The spa pony didn't allow her customers to dwell on that subject for long. She coughed lightly and gestured for the customers to follow her. It was time for facial treatments. Rarity took the opportunity to inform the princess of her own grooming practices. Aloe was quite familiar with the dissertation; it was the unicorn's favorite topic of conversation, at least when she met someone new at the spa. By the time they met Lotus in the appropriate room, the designer was just warming up to her customary script.

Luna was silent as she followed Rarity's lead and climbed on to one of the room's seats. Aloe moved quickly to the alicorn's side and began to prepare the mud mask. The customers, lost in their own little customer world, didn't notice the jealous scowl that Lotus shot the other spa pony, or

the pink mare's wink in response. The princess was Aloe's customer; she'd won the coin toss fair and square. It wasn't her fault that her sister wasn't very lucky. And if she happened to get offered a position in the palace, well...

Aloe shook her head. She'd have to actually impress her customer first. As her sister applied Rarity's mask, she dipped her own brush in the bucket of green muck and got to work on Luna's face. A few expert movements, and the substance was fully applied. The Earth pony smiled with satisfaction at her work.

The mud mask slid off the princess, impacting the floor with a loud 'splat'.

Rarity's droning voice continued unabated.

Aloe gaped at the perfectly clean face of the princess, who was busy gaping at the mess on the floor. Lotus snickered. Luna looked at the green-coated face of Rarity, who was still quite oblivious, then at the pile of mud in front of her. Her eyes widened. "Oh. I see. Well," she whispered to the mare attending her with a sheepish smile, "care to try again? It'll stick this time."

It did, much to the Aloe's relief. She applied the cucumbers without incident. The spa pony let out a breath that she hadn't realized she was holding.

Lotus stuck her tongue out at her sister, who responded with a very rude hoof gesture. Luna giggled. The spa ponies blinked at the princess, whose eyes were still covered by the vegetable slices. Rarity stopped in the middle of itemizing the benefits of different brands of conditioner to ask, "Is something amusing, Luna?"

"It's nothing. Please, you were saying...?" the princess replied.

The unicorn continued, and the earth ponies shrugged at each other. Aloe opened a drawer and selected from among a line of metal files. Her alicorn customer's horn had an intriguing texture, but smooth horns were very much in fashion. She didn't know how soft the dark spike of the princess was, so she started with a fine grain. With a whispered, "Hold still please, your majesty," she steadied the tool against her teeth and began to lightly

file at the regal horn. After a few moments, she stepped back to examine the progress.

Aloe blinked. There was no progress; the horn looked no different from before. She frowned and switched to a rougher file, taking longer, more deliberate strokes. It didn't help. The surface appeared untouched. She attacked again with renewed vigor, shaking her head to scrape more quickly. After a minute's work, she had made no mark. The spa pony frowned.

Sticking her head deep within her file drawer, the pink mare retrieved her most impressive implement of horn-removal. The huge tool had come with the set, but she didn't think it was intended for ponies. Perhaps rocks. She'd certainly never used it before; the wicked spikes that studded the business end of the file gleamed, good as new. Aloe wondered if the implement was covered by weapons laws.

Lotus had long since finished the touch-up of Rarity's horn. Her jaw dropped when she saw what her sister was doing. Aloe may have let her composure slip a bit, but she knew horns better than just about any unicorn, and the Earth pony wasn't about to let this one get the better of her. She drew her new implement across the alicorn's spike in a stroke that would have ground half the length off of most unicorns.

Aloe's effort left not even a single scratch. The texture was unchanged. The force hadn't even tilted the dark mare's head.

Luna whispered, "What are you trying to do, anyway?"

Aloe struggled to keep her voice composed, "Just filing your horn smooth, princess. That's the preferred style, currently."

"Oh," the princess replied with a wry smile, "Well, good job then. Thank you."

The spa pony frowned, and glanced at the alicorn's forehead. Sometime in the few seconds she had spent looking away, the horn had become perfectly smooth. Aloe felt her eyelid twitch, just a bit.

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Rarity paused mid-word. Had she just spent the last half hour telling a princess about how she maintained her appearance? The unicorn was neck-deep in a mud bath, wrapped from head to hoof in seaweed, in the same room as one of the goddesses of ponykind, and could think of nothing better to do than ramble about pedicures. It was ridiculous. She'd allowed her nerves to get the best of her.

After a few seconds of silence, Luna spoke, "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, certainly not. Just a moment, please," the unicorn replied. She took a deep breath and collected her thoughts; it wasn't too late to salvage this spa trip, and keep the princess from remembering her as a beauty-obsessed dimwit. She certainly would prefer to be known as a beauty-obsessed genius, but at this point she would settle for 'halfway competent'. No more lecturing Luna on hoof care. Time for business. Or at least a segue into it. "So, princess Luna, are you enjoying the spa?"

"Very much so. But please, call me Luna. Just Luna."

Rarity's brows furrowed behind her cucumber slices, "I'm sorry. I don't intend to say your title. It's an instinct. It's just proper courtesy. And if I'm anything, it's courteous," she paused, "If you don't mind my asking, why do you take exception to it? The title is yours by right, if I understand correctly."

The unicorn heard a soft sigh from the other mud bath. "I suppose so. Technically. But I don't see the need for formality. Royal titles are symbols of authority. I'm keenly aware of my power over ponies; I don't need to be reminded."

Rarity stirred the mud with a hoof. "Have you ever considered... that it might not be for your benefit that ponies bow to you and call you princess?"

Something shifted in the other bath. "What do you mean?" the alicorn asked.

The unicorn hesitated. "Did you have... parents?" it was a personal question, but necessary. She just hoped that she wasn't overstepping her bounds.



"No. Nothing like that."

Rarity's nerves began to return. She knew many religious ponies who would give much to be in her position right now, learning at least a small part of the history of one of their goddesses. Straight from the horse's mouth, as it were. She resolved not to squander the opportunity. "What about princess Celestia? Did she guide you, raise you when you were young?"

The princess was silent for a time. Eventually, the reply came, "We were wary of each other, in the beginning. The first time we saw each other, we both turned tail and fled. Something that moved against the laws of flow? Something I could not examine, could not shape, could not bend to my will with magic? It was terrifying. I'm sure she felt the same way. I avoided her; it wasn't difficult. We each preferred our own half of Equestria anyway," The alicorn sighed, "And so I spent my first few hundred million years alone, building monuments in ice and forcing the light of the ever-present stars to dance for my amusement. As for my sister...", mirth entered Luna's voice, "Perhaps she simply spent the millennia swimming in the lava flows of her sun-baked side of the world. I've never asked. So no, she did not raise me. We each grew up on our own, and became very different ponies."

Rarity did her best to commit Luna's words to memory precisely as she heard them. To her knowledge, no record of history mentioned any events prior to Nightmare Moon's banishment. Stubborn seclusion or not, Twilight Sparkle would want to know about the account. Still, that wasn't the reason for her question, "I see, your majesty. Then it's no wonder that you don't understand. I suppose it simply requires a mortal perspective. You never had anypony to look up to, to show you the way through a world beyond your understanding, to protect you when you were in danger, and reassure you when you were afraid. The very young have parents and, to their perception, mother and father are giants, able to complete the inconceivable tasks of cooking food and reading books, strong enough to drive away the monsters in the closet. Power in the hooves of those trusted ponies makes a foal feel safe. It's a grim revelation, however necessary, when a filly realizes that her parents are not all-powerful. That they can fail. That they grow tired, that they are not all-knowing, that they are sometimes horribly, horribly wrong."

The unicorn paused, and when she continued, her voice trembled, "It is a tragedy of the highest order if a filly finds that her parents, those charged with her care, are working against her. The cri du cœur is beyond description. But even when it's interrupted, by failure or betrayal, the desire for somepony to look up to does not go away; it merely settles on a new object: A celebrity, a character in a book, a teacher...", her voice dropped to a whisper, "...an older sister."

The room was silent. Luna waited, and soon enough, Rarity continued, "This world needs heroes, princess. Doers of great deeds and thinkers of great thoughts. Ponies worth looking up to. Ponies held to a higher standard. Ponies that can be relied upon, when the world turns to them for guidance. Who do adults look to when there is uncertainty, crisis, conflict? When there are problems too large for one pony to understand, let alone solve? We look to the leaders. Noblesse oblige; the power of those in positions of authority comes with a responsibility to work for the benefit of all below. There is one who has the more authority than any other. Above all, we look to our ruler. Princess Celestia has done as much good with her mere presence as she has with her policies. I believe that she understands the importance of appearance. Everypony in Equestria knows in their heart that there is a pony in Canterlot, wise and capable beyond mortal bounds, who will make the decisions that need to be made to keep everypony safe and prosperous. They just know that their princess will not fail them,

"Whether or not it's true," Rarity added.

The unicorn took a deep breath, and released it slowly. "Thanks to princess Celestia, the people of our nation still view the world like foals. We have not experienced the wars of succession of the gryphon monarchy, the tyranny of the zebra khans, the petty greed of the dragon lords. We still believe that our leader could never fail us. It's an innocence worth preserving, even among those of us who know better. And so appearances absolutely must be maintained. Is it necessary to have titles and guards and a throne in a palace in Canterlot? The princess could rule with as much justice and wisdom from the floor of a wooden cabin as she does from her seat in the capital, so why have it? One reason.

"Prestige. Prestige is simply essential. The fact that our leader is kind and powerful and reliable means little if nopony believes it so. Everypony does what is expected, pays the proper respect and follows the essential

protocol, because appearance is very nearly as important as reality. It is not princess Celestia's power or wisdom or purity that allows many to believe in her, it is the fact that everypony knows that she is powerful and wise and pure. Bowing and titles are a small part of that, but an important part nonetheless. I call you princess not to serve your ego, but to remind myself that there is a princess. That there is somepony I can look up to. Somepony greater than myself. Ceremony instills confidence, and repetition reinforces faith.

"And so we arrive at your reason for coming. Fluttershy didn't tell me much, but she did say that you came to her asking for trust and forgiveness; I assume you want the same from me. Well, you have it. It is a gift, freely given in the knowledge that I've seen you do nothing to earn it. Whether you've earned it or not just does not matter. If you deserve it, then there's no reason to withhold it, and wait for proof. If you don't..." She hesitated for a moment, gathering her composure. "My parents..." Rarity paused, "I have a sister..." Again, the unicorn stopped. After a few seconds she sighed and continued, "Just know that I understand what it's like to be looked up to, to be depended on, by a pony with nowhere else to turn. A pony who has been betrayed by authority. Equestria has nowhere else to turn. Even ignoring all the damage that you could do with your magic, princess Celestia has acknowledged you. If you turned on ponykind again, our faith in our ruler would be shattered. It would be an end to innocence, and we would simply not be the same, after. Those sorts of wounds take centuries to heal.

"So if you don't deserve my trust, my forgiveness... it just doesn't matter. The possibility that you might work against me is simply too terrible to contemplate. I must have faith, or I will have no hope. C'est tout. Does that answer satisfy you, Luna?"

The alicorn responded in a voice far deeper and more resonant than the one she had used just minutes before, "It does, but I would appreciate it if you were to refer to me by title, from now on."

Rarity smiled. "As you wish, Your Grace."

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A pony watched as lights danced on the surface of water. Their dim glow

did nothing to illuminate the inky blackness beyond the pool's edge; scrying was preformed in the dark. He did not remember whether the darkness was necessary for the spell or merely a choice, but he didn't feel the need to change his routine. Just as he always had, he stirred the liquid with a hoof, and an image began to form.

The pony monitored Ponyville closely due to its position between his realm and the capitol. If Celestia were to come for him, he needed forewarning, but he dared not scry Canterlot directly. Any misstep might remind that goddess of his presence, and cause her to act. That outcome was to be avoided at all costs. He contented himself with those happenings of note that occurred a safe

distance from the sun palace.

On the morning of the Summer Sun Celebration, he'd witnessed quite an impressive event. Luna had returned, the only being that he hated more than her sister. Six representatives of the incomplete breeds of ponies had called on a powerful magic. It was a magic of which he could find no mention, even in the most ancient of his memoirs. Since then, the pony had thrown caution to the wind, scrying every waking hour to learn what he could of these new players on the stage.

Indistinct shapes whirled in the water before resolving themselves into an image: a purple unicorn mare, writing a letter. The pony at the pool had taken a special interest in the Element of Magic. Unicorns, pegasi, and Earth ponies seemed almost monolithic in their simpering devotion to Celestia. The other five Elements fit that mold perfectly. The foals all trusted their princess, and so she ruled over them. The pony had been down that road before, and found only sorrow there. Sorrow and lessons to be recorded.

But here was none other than a student of one of those accursed goddesses, and she seemed to be teaching herself the lessons, teaching herself to reject the sisters' treachery! The pony smiled. There was promise in that. Perhaps she was worth venturing out for, out beyond his little garden.

Yes, it was finally time to pay a visit to his neighbors in Ponyville. Time to emerge from hiding after all these years. It was time that the other ponies

remembered the name of....

Hmm, what was it again? It began with an 'H', right? He tapped a hoof in frustration. It was right on the tip of his tongue. Finally, the pony gave up, and simply lifted a leg and examined the scars, looking for one that was legible.

"Ah, of course. How could I have forgotten? It's been far too long since I've reminded myself."

The pony's horn glowed crimson as he conjured a knife and levitated it slowly toward himself. A glowing white ball appeared before him, its glare casting long shadows on the cave floor; he certainly needed light for this. The pony stretched out a wing and found a spot where the scars were light, nearly faded away after long healing.

The knife worked slowly, and the pain was intense. The alicorn wanted it that way; too quick, too painless, and he would just forget again in a couple of years. Blood dripped, creating a puddle onto which fur and feathers fell, all a uniform scarlet in the harsh light. After a few minutes, he was done, and he banished the knife with a wave of his horn. He watched the blood stream from the wound; it reminded him of who he was, and who his enemies were. 'The goddesses do not bleed.' It was the first and last sentence of every book that he'd written.

He glanced at the pool. The image of the purple pony remained; she had finished her letter, and was burning it, just as she had the past few nights. Apparently, scrying did work in the light. He'd remember that, for a few years at least. Burning the letter... burning... what did that remind him of? Oh, of course.

He conjured flame, and cauterized the wound that he'd made. It was always easiest to read when fresh. On his wing, a new scar was forming, one nearly identical to the hundreds that covered nearly every inch of his body. Each time he had begun to forget their message, he made a new wound. And so, once again, he'd carved his name. A grave name. A name worth remembering by any means necessary. A name with which to defy divinity. He read aloud:

"Ever Free."

# Fourth Interlude

## Repose

"Are you sure you don't want help with that?" Luna asked, eyeing the bulging saddlebags slung over Applejack's back, "It wouldn't be any trouble."

The Earth pony's reply was muffled, but intelligible; she was busy adjusting the thick leather straps of her burden, "Sure I'm sure! What'd'ya think my kinfolk'd think of me, usin' a princess like a pack mule?"

"I could levitate it." The alicorn offered.

Applejack snorted, "Oh no, missy. You agreed to do this the Earth pony way, and that means no flyin', no teleportin', and definitely no levitatin'. Now we got a schedule to stick to; let's get crackin'. Gotta be off the farm before Pinkie starts settin' up. She's a right hellion if you get in the way of her most important party rule: no birthday fillies allowed before everythin's ready." And with that, she strode off down the path away from Sweet Apple Acres and Ponyville. Morning sun lit a beautiful scene: the narrow road meandered through a large meadow before disappearing behind a small, green hill. Beyond the rise, in the distance, a dark line of rocky mountains loomed. The alicorn smiled in anticipation of a pleasant hike.

The farmer's deliberate steps covered ground with surprising speed; after a few seconds, Luna followed, trotting to catch up before slowing to match her companion's pace. "Do we even need all that stuff? We're only going to be up there one night. A tent makes some sense, though it's not going to rain. And some of the food. But a week's worth? There are streams, I checked; we don't need all that water. And a whistle? Really? "

Applejack did not meet the other mare's questioning gaze; she kept her eyes on the path ahead, walking in silence for a few moments. Her eventual reply was terse, "It's for emergencies."

The princess scoffed, "What could possibly happen that I'd be unable to deal with? I could grow you food in an instant, pull water from the air,

summon a cottage if it gets chilly. Dragon attacks? Not likely; they're more afraid of me than I am of them, and for good reason. Land's sakes, Applejack! I can make the mountain grow legs and walk us back to Ponyville if we need it."

"Ha! Land's sakes, y'say?" the orange mare barked, "I'll have you talkin' like a farm filly yet." Her expression hardened as she turned to look at her companion, "But that ain't how Earth ponies deal with emergencies."

"You're just being stubborn."

"No I ain't! I'm bein'...", Applejack paused, "What's a word that means 'stubborn' but doesn't make it sound like I'm bein' stubborn?"

"Steadfast?" Luna suggested.

"I'm bein' steadfast," The farmer said with a nod.

The alicorn sighed. "Fine. But if you get hurt, I'm not going to fiddle around with that first aid kit. You're going find yourself in the hospital before you can say 'Earth ponies don't teleport'."

Applejack smiled and turned her head to meet Luna's gaze. "You gonna be steadfast about that, sugar cube?"

"Of course," the response came with a grin.

"Then I guess I'll just have to appreciate it, won't I?" The Earth pony's eyes returned to the travelers' path. After a moment, her brow furrowed, "But why the hospital? Fluttershy said you put a bird's busted wing back together good as new. Couldn't you just fix me up?"

Luna stopped. Applejack continued for a few moments, then looked over her shoulder. "You comin', sugar cube?"

The princess closed her eyes for a moment. She took a deep breath, then released it in a rush. She galloped forward to close the gap that had grown between the travelers. When the alicorn reached her companion, she looked away, unable to meet the other pony's eyes. She spoke, "My sister and I agreed long ago not to heal any pony, to any degree, for any reason."



No exceptions. I'm sorry, Applejack."

"Huh," The Earth pony replied, "That don't sound like the omni-bena-whatever princesses that I know."

"We have our reasons," Luna said.

"Well?" Applejack prompted, impatient.

"Well what?" the other mare replied.

"What are the reasons?"

The question hung in the air. Eventually, Luna whispered, "It's complicated."

The Earth pony tilted her head, "Well, we're gonna be walkin' for the next... hmm... somethin' like twelve hours. I reckon you have time to do some explainin'."

"I'm not going to tell you, Applejack."

"Don't trust me?" The farmer asked with a smile; Luna couldn't tell whether the jestful tone was genuine, or a cover for concern.

"I do trust you, Applejack," the princess insisted, "But I want you to keep trusting me. There are some things that you're better off not knowing, when it comes to my past."

They traveled on in silence, the Earth pony seemingly lost in thought, and the alicorn dreading an inevitable question. After a few minutes, it came as Applejack whispered almost to herself, "I already know about Nightmare Moon; what could be worse than that?"

"I never killed anypony as Nightmare Moon," Luna replied, doing her best to sound dispassionate, "I couldn't bring myself to do so, even then. I put you Elements in danger, but only danger that I knew would not end your lives. I probably would have even have saved you, if there was any real risk. I did what I safely could to delay you, to deter you, to drive you off. But I never wanted death."

Applejack's opened her mouth to speak, but no words came.

After a second, the princess continued, "You've seen what I can do. Did you think that the power to stop my sister from raising the sun, the power to banish her from Equestria and prevent her return as long as I willed it so, was insufficient to kill six young ponies before they ever laid eyes on that castle?"

"I... reckon not." The Earth pony frowned. After a few seconds she spoke again, "So it was worse than that? Does that mean you..." she gulped, and her voice dropped to a whisper, "Killed somepony?"

"There was a tragedy. I tried to fix it with an atrocity." Luna said.

"Did it work?"

"That's the wrong question, Applejack," the princess replied, eyes distant, "It's more important to ask: 'Was it worth it?'"

"And?" The Earth pony asked.

The alicorn did not speak. The farmer waited. The path continued, over verdant hills, across crystal clear streams, winding between stands of trees where oak mixed with heath. Bird calls filled the air. The grass lining the path often rustled as creatures unaccustomed to ponykind fled from the travelers, or watched them, curious. It was a beautiful day, and all the living things in Equestria thrived.

In time, the dark mare whispered her reply, "Was it worth it? I wish I knew."

Applejack's next words were far softer than the princess was used to hearing from the farmer, "Whatever you did, Luna, I forgive you."

The alicorn smiled at the Earth pony, looking her in the eyes; Luna saw only trust within the orbs. "You are too quick to forgive, Applejack. It is a most endearing flaw."

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Conversation turned to more trivial things after that: apples and stars and distant cousins. The two ponies laughed loudly and often, their mirth only growing whenever they startled an animal out of its hiding place. Their way grew more strenuous as they climbed the foothills; even with switchbacks, the way was steep. Luna ended up doing most of the talking as Applejack's breath grew more labored. The Earth pony was unaccustomed to the altitude, but her endurance did not fail her. The farmer needed no breaks before they stopped for lunch in the early afternoon.

The princess guided them to a quiet glen dominated by enormous trees, red barked evergreens that seemed to touch the sky. Applejack dropped her pack and looked upward, struck dumb by the sight. The verdant crowns of the living towers, high above, swayed gently in the breeze. When her gaze dropped once again to ground level, she saw Luna leaned up against the bark of the largest of the lot, a true behemoth. The barn at Sweet Apple Acres could fit comfortably in the trunk.

The farmer called out to the alicorn, "Luna, did you know about these when you planned the trip?"

"Of course I did! This is was one of my favorite places to come for solitude, before my banishment. These hills were the nearest forest to my old castle." Luna nodded toward the trunk supporting her, "I planted this one myself, to even out the shade, though all the trees that were around before seem to have died and been replaced. At least this old friend remains," She turned to grin at Applejack, "It's come a long way in three thousand years. As have I."

The Earth pony rolled her eyes, "To even out the shade, huh? Just a little gardening?"

"Eeyup," the princess replied.

Applejack recoiled, "Oh, not you too. Come on now, Luna, I get enough of that from my big brother, you ought to know better."

The alicorn just chuckled through a satisfied smile.

"Anyway, this was the closest forest? Isn't your castle in the Everfree?" Applejack asked as she began walking toward the princess.

Luna shrugged, "It wasn't anywhere nearby when I was banished. It was small, and distant, and it was home to somepony that my sister and I did not want to have to deal with. It did not grow for thousands of years; I can only hope that its expansion came because the master of that place is gone, one way or another." She sighed, eyes downcast, but brightened when Applejack reached her, "But that depressing subject is of no importance. Come, I have something to show you!" And with that, she rushed off, trotting around the gently curving trunk of the ancient tree.

Applejack struggled to follow, still worn out from the morning's trek, but she burst with new energy as soon as she saw her companion's destination. It was a mountain stream, deep and wide and crystal clear, and it looked so blessedly refreshing. Luna leapt in with a great splash.

The Earth pony hit the water seconds later, and soon found herself fully submerged. The frigid liquid gave her quite a shock, but as the gentle current pressed at her side, the chill across her overworked legs felt incredible. After a few moments, she surfaced with an excited exclamation of, "Yeeshaw!"

The woods were silent. Applejack didn't see Luna in the water. She glanced at the shores, but there was very little undergrowth in the shadows of the massive trunks. Certainly not enough to hide the princess. She blinked, confused, and tried to spot any sign of her companion. For a few seconds there was nothing, but soon the orange mare spotted movement in the corner of her eye. A little triangle of ripples spread from the night-blue tip of a distinctive unicorn horn, poking just above the waterline.

Applejack smiled to herself. She wondered what the alicorn was doing, but not enough to interrupt and find out. The movement got closer, approaching slowly from her side; impressively, the advance was completely silent. The Earth pony just waited.

When Luna got within a few feet of the farmer, she burst forth from the stream, wings spread wide and forelegs raised, with a prodigious splash and a loud but unconvincing, "Rar!" Applejack's eyes widened, more surprised by how far out of the water the princess got than by the act itself. The dark mare seemed to hang above her for a full second before crashing down to grab the Earth pony and drag her beneath the ensuing waves.

The ponies surfaced laughing. Applejack laughed all the harder when she saw that her hat had ended up hanging on Luna's horn, and had fallen forward to cover the princess's eyes.

The alicorn, for her part, turned her head to face an area of the stream far from the Earth pony, and pointed menacingly with a hoof at nothing in particular, "Ha ha! Now you have felt the wrath of Nightmare Stream! I am queen of this place and all that is chilly and flowing! It is customary to bow, but exceptions can be made for those without gills. I demand service of you, newcomer, if you wish to remain in my realm."

"What do I -" Applejack suppressed another bout of laughter, "got to do?"

Luna flapped her wings, rising to hover above the water. "First, you must wait here while I get apples out of the saddlebags. Then, you will wash the apples in the stream. And finally," the alicorn burst into an over-exaggerated melodramatic cackle before continuing, "We will eat the apples. Nefariously!"

"Whatever that means," The Earth pony replied. The princess flew off, managing to avoid running into the trees despite the continued obstruction of her vision. Applejack called out after her, "Make sure you leave my pap-my hat by the saddlebags! I don't wanna lose it!"

Nightmare Stream soon returned with apples, and the traveling companions enjoyed their lunch in the shallows. In time, Applejack left the water, rested and ready to continue the journey.

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They ended their journey on top of the world. The air was thin at that altitude, and cold, but there was a sharp freshness to it; it carried none of the scent of farms and bakeries of Ponyville, none of the ozone tinge that lingered in the magicians' playground of Canterlot. It reminded Luna of years long past, before her sister had brought other intelligences into being, when it was just the two of them, playing with a new toy that they now called 'life'.

There was precious little of that around: just the occasional stunted

evergreen, twisted by storms and harsh climate, and a few sparse tufts of grass. The plants clung tenaciously to cracks in the bare granite. It was stark. It was remote. It was desolate.

It was beautiful; a stark beauty, but Luna appreciated it all the same. A depression in the rock held a small lake, and the ever-present wind kicked up ripples in the water, ripples that caught the fiery light of the setting sun and shone like burnished gold. It danced, and the alicorn was compelled to watch.

Applejack stood beside her, speechless.

In time, the show ended. The sun could no longer reach the heights, and Luna turned, walking to a smooth stretch that overlooked a cliff. She lowered herself, folding her legs beneath her body, and her companion followed, lying just at her side. Together, they watched as the line of sunlight swept down the mountain and over the foothills, racing away to escape the coming night.

Luna raised the moon. Her horn did not glow, but the Earth pony did not comment. The princess spoke, for the first time in an hour, "Now, Applejack, you will see my night in all its glory." Hearing no response, the alicorn looked to her companion, then smiled to herself, whispering, "Another time, then." There would be other nights, for that.

Applejack's head had fallen forward to rest on her foreleg, and her sides grew and shrank in the slow, steady rhythm of deep sleep. Her hat had fallen off, and laid on the ground in front of her, shifting slightly in the evening breeze. It had been a long day, and the princess knew that the farmer had earned her rest.

Luna levitated the farmer's hat, placing it on her own head, its brim resting lightly on her horn; it was precious to Applejack, she couldn't risk it blowing off the cliff. A bit of magic, and the wind parted around the ponies, leaving them in a pocket of warm, still air. It would do for a tent, though the princess suspected that the other mare would object to the arrangement in the morning. It was not, after all, the Earth pony way of camping out.

She'd risk it.

The princess looked once again to her companion. The farmer looked so peaceful, content. Luna shifted closer, until their bodies touched; she could feel the slow rhythm of Applejack's breath.

It was then that the alicorn realized that the wind had come back. The grass was still, Applejack's hair was still, even her own coat was motionless, untouched by the breeze, but the soft tug of moving air remained on Luna's mane and tail. She looked over her shoulder, and softly gasped.

Her tail had changed. A stripe of its normal color was flanked by other stripes, blues of ice and midnight; the colors did not mix, even as the sourceless wind caused the hair to slowly sway in a wavy dance. She knew that her mane was now the same. The last time her physical form changed was when she'd become Nightmare Moon, but she could not bring herself to worry. She did not feel the desperate longing that brought that insanity upon her, only peace and joy. It didn't feel dangerous, just somehow right. The alicorn curled around Applejack, resting her head on the other mare's neck. She laid a wing protectively over the Earth pony's sleeping form.

Luna, for the first time in all her years of life, went to sleep.

She dreamed of apples.



# Chapter 5:

## Loyalty

Rainbow Dash knocked on the library door. She was disappointed, but not surprised, when Spike opened it.

The dragonling sighed, shaking his head, "Sorry Dash, same as yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. And-,"

"I get it," the pegasus interjected, "She's still up there. Did she at least say anything?"

The response came in a dejected monotone, "Nope. Nothing. It's like..." Spike paused, turning to look at the stairs to Twilight's room, then stepped outside. He pulled the door closed behind him. "Look Dash, I'm scared. I think something might have happened with the princess. The first night she locked herself up there, I tried to write to the princess about it, but the reply was something like," Spike adopted a faux-regal tone, "Twilight Sparkle deserves to decide her own fate. I've meddled enough.' And that's all! I sent a few other letters, but I haven't heard from Celestia since."

"Do you think Nightmare Moon got princess Celestia?" The pony asked, sounding almost hopeful. The dragon merely pointed a claw at the midday sun, his face set disapprovingly. Rainbow Dash deflated. "I know, I know. But I'd rather fight something that has a face to buck."

"Dash...", Spike looked hesitant to continue, but the words came regardless, "The others have been coming too. They told me a lot about what Luna's been doing, how she acts, that stuff. It just... it doesn't seem like she's bad. I don't think she's here for revenge. Maybe... maybe you and Twilight were wrong about her." He winced, awaiting her reply.

The pegasus just sighed. "I know, Spike. Luna does seem different. I can't imagine Nightmare Moon going all frou-frou at a spa with Rarity or eating apples on some bumpkin's farm." She paused, then blinked, "Don't tell Applejack I said that. Anyway. Even if that's how it is... I want to trust Twilight. She's the one that saved our rosswursts the last time Luna

showed up. I'm just not so sure anymore."

"Me too, Dash. I just don't know how to help her." The dragon leaned his head against the door, looking toward the sky, then added in a whisper, "Sometimes, when I wake up in the middle of the night, I can hear her crying up there."

Feeling painfully awkward, Rainbow Dash patted Spike on the shoulder with a hoof. It wasn't generally in her nature to be comforting, but she was there, and nopony else was. She just hoped that there wasn't anypony looking. "It'll be okay, little dude. Twilight is a smart mare, and she has good friends looking out for her. Good friends like you and me. She'll get through this. I'll make sure she gets through."

"I really hope so, Dash. I really do."

\* \* \*

Rainbow Dash's body lay under her cloud sheets, on her cloud bed, in her cloud house. Her head? Well, it was also in the clouds.

She considered, once again, the upcoming birthday. It was her only hope of breaking Twilight's solitude. Time spent with good friends. The party would help.

The party had to help.

Just one more day.

Luna was not a threat; she owed the alicorn an apology. Rainbow Dash was not a subtle pony, but it constantly surprised her how little attention the ground-based ponies paid to a stray cloud hovering above them. Even Luna rarely looked up, except at night. Two weeks of surveillance, and the princess hadn't done anything more evil than a harmless prank. Applejack was right, as much as she hated admitting it. That sort of thing always hit her right where it hurt most: in the pride.

The pegasus would make it up to them! Her friends had spent the past few days on two plans. The first, of course, was for the party, and other was for getting Twilight and her to meet with Luna on civil terms. They hadn't come

up with much for that second one, of course. Rainbow Dash couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces when she crashed the party, Twilight in tow, ready to apologize and help convince the unicorn.

Priceless!

The only problem was getting the librarian to go. She could easily get into the upper floors of the library; what's a window between friends? The convincing, on the other hoof... Rainbow Dash had never been a particularly persuasive pony. She supposed that she could just tell the other mare that she was needed so that they could use the Elements against Luna. That would take advantage of the unicorn's pride. It was a bit of a risk, but that appealed to Rainbow Dash; what's life away from the edge?

By that time the next night, their group would be back together. No more having to take sides against one friend or another. Loyalty to one wouldn't feel like betrayal of the rest. They could all stick together. Just one... big... happy....

Rainbow Dash drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face.

\* \* \*

Twilight Sparkle closed her book with a heavy sigh. She stared at the cover of The Journal of Heavens Sparkle; gilding in the shape of a rose shone, dominating the surface. It was as beautiful as the first time she'd laid eyes on it. If she were to flip the tome over, the librarian knew, there would be a five-pointed star of the same smooth gold. She studied the curving lines of the stylized flower; the sensory focus helped her avoid thinking about the next few pages of the Journal, the final section of the work.

But it didn't help much.

The passage she'd just read, the beginning of the end, had always been a favorite of hers. The first time she'd seen it, she had thought of it as a deep and beautiful metaphor for a meteor shower. It spoke of seeing the shimmering tears of the moon falling, a torrent of profound sorrow. Heavens Sparkle had asked the moon what it mourned, and received no answer. He had concluded that it was a pain too great for him to bear, else

the moon would have shared its burden. She'd always found it to be a potent metaphor.

Twilight had thought of it as allegory. She'd only come to that conclusion because her father had told her that 'Luna' was what Heavens called the moon.

Now she knew better.

Taken literally, she would have expected the passage to come from just over a thousand years before, from the alicorn's fall toward Nightmare Moon. That could not be the case; her father considered it a point of pride that the Sparkle line traced its ancestry back five thousand years - to Heavens Sparkle's grandson, the first pony to receive his Journal. She wondered what that could mean; was Luna falling into despair four thousand years before her banishment? She wondered if the journal was younger than it seemed. She wondered if there were any other passages she'd misinterpreted. She wondered...

She wondered what that sound was. That tapping. It was coming from the glass doors to the balcony. She hoped that it wasn't Rainbow Dash again; it seemed unlikely, so late at night. She climbed the steps slowly as the noise continued. It had a light, even rhythm.

The lantern light did not reach far, so the unicorn could only see a shadowy figure, through the glass. A figure nearly twice her height, with wings and a horn. Her eyes widened, and she dared to hope for a moment.

A light appeared above the figure's head, and made clear that it was not Celestia who had come. Twilight could see why she had been confused: the pony was an alicorn that matched the size and rough of the elder princess. Unfortunately, that was where the similarities ended.

The alicorn's square jaw and bulky frame marked him as male. He was red. Coat, mane, tail, feathers, horn, all the deep red of fresh blood. Where the princess had a long, thick mane that seemed to flow in an unceasing ethereal wind, he had a short-cropped mop, frayed and mundane. His fetlocks were not maintained; they fell almost to the ground, over unshod hooves. His feathers stuck out at all angles, and his coat...

His coat was covered with scars, countless old wounds on every surface, from his flank to his face. Most looked very old, and some had almost healed, but there was one on a wing that seemed fresh. It shone with the most vibrant crimson of all.

The alicorn was quite thoroughly hideous.

Twilight's first reaction was fear. She spread her front legs, dropping into an instinctive position of defense as her horn's magic charged. The other pony merely stared at her with gold-irised eyes, and once more patiently tapped on the glass. His lips curled into a smirk. It somehow made the scars on his face look slightly less twisted.

She watched him and he watched her. Empty moments passed. He raised his hoof again, holding it near the window, and he winked at her.

Twilight supposed that he could have just bucked the glass in, if he wanted to do her harm.

The unicorn sighed and released her magic into levitation, undoing the clasp and opening the glass door to the balcony. Cold night air rushed in. The alicorn spoke, and his pleasant voice and cheerful demeanor contrasted sharply with his rough appearance, "Good evening, madam. May I enter?"

The mare's eyes narrowed, "Why are you here? Who are you?"

"A fair question! I am a friend to mortal ponies, and to the truth, and an enemy to those who deceive and betray. And you are Twilight Sparkle," the stallion looked her over. "Well met," he added with a bow.

"How do you know my name?" Twilight asked, wondering whether she was in some sort of strange dream.

"Ah, yes, well..." The intruder looked away, sheepish. "I must admit that I've been scrying on you."

"What!?" The unicorn yelled, indignant at the violation of her privacy. She'd heard of ponies with the power to scry, but such strength and talent was rare. "Why?"

The stallion sat on his haunches, the balcony creaking under his shifting weight. He raised a hoof to scratch his chin. "First of all, forgive me my long-winded speech. I don't get out much, so when I can talk to another pony, I relish the opportunity while I yet have it. Still, even in my seclusion, I have to keep up to date on news from around Equestria. Thus, I scry. As for how that applies to you.... Well, any powerful magic is of interest to me, so Luna's return from her extended absence and the accompanying theatrics drew my eye. At first I thought that one goddess would replace the other, and this land would have an empire of the night instead of an empire of the day," he said, speaking of both empires with equal disdain in his voice.

His countenance brightened as he continued, "But then, what did I witness? Six little incomplete mortals defying a goddess," a grin split the alicorn's face, and his voice filled with manic glee, "I thought you were madmares, but you did it! You cast her down and scoured a part of her being. Six little ponies overpowered one of those immortal, invulnerable, insufferable tyrants." He laughed, quick and sharp and cruel, before speaking again in a more restrained tone, "You couldn't have known that it wouldn't destroy her. You couldn't have known that it would only lead to her returning to her sister's side. No matter! I'm sure, in time, you will find a way to make that princess give back what she took from you."

"W-what?" Twilight asked, overwhelmed by the onslaught of speech. Had he called the princesses tyrants? "Make... Celestia... give back what? What did she take from me?"

The other pony shook his head, "Not Celestia. Luna. And not from you you, but from all of you. I believe we've strayed from the topic, though it is parallel, parallel. We will return to your birthright in time but if I remember correctly, we were discussing why I was scrying on you. And I was going to apologize for it, however necessary the act was. I watched you because you have a part of the power to overcome the princesses. What's more, you have the will to use it. You know not to trust the princesses; that's good! But you don't know the whole story. Celestia had the records destroyed. But I can teach you the real story of the past of our race. History that only I, among living ponies, know."

The unicorn's brow furrowed, "What about Celestia and Luna? Don't they

know?"

The stallion snorted dismissively. "Oh, they know, better even than I, but don't let their shells fool you. They aren't alive; everything living bleeds. The goddesses do not bleed. Not like you and me." He flexed his wing. The mutilated flesh of the most recent burn cracked, droplets of blood springing forth and running together.

Twilight shuddered and closed her eyes as she recoiled from the sight. Still, curiosity drove her on, "And how do you know? And how have I never heard of a third alicorn before?"

"You've never heard of me," he hissed, "Because it wouldn't have helped you carry out Celestia's will. I am not a third alicorn. I am one of a once-proud civilization that covered this world before Luna ended our lines on a whim. I don't know how many yet live. And as for how I know?" The stallion chuckled, "Well, I'm a bit of a librarian myself, Twilight Sparkle, but unlike your collection, mine is not Celestia-approved. My records go back five thousand years, and show that those sisters are enemies to you and I, not friends. You've seen how they can manipulate and plot, haven't you?"

The unicorn was hesitant, "...Yes. I have."

"Then let me educate you. You can learn the truth, if you come visit my library. Together we can show your friends the light, and then we can fight them. End their tyranny once and for all."

"How...", Twilight gathered her resolve, "How do I know I can trust you?"

The other pony smiled, "You don't know. But I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to listen to me, and then decide for yourself. Come with me, Twilight Sparkle, and we will read of things long forgotten."

The cold night air blew through the open window, and the mare thought. The alicorn merely waited; a subtle smile graced his mutilated face. Ancient books, lost knowledge, reassurance. Someone telling her that her course was right, was justified. It tempted Twilight. She tried to resist, a very strong part of her unwilling to betray her mentor even then. In the end, one idea decided her course: perhaps, with this newcomer, she could find a way to hurt Celestia as much as the princess had hurt her.



"Wait here for a moment," the unicorn said. She rushed down the stairs, levitating her saddlebags to her and filling it with a few of the books she had been working on and some other essentials. Once the bags were secured, she climbed back up, a piece of paper and quill in tow. Her uninvited guest had wandered inside, and was examining one of her bookshelves. Twilight gasped as she saw, for the first time, the stallion's side, "Your cutie mark!"

Where a normal pony would have their identifying mark, the alicorn's flank had only charred flesh.

"Hmm?" He blinked at her, then followed her gaze, "Oh, that. I removed it. The purpose of a cutie mark is to let the goddesses identify you. I... opted out."

"What...", Twilight managed, still disturbed by the sight, "What do you mean? A cutie mark is a representation of your special talent."

"A unique representation. And that's what a cutie mark is, not its purpose. The purpose is to serve as a crutch for the sisters. One can't remember faces, the other can't remember names, but neither ever forgets a cutie mark. I marred my face and I changed my name and I got rid of their brand," He smiled, "I consider it well worth the price."

"And what is your name, now that it's changed?" Twilight asked, somehow dreading the answer.

"Ever Free."

\* \* \*

The early-morning silence of the cloud-home broke with a sudden pop and a green flash. Rainbow Dash opened her eyes just in time to see the falling scroll in the instant before it landed on her face.

The mare groaned. It was perhaps the least pleasant wake-up call she'd endured since flight school. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she rolled over onto her knees and began to undo the letter's seal with her teeth. If it wasn't important, somepony was going to pay dearly.

Dash spread out the sheets and read from the first:

*'RD: URGENT! Twilight is gone! She went to the Everfree Forest. I tried sending a letter to Celestia, but she didn't respond. I think the post to Canterlot might not be working or something. I sent you the note she left. Please bring it to Celestia. Hurry!. -Spike'*

The other page that Spike included merely said:

*'Gone with Ever Free'*

\* \* \*

The graceful arch of a rainbow shone over Ponyville, a beautiful sight that brought joy to many. It sprang from one pony's rank desperation.

At one end was the library, where Rainbow Dash had reassured Spike that she would find Twilight and bring her back safely. At the other was the Everfree Forest. A hoof-delivery to Celestia would take hours; the unicorn might not have that much time. On her friends' last visit to the forest, they only had to deal with some lame flower curse, but Dash knew that more serious dangers waited in the dark depths of the woods. She wasn't about to let Twilight wander around in there longer than necessary. She was going in after the unicorn.

Success was not a certainty; she kept the the librarian's note clutched in her folded foreleg, ready for delivery should her search prove fruitless.

A quick scan of the treeline yielded no obvious point of entry. Old game paths entered, but none had seen recent use. Rainbow Dash took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She wished she'd studied forests as thoroughly as clouds.

Plan A was a bust, but she could still check places her friends had gone before. Only after that would she allow herself to panic.

The pegasus dove into the forest. She dodged back and forth, weaving among the trunks along a familiar path. She was sure to go around the patch of inviting blue flowers, this time. Soon, she found herself at Zecora's hut. Rainbow Dash doubted that Twilight had simply stepped out to pay their new zebra acquaintance a visit, but the shaman might know something. Anything.

She could hope.

Dash knocked on the door with a knee. After a moment, it opened, and Zecora peered out. When the zebra saw her guest, she smiled,

"Greetings pony, it's a surprise  
To have your presence grace my eyes"

The pegasus blinked, parsing the rhyme. Why couldn't the other mare just talk normal? "Uh, yeah, hi Zecora. Have you seen Twilight?"

The zebra shook her head,

"She has not come to visit here  
I've had no recent guests, I fear,  
And she did not pass by this way;  
No one has been around today."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Darn. Well, she should be around here somewhere. She left this note about the forest, see?" She grabbed the edge of the paper with her teeth and showed it to the other mare.

Zecora read the message. Her eyes widened and scanned the page again. After a moment, she frowned and moved past the pegasus, looking left and right into the darkness of the forest. Finally, she turned and set her head against the other mare's flank and pushed as she spoke in a low voice,

"Inside now; none must hear or see  
The things that you will learn from me.  
Of this forest's name, be assured,  
that Everfree is but one word  
But on this note you've shown to me

It is two words that I can see.  
This choice is no mere accident  
She wrote precisely what she meant."

The zebra kicked the door closed behind her. She grabbed a long bamboo stalk between her forelegs and balanced awkwardly on her rear hooves. One by one, she closed the curtains of the hut with the implement, plunging the room into ever deeper shadows.

"Now you may call me paranoid,  
But it's a fact I can't avoid  
That Ever Free, written that way,  
Is not a prudent thing to say.  
It's known that he has magic ears  
so all that's spoken of, he hears  
And also far flung scrying eyes;  
He watches all that lives and dies"

The room was pitch black; Zecora's voice seemed to come from all around Rainbow Dash, as though the darkness itself were chanting with a fevered rhythm. The pegasus could not bring herself to speak over the whispered words, though countless questions burned within her.

"Now this may be just a tall tale  
But zebras know that without fail  
In legend, myth, and folk story  
There are some grains of truth to see  
And I believe our friend has found  
truth best left buried in the ground.  
You need not blindly journey on  
I think I know where she has gone."

There was a loud thunk as bamboo hit wood, and the pegasus blinked as one of the walls of the hut began to glow a sickly green. The light came from some sort of moss, and the zebra had used it to create a makeshift map. A line divided lights shaped like tiny, stylized trees from others shaped like tufts of grass; Rainbow Dash recognized the treeline of the Everfree Forest, as seen from above. Within the woods, symbols were drawn in chalk and charcoal, though the pegasus could not recognize many of them. One that stood out was a simple representation of the ruined

castle where the Elements of Harmony had been found. Just beyond the familiar landmark was a drawing of a field of gravestones much larger than the image of the castle itself.

Zecora had abandoned the pole and gestured with a hoof to a winding line of blue pigment that met an azure pool at the far edge of the map. Near the junction, surrounded by the harsh charcoal lines of dead woods, she'd drawn a bone-white equine skull.

"At mouth of twisted river's flow,  
A place where only fools will go,  
Where desecrated woods surround  
His cavern under barren ground.  
Beneath gnarled branch and dead wood  
There is no light or hope or good  
A twisted master, you will see  
The winged unicorn, Ever Free!

"Your prospects, thus, are very bleak  
This place's sire you must seek.  
So do not try to find your friend;  
In doing so you'll meet your end."

Dash scoffed, "Buck that! I'm going after Twilight, and I dare Ever Free to stop me!"

Zecora frowned and whispered a harsh reply,

"Hush little pony, not so loud!  
Such volume cannot be allowed.  
To speak of him is dangerous;  
To challenge him? preposterous!  
You could not ever hope to face  
a pony of the elder race.  
To do so, Dash, is never wise,  
For everything he touches, dies.

"The myths speak of his blinding speed,  
More strength than any other steed,  
Magic we can not understand,

A mind where brilliant schemes are planned,  
But worst of all, his tongue of gold,  
Makes creatures do as they are told.  
I will be honest with you, Dash  
You'd be defeated in a flash."

Rainbow Dash's eyes narrowed. Her heart pounded in her chest as adrenaline began to flood her system. If Zecora was right, there might be nothing she could do. If she was right....

The pegasus whispered, "How do you know all this? Have you seen this 'Ever -" she stopped, unable to continue her question through the hoof Zecora had thrust into her face.

"I think that's enough of his name,  
Its danger is much of his fame.  
I must admit, I have not met  
The master of this forest yet,  
But all who I have spoken to  
Have sworn to me these things are true.  
From weakest creature all the way  
To those who rule both night and day,  
Those who cannot be devoured,  
Beings magically powered,  
He was here before anyone;  
He will remain when we are done.  
So tribute to him all do pay  
And we must stay out of his way;  
Yes, solitary or in herds,  
Even the ursas heed these words!  
That's enough, Dash, of tempting fate,  
I wish to live to see a mate,  
so turn your tail and leave this room,  
For mere mention may bring our doom!"

In one moment, Rainbow Dash was staring at the map as Zecora filled her head with fears and threats. In the next, she was outside, and the hut behind her was dark and silent. The pegasus tried to summon memories of the time between, but had no success.

She supposed that there was nothing for it; as much as she would have liked to be the big hero of the day, anything that ursa were afraid of probably outclassed her. Even if only by a little bit. Dash clutched the note and shot up through the canopy. Once she reached sunlight again, she leveled off and flew as hard as she could. There, on the horizon, was her goal: Canterlot.

\* \* \*

Celestia sat alone in her empty throne room. The beaming midafternoon sun filled the grand hall with warmth as birds sang in the royal gardens below. To the princess, the cheerful tones sounded very far away, and the heat refused to approach.

Frost covered the alicorn's seat, a sheen of ice that crawled inch by inch down the dais.

No mortal pony remembered why this day was set aside, why no court was held. It did not seem to be a holiday. There was no feast, no festival, no celebration. There had not been for over a thousand years. Celestia wondered whether her sister was enjoying her birthday.

There was a brief scuffle outside, a blow to the door followed by raised voices. The alicorn did not pay them any mind. Her guard had standing orders not to interfere with anything more dangerous than an irate petitioner; the policy had saved their lives on many occasions. There was little reason to risk injury protecting a charge that could not be harmed by tooth, claw, or spell. Whatever the altercation might have been, she would receive a report. Even if she didn't particularly care.

A half hour later, the doors at the far wall of the room opened, and a pegasus guard walked in. He cut a noble figure in his shining gold armor and pristine white coat, and carried himself with the bearing of a veteran. The princess did not know whether she had ever seen him before.

He approached the throne and bowed deeply, a gruff voice ringing out, "Good afternoon, Your Grace." The stallion paused, waiting for acknowledgement. He waited a long time.

Eventually, Celestia spoke a curt, "Rise," and the guard returned to his



hooves. "I asked not to be disturbed."

The pegasus maintained a stance of perfect attention as he spoke, eyes straight ahead, "Yes Princess, you asked but did not order. I have a report that I believe you should hear at once."

The alicorn sighed and waved a permissive hoof, "Very well, what is it?"

The stallion's throat moved as he swallowed, though no other part of him did, "Well, Your Grace, a petitioner came, and when we told her that court was not in session, she tried to rush past us and get in. She failed to open the door because she pushed instead of pulled, and then she tried to rush away. We apprehended her and held her for questioning."

Celestia's brow arched, "And why did you think that I need to know about this?"

"I would not have brought it to your attention, Princess, except that the pony we apprehended, one Rainbow Dash, claims that there is a matter requiring your personal attention," he paused and, just for an instant, his eyes flicked up to meet hers, before discipline returned them to their steady course, "A matter regarding the safety of Twilight Sparkle. Her life is in danger."

"And why," the princess snapped, "should I be concerned about that? There are many instances where my intervention could save a pony's life. I cannot save them all. I expect my wishes to be ignored when there are major disasters, not petty tragedies. You should not have brought this to my attention."

The muscles in the stallion's jaw tensed and his eyes narrowed. After a few seconds he spoke, "May I have permission to speak freely, Your Grace?"

Celestia frowned and shifted on her throne, "Very well. Rest."

The guard spread his legs, adopting a more comfortable position and looked up. His gaze met hers, and his voice shook as he said, "Princess, I am not nearly as wise as you. I've seen but a handful of years on this world when compared to the centuries you must have seen. For twelve generations, my family has served you in the Guard, and stories have been

passed down, and we have learned what we can on our vigils. We know far less than you, but we do know more than nothing. The ponies of this palace are many things, but we are not blind. We have seen the way you've acted since the Summer Sun Celebration. Getting you to go to court and hear petitioners used to be more than half the trouble of this job. Now it's been two weeks since you left this room. It does not take ancient knowledge to see that you are troubled, that something is wrong.

"The consensus among the court is that there have been issues between you and your sister. The Guard knows that is not the case; after all, you've only spoken to her a few times, and always quite civilly, since this... irregularity... began. The Guard remembers that you were withdrawn even a few days before the Celebration.

"Prin- no. Celestia. Celestia, you underestimate the Royal Guard. We know that the customs and courtesies were designed by you. You prevent us from using names and ranks to hide the fact that you cannot tell us apart. We approve. All of us have served in border units; too many of us know the pain of losing a brother in arms. If we are incapable of protecting you from physical danger, we can at least protect you from that pain. It is well that you never grow close to any of us.

"But all of us have grown close to you.

"We saw the way you acted around Twilight Sparkle. We know the joy she brought you. But we do not know why she is gone, why you have sent your joy away. And I thought - I thought that you would want to save your joy, to avoid that pain of loss. Why, Celestia, why are you doing this to yourself?"

Celestia was silent, for a time. When she replied, it came in a whisper, "I did not know whether any of you suspected. Sometimes, it helps that I can pretend the pegasus telling me the latest joke is the same one who helped my sister play pranks on me three thousand years ago. Other times... other times it feels like I lose all of you at the end of every day. I did not have that motivation when I designed the uniforms, but I could not change it if I tried. Military tradition is sometimes stronger than any magic." She paused, then shook her head. "Tell Rainbow Dash that I will not help her. Send her back to Ponyville. That is my final word on the matter. Do not challenge it. You will only make things more painful. I appreciate what you have done, what you all have done for me, but you cannot save me from my own mistakes,

my own misjudgements -"

"We can try," the guard cut in without hesitation.

The princess smiled, but it was an unsteady, sickly thing. "Go. Go and never mention this again. Lose yourself among the others so that I can delude myself. I want to believe that such loyalty never dies. Dismissed."

The stallion bowed. "As you wish, Your Grace."

\* \* \*

A single blue pegasus streaked toward Ponyville, slowed only slightly by her exhaustion. Most of her day had been flight, but she did not let it weigh too heavily upon her; she had a friend to save.

Normally, Rainbow Dash would have been thrilled to meet one of her idols. She would have been even more thrilled to be chased and subsequently tackled by one. Tronenskjold, commander of the Royal Guard, combat veteran and former Wonderbolt, was essentially the height of awesome. The pegasus wished that they could have been introduced on better terms, and she wished that he hadn't hurried her out of the palace so quickly. She wished most of all that his last words to her had been anything other than what they were.

His message had been grim. Celestia would not help. He had seemed as disappointed by the news as her. She told him about Ever Free and the location Zecora said to avoid, and he had dispatched a few pegasi to scout. Rainbow Dash hoped that it wouldn't be too little too late.

With that, the mare was nearly out of plans. There was only one option, one hope left. As much as she hated to ruin one of Pinkie Pie's parties, it was a necessity.

Only Princess Luna could save Twilight Sparkle.