

The Sun is Tired

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Chapter 1

Celestia woke up. She had been sleeping on a bed made of donated Pegasus feathers, with sheets of the finest silk. Overall, her bed had cost what the average pony makes in a lifetime.

She stood up, putting on slippers that were lined with gold leaf. She walked to her window. Outside, a palace of marble stood on a mountain. She had over 400 servants in said palace. At any moment, she could ask for anything she pleased, and she would get it in seconds. Everypony in the land she ruled over loved her unconditionally, and they all thought she was the wisest being to ever grace the land.

She hated every second. She hated the adoration. She hated the power. She hated the excess.

She had always felt this way, even though she tried to hide it for her subject's sake. That task was getting harder and harder to do, however. Things had gotten worse since her sister's return. Having another Princess in town seemed to make ponies even more careful not to offend her. Maybe they just assumed that double the Princesses equaled double the power? It really wasn't making sense to her.

Or maybe her attempts to lessen the hate had backfired. She tried to be more playful, more mischievous, but that seemed to only make things worse. Making a giant statue of herself with the word "OBEY" below it, then getting a team of ponies to pull it down for a camera seemed funny to her, but scary to everypony else. She had tried other things, like starting a royal wheat factory that made terrible food, then admitting the food was awful on purpose, but those only strengthened the rumors. Horse-drawn trains, an apple-pie armed army, and Parasprite parades hadn't helped, either. The final straw, however, was the Grand Galloping Gala. She had tried to lighten the mood by inviting Twilight and her friends, but most ponies assumed she was trying to demonstrate her ultimate power. Twilight had received no punishment, but everypony thought that was because she was some sort of spy for Celestia. There was nothing she could do to lighten the mood.

She grunted in frustration, then turned and walked out her door. Another endless day of pointlessness. Let's see... She had to dedicate a graveyard, answer letters, and judge a few contests. Great, that sounded *fun*.

A guard greeted her outside the door. "Celestia, anything I can get for you?"

"No, that's fine, thank you," She said, trying hard to keep her pleasant demeanor.

A cook rushed up. "Would you like some hay? Apples? Anything at all!"

"No, I'm not that hungry," She muttered, starting to walk away. *Where did she even come from?*

Celestia made it to her chariot. Why did she even use it? She had perfectly working wings. Oh, right, "safety." Really, would it kill the God of the Sun to exercise a little?

The Chariot took off, the Pegasi pulling it struggling visibly. God, they were practically killing themselves. Why? Why was she so special?

It was a half-hour ride to Phillydelphia. Celestia stepped off the chariot, looking around. They had touched down in a pretty deserted area. Good, she might be able to get to the graveyard without-

"Princess Celestia!" A unicorn screamed, bowing. "It is an honor to be in your presence."

Why? I'm powerful, sure, but I'm not better than you. Celestia thought. This was the worst part. The bowing. Ponies sometimes fainted in her presence. She didn't deserve it. She ruled as best she could, but she wasn't perfect. They always glossed over the bad parts. Accidentally trapping her sister for a thousand years instead of one. Deciding to go ahead with a mining operation that killed nearly a thousand ponies. Making a trade treaty with the Griffons that had cost the country millions. Or, really, any other mistake. Her citizens all loved her, and something wasn't right about that.

Well, loved wasn't the right word. Celestia knew that much. The right word would be *feared*. They were deathly afraid of her. Afraid that she would decide to let the sun go out, that she would kill them all if they didn't treat her perfectly. She was a tyrant, and she had never even tried.

Whenever she tried to stop, things only got worse. A while ago, she wanted to lose some of her power, so she thought about getting a Prime Minister to do most of her duties. The position would be based on popular vote, and would have most of the real power. She would still be trapped in her palace, and would still have to raise the sun, but at least somebody else could decide the treaties and such. When she suggested it to a guard in passing, however, he reaction was strange.

"Oh, no, your highness," he began, bowing, "No pony would be anywhere near as wise, brave, beautiful, or kind as you."

Celestia looked in his eyes. Fear. He thought he was being tested, that if he had liked the suggestion, he would be killed or worse.

She tried to shrug it off, to consider it a fluke, but everypony else reacted the same way. Fear. Intense, burning fear. And it was tearing Celestia apart. She had been alive for a long time, and she knew that fear wasn't even a full step away from hate. The two emotions were linked closer than her and the sun, and that was saying something.

She sighed, breaking out of her reminiscing. "The pleasure is all mine, ma'am."

She started walking to the graveyard. Everypony she saw bowed on the trip. It was almost unbearable. This was supposed to be about the dead, not her.

She finished the dedication quickly, then galloped back to the chariot. Screw the letters. They were nothing but the same love note over and over, never a real request. She needed a break.

"Take me to Ponyville. Fast." She said, curtly, to a guard. She had a friend to visit. . .

It was only a few hours trip to Ponyville. When she arrived, she stepped out of the Chariot, nodding to the guard, then looked around. A clock on the wall of a bakery informed her that it was around noon. Ponies all around were at various levels of shock, some just surprised, others frantically running inside to change into something nicer now that the princess was here.

She hadn't really thought this through that well. Twilight would probably not take a random visit from her well, considering the level of stress she had reached on a planned one. Well, she couldn't back out now. She turned towards the library.

As she walked, she noticed the same strange, methodical bowing that followed her everywhere. She tried to get her mind off it, but it disturbed her. She felt like only one pony bowed out of actual respect, and she was going to visit said person now.

Celestia finally arrived at the library. Sighing, she opened the door. When the guards tried to follow, she motioned for them to stop.

The door closed behind her. The library was in what she imagined to be its usual state of disrepair, with more books off the shelves than on them. Twilight was nowhere in sight, although she did hear what sounded like somepony attempting to find a book in a pile coming from upstairs.

"Twilight?" She called, getting nervous. What did she plan to do?

The noise stopped. Celestia could practically see Twilight's facial expression.

"Who is it?" She called, an edge to her voice.

"Celestia. Twilight, I need..." Celestia's words caught in her throat. "Just, come here please."

She heard a short silence, then the rather loud *clomp* of hooves on wood. Twilight was standing on the stairs in front of her quickly, but she didn't look happy to see her. Concern was written all over her face, but it wasn't concern for herself, unlike what most ponies would have in the situation. Twilight was concerned for Celestia.

Celestia quickly regained composure. "I was close by, and thought we had time to get lunch. Care to join me?"

"Well- Oh yes, Princess. That would be lovely," Twilight said, sounding nervous.

Celestia found it difficult to keep face. Twilight was nervous not because she was afraid that Celestia would do something bad if she had any mishaps, but because she

was afraid Celestia would like her less if that happened. She was perhaps the only person in the world who would think that.

Then again, her perception of Celestia wasn't completely untainted. She had thought Celestia would banish her for hurting her bird. Then again, hurting the pet of a princess was never good. Maybe Twilight had thought she would be crushed if anything happened to Philomena, and would react instead of thinking about what to do. But, even if that wasn't the answer, Twilight feared her the least, and that was good enough.

"So, where do you want to go?" Celestia asked, careful to sound cheerful. She had a feeling Twilight could tell she wasn't however.

"Wherever you want, Princess." Twilight responded.

"Twilight..." Celestia struggled. Was this a good idea? Well, only one way to find out. "Can you please call me Celestia? And I want *you* to pick the restaurant."

She had let her guard down a little. A glance at Twilight told Celestia that she knew this visit wasn't a fun one. She didn't look concerned for herself, however, so Celestia guessed she had done the right thing.

"Well, Celestia," She began, trying (and failing) to hide this knowledge, "The Cakes' bakery is pretty good, as is The Daily Hay. However, I'm in the mood for a good sandwich, and I prefer the Cakes' place to TDH in that regard."

Celestia smiled genuinely. Twilight was rather young, but she talked in a way beyond her years. "That sounds lovely."

Celestia turned, gesturing for Twilight to follow her with a wing. "So, they're right down the street, right?"

"Yes. On the left." Twilight responded.

The guards practically jumped on Celestia at the door. She brushed them off with her wings, gesturing to a spot a few feet behind her. They got the message and followed at a distance.

Her and Twilight walked in silence. They were both feeling strange about what was happening. Celestia had just given her permission to call her by her first name, something only Luna generally did. It was rather awkward for both of them.

They arrived at the bakery shortly. Celestia walked in first, noticing the shocked look of the current patrons.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Cake," Celestia said towards the counter, sitting down. Twilight sat next to her.

A waiter immediately rushed over, carrying menus. "Your highness, is there anything I can get you?"

Fear again. Celestia wanted to explode, break down, start begging him to actually like her. However, she only glanced at the menu and said, "I'll have an Alfalfa and Wheat sandwich, Apple Dressing."

"I'll go with a Rye-and-grass, hold the dressing, please," Twilight said, glancing around the restaurant. Celestia did as well. Everypony else wasn't eating anymore, and a good portion of them were still bowing.

Futilely, Celestia tried to get them to go back to their normal routines with a hoof gesture. When that didn't work, she rather tersely (and loudly) said, "Everypony, my presence here isn't the end of the world. You can stop bowing and eat your sandwiches."

The minute she said that, she regretted it. Everypony in the store reacted so quickly, and so nervously, she knew that she had ruined their day. They would probably be afraid for a month. Celestia snorted in frustration, causing most of the ponies in the bakery who weren't frozen in fear to jump.

"Your food, m'am." The waiter said, placing their meals on the table.

"I think we're taking this 'to go,' so I'll just pay now," Celestia said. It was almost painful to talk in a room filled with so much terror.

"No charge, your highness." The waiter said, turning away from her.

"I'm paying for my damn food, sir," Celestia said, smacking the table with a hoof. A fork fell to the ground with a *ting*, breaking the silence.

"Sure, ma'am. Ten bits." The waiter was actually shaking. God, why did she have to react like that?

She took a few deep breaths, then glanced at Twilight. That only made things worse. Twilight's face was contorted into an expression conveying fear and genuine concern for her at once. Celestia tried to calm down, then said, "Here you go. Can we get a few boxes?" while placing eleven bits on the table.

"Sure ma'am. Right away, ma'am." His voice was shaking. Celestia could almost taste the terror.

In about 30 seconds, he had managed to get two bags and bring them to her. Celestia rather tersely placed the sandwiches inside, then stood up and motioned for Twilight to follow. They walked out the door, leaving the people in the shop to wonder what was going on.

Celestia wanted to explode. She took off into a gallop, Twilight following close behind her. The Guards attempted to catch up, but Celestia put a magical barrier between them and her. They crashed into it, collapsing in a pile of feathers and fur. She made it to the library, waited for Twilight to catch up, then locked the door. She was breathing hard, and filled with a mixture of rage and despair. She turned to Twilight. The little unicorn was very tired, but she still seemed intensely concerned for Celestia.

Celestia turned around, looking at the library, then did something she had wanted to do for a while.

She screamed.

Chapter 2

It was a guttural, primal sound. Celestia's scream was filled with so much anger, so much despair, so much hatred that Twilight could have sworn it was magically enhanced. She wasn't entirely sure that wasn't the case. It must have lasted for a solid minute before Celestia stopped, breathing hard. Her eyes were wild, to the point where she almost looked crazy. She looked at Twilight.

"I'm done." She said. Her voice was almost half an octave lower than usual, and Twilight had never seen her this upset. "I'm done."

"With what, your Majesty?" Twilight began, but was cut off.

"Don't call me that!" Celestia said, her voice rising. She was in hysterics.

"I mean, with what, Celestia?" Twilight corrected. "Were those people in the restaurant not honoring you enough, or?"

Again, Celestia cut her off. "NO! They were. . . They were honoring me too much. I don't deserve it."

She had suddenly lowered the volume of her voice to a whisper. Twilight swallowed. Celestia looked utterly hopeless, like she had a depression nopony could cure.

"I'm feared, Twilight. Can't you see that? Doesn't everypony see that?" Celestia said.

"Celestia, I don't think that you're really feared all that much. I mean, I-" Twilight began, before being cut off again. Celestia had evidently thrown normal conversation to the wind.

"You don't. Not now, at least. Remember your test? How you were so afraid of failure? Your parents were afraid too. Afraid I would hate you, that I would. . . Well, That I would kill you. They actually thought I would kill a filly. After the test, your parents were absolutely terrified. Then, like an idiot, I decide to make you my protégée. I did it because I liked you, but your parents thought I viewed you as a threat. It was obvious."

She sighed, then sat down on the floor. "They haven't written to you that often since, have they?"

Twilight thought about it. In the past few years, she had gotten maybe two letters. "No, they haven't."

"They're distancing themselves from you. Since they probably think I'm looking for a good time to kill you off, or maybe turn you into some sort of agent of mine, they don't want to associate themselves with you, or, for that matter, know you too well. It would make your perceived inevitable death that much worse for them. I'm sorry."

Celestia said. She sounded exhausted. "I was only trying to get somepony to actually like me."

Twilight walked closer to Celestia, then sat as well. "It's okay."

"No, it really isn't," Celestia began, "It really isn't. It wasn't okay for me to trap my younger sister in the moon for a millennium. I can imagine that a lot of ponies don't find most of my political moves okay either. But nopony ever says anything. They're all too scared."

Twilight noticed that Celestia was almost crying at this point. It was rather shocking, seeing this happen - Seeing a pony that she had once considered to be invincible break down.

"I'm a tyrant, Twilight. Don't look at me like that, it's true. I rule by fear. I rule because ponies are afraid I'm just going to let the sun go out and kill them all if I don't. I rule without challenge because they're afraid that I might kill the challengers." She sighed again. "For once, I want to get an angry letter from somepony. I want somepony to dislike what I've done openly. Your friend Fluttershy came close, which I guess was just the fact she had the Element of Kindness, but you scared her off with you speech about punishment."

Twilight had only now remembered that. It wasn't easy to realize that she was just as guilty as anypony else for making Celestia like this.

"I'm sorry, Celestia." She said, in a voice that was near silence. She felt awful about the entire thing.

"It's not your fault. I should be feared. If I decided to go bad, I would be able to completely." Celestia said, looking at the floor. "I could start a genocide campaign against earth ponies today and nobody would speak up. Even the ponies I'm slaughtering would probably go along with it, to afraid I would kill everyone if they were to protest."

Twilight felt shivers go down her spine. *She's right. Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and all the other ponies I know would gladly walk into a death chamber if they thought it would give others a chance to live,* she thought.

"I would never do such a terrible thing, of course, but having the power to do so - it's driving me mad. Nopony needs that kind of power. Especially not me. I might be over a thousand years old, Twilight, but sometimes. . ." Celestia searched for the words. "Sometimes I feel no different then when I was only a little filly, wondering why I had a cutie mark of the sun since birth."

Celestia laid down on the floor. She didn't have the energy to sit anymore. "I'm not qualified to rule. I try to be kind, but I'm not the smartest pony. I'm just the sun. That's all. That's why I rule. And Twilight. . ." She put her face in her hooves. "The sun is tired."

Twilight laid next to her. "Can I do anything to help?"

Celestia gave her a slight smile. "You already have. I needed to talk to somepony."

They lay in silence for a long time. Finally, Celestia spoke.

"Listen. . . I hate to ask this, but, can I stay here for a while? I need to get out of palace life. I'll tell the guards to leave."

Twilight considered this. If she had Celestia stay at her house, all sorts of negative rumours might start. They probably wouldn't be spread around, out of fear, but there would still be rumours. Twilight didn't want to deal with any of them.

She glanced at Celestia. Hell, who was she kidding. She was letting Celestia stay. She had never seen a pony so broken before. "Of course you can," she said, trying to be as warm as possible.

"Thanks." Celestia said, walking toward the door. She opened it, and was greeted by half a legion of Guards. How the hell had they gotten here so fast?

"Your highness, you need to leave this building immediately. We are ready to destroy this building and everypony inside at your call. We would have done so sooner, but you were still inside. We apologize for our failure in breaking the magical lock," One said, incredibly fast. Celestia noticed that was he also shaking, afraid she would be mad that they hadn't helped her sooner.

Celestia had almost no strength left, but she managed to say "Actually, I wanted to be alone. You and you guards are going to leave, *now*. And, if anypony inside that building gets hurt, I *will* put the sun out." Startled, she realized that she had meant every word. Was she actually... No, she couldn't think about that now.

She looked at the Guards. They were utterly terrified. Their eyes wide, the galloped out of sight, hastily dis-assembling the destruction devices.

Celestia kicked the ground. *Dammit!* She just had to go one step forward, two steps back. Why the hay had she done that? Why had she meant it?

She snorted, then her rage at herself was gone, replaced with despair again. She walked into the library, up to Twilight's bed, and collapsed, falling asleep.

Twilight walked up the stairs. It had been almost a full day since the Princess had fell asleep, and she was still snoring. Twilight hadn't really minded sleeping on the couch, but explaining why Celestia was in her bed to a sarcastic Spike hadn't been fun.

Twilight had no idea what to do. Celestia, obviously, needed help. But how could she do anything? She had been reading every book on royalty she could, but nothing had came up. Frustrated, she walked back downstairs.

Celestia Through the Ages. No, she had read that one twice.

A Brief History of the Royal Sisters. That was a useless rag, nothing but praise. No real info.

Supreme Beings: Why Celestia Alone is Fit to Rule. That was even worse. After talking with Celestia, Twilight had realized that no book she had ever read criticized Celestia in any way. She could see that Celestia was going mad. Ponies were placing literary censorship on *themselves*.

In frustration, she banged the bookcase. A rather large, heavy book fell from the top shelf. The Elements Of Harmony: A Reference Guide. Why hadn't she thought of this sooner?

She flicked open the book, looking at the table of contents. *General Info* - no, she had read that already. *In-depth Analysis of Each Individual Element*- She didn't need that, she knew her friends pretty well... *Powers of the Elements*. Yes, that was the page.

She skimmed the chapter for about a minute before a passage caught her eye: Perhaps *the greatest power of the elements, however, is the ability to strip unicorns of their magic, or Pegasi of their flight. Such a power can be used by Celestia in the event that a Unicorn/Pegasus is foolish enough to disobey her perfect advice.*

The ability to strip a unicorn of their powers. . . Could that be amplified? Could she strip - no - *relieve* Celestia of her control of the Sun? It just might work.

Twilight ran out of the door. She had some ponies to talk to.

She decided to go to Applejack's house first. It wasn't the closest, but Twilight thought she would be a good pony to start with. When she arrived, it was just after one O'clock. She knocked on the door, then waited for a minute. Two. She knew that Applejack was home, so why wasn't she answering the door?

Twilight knocked again. No answer. Beginning to get angry, she tried one more. No answer. Why was Applejack doing this?

Twilight noticed an open window. She walked up to it, then yelled, "Applejack, I know you're home! Big Mac is out of town for the weekend, and you never leave the house alone! I'm not stupid! Please come outside!"

No answer. Why? Maybe she was in some kind of trouble. Twilight began to worry. What could be keeping her?

Five minutes later, she knocked again. Not a peep. Twilight was starting to freak out. Was she hurt? Sick? What was she doing? She had been acting more nervous since the Gala, but not to the extent of hiding in her house.

After another five minutes, she couldn't take it anymore. She walked up to the open window, used magic to remove the screen, then jumped inside.

The house was dark. Not a single light was on. Twilight was surprised. Applejack was definitely home, so why would the lights be off? Twilight set her horn aglow. She looked around. No trace of anypony. . . wait, there! There was a few muddy hoofprints on the ground, leading into the basement. Since they were so small, Twilight assumed them to be Appleblooms. She cautiously followed them.

While walking down the stairs, Twilight herd some somepony moving around. They seemed as if they were trying to be as silent as possible. After a few more steps, she heard a loud crashing noise. In a sudden panic, she ran the rest of the way.

When she reached the bottom, she stopped. There, cowering behind a few bags of dried apples, was Applejack and her sister, Applebloom. They were terrified, and shaking.

Applebloom turned around and saw her. Then, to Twilight's shock, she wailed the word "No!" and began to cry, burying her head in Applejack's mane.

Applejack turned around to face the speechless Twilight, fear on her face. "Oh. You're here. Well, no use resisting, is it?" Her voice was hollow and hopeless.

"Resisting what?" Twilight asked.

"Arrest." Applejack said, standing up.

"No! Sister! Don't go! Please don't go!" Applebloom was in hysterics, wailing in a way only a filly in trouble could.

"I'm sorry, sis. I love you. Don't forget me, okay?" Applejack said, turning to her sister. She turned back to Twilight. "You're not taking her too, are you?"

"Who said I'm taking anypony? What the hay is going on here?" Twilight said. Her voice sounded loud, even to her.

"Don't play games here. The betrayal is bad enough," Applejack began. "You're here because of that stunt I pulled at the Gala. You're Celestia's spy. You're going to make me disappear."

Twilight felt something bubble up inside her. It was an emotion she had never experienced before, and she didn't have a word to describe it. It was like a voice screaming "No, no, no, no, no!" over and over. It was terrible.

"I'm not a spy! And Celestia doesn't care about that! She liked our antics, remember!" Twilight realized she was screaming. She felt like she was drowning.

"Don't damn lie to me! It's bad enough I'm dyin'!" Applejack shot back at her. Behind her, Applebloom went into a new fit of wailing.

"I'm not lying! What the hay are you talking about?" It was starting to get hard to breath.

"Celestia's in town! At *your* house! Do you really think I wouldn't notice? Now, dammit, just take me to her. Or, at least, somewhere else. I don't want Applebloom to see." Applejack's hollow voice was like a punch in the face.

"I'm not going to hurt you! I just... Celestia came to me because she-" Twilight couldn't get any air into her lungs. Why would Applejack think this?

"Stop it! Just stop it! Dammit, can't you just get it over with!" Applejack shouted. A few tears dripped from her face.

"I'm not doing anything! I just need help!" Twilight shouted. *No, no, no, no, no, no, no!* "I'm not going to hurt you!"

Twilight didn't know what to do. Applejack had always been stubborn, but this was ridiculous. She honestly believed Twilight was going to kill her.

Applebloom was still crying. It was a terrible noise, the kind of cry that made you want to run to their aid. Applejack put a hoof on her shoulder, then let go and walked over to Twilight.

"Fine. You want 'help.' Sure. Whatever makes you feel better." Applejack muttered. "Lead the way."

Twilight had no idea what to say. Apparently, nothing would work. She slowly turned around and walked up the steps. Applejack, true to her word, followed close behind her.

Twilight decided to take her to the library. She had no idea why, but it seemed like a good thing to do. Applejack continued following her.

Walking through Ponyville was terrible. Applejack's was hanging her head, shoulders slumping, still following. Ponies on the street ran inside their homes, locking the doors. Those that didn't looked terrified. Twilight wanted to scream. *Is this what happens to Celestia on a daily basis?*

They made it to the library. Twilight walked inside, and, to her relief, Celestia was awake, standing in the kitchen.

"Twilight, you're back. I tried to make scrambled applesauce, but. . ." Celestia said, gesturing to a burnt mess on a plate. Celestia looked up, smiling, but quickly stopped. "Is there something wrong?"

Twilight didn't answer. Instead, she stepped aside, revealing a softly crying Applejack.

"Dammit, Applejack, stop it. You knew this was happening," Applejack muttered to herself, then stopped crying. She walked to Celestia. "Can we get this over with?"

Celestia stared at Applejack for a long time, then turned to Twilight. "See?"

Twilight nodded, crying herself.

"Applejack, I'm not going to do anything. I just. . ." Celestia started to say, but stopped. "I have no idea why Twilight brought you here, but you're not getting hurt."

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Applejack said, beginning to cry even harder than before. "Can't you just - just - finish it?"

"I don't want to hurt you!" Celestia's voice was beginning to get that desperate tone. "I don't even know why you're here."

"Book's on the desk over there. It's open to the right page." Twilight managed to get out.

Celestia walked over to the desk, reading over the book. "Oh."

"Here, Applejack, why don't we talk for a while. Twilight, can you get the others?" Celestia asked, turning towards Applejack.

Applejack looked, if possible, even more afraid. "The others? You're betraying them all? Twilight, I thought you'd be better than that!"

Twilight didn't know what to say. Hoping Celestia could explain things, she galloped out the door. She dreaded the task ahead of her. If it hurt that much to have one friend afraid of her, what would having all of them afraid do?

Chapter 3

Twilight practically slammed the door behind her, causing Applejack to jump. She shivered slightly. Well, the moment of truth was here. Applejack braced herself for the end, shutting her eyes tightly. *Sorry, Applebloom*, she thought.

After a few minutes, she opened her eyes again. Nothing had happened. Strange.

"Are you done yet?" Celestia said, turning to her. She had sat down.

"Done with what? Aren't you going to—" Applejack began, before Celestia cut her off.

"No, you're not dying!" Celestia said, exasperated. "To be honest, I don't know why you're this worried."

"Are you sure? Because it would sure be cruel to get me all cozy, and then kill me." Applejack relaxed a bit. Celestia obviously wanted to talk.

"I'm positive," Celestia said. Applejack noticed that she hung her head slightly while doing so.

Applejack looked around. No guards, no torture instruments, nothing that looked like an interrogation would be taking place. Well, she didn't have much to worry about then. She let herself relax a bit more.

"To be honest, your reaction seemed a bit. . . strange for you. I thought you would have trusted Twilight more." Celestia said, walking towards a shelf. She seemed to be avoiding Applejack, as if it was painful to look at her.

"Well, I would, but—" Applejack said, then stopped herself. Telling Celestia this would probably not be the best idea.

"But what?" Celestia looked genuinely confused. She took a breath, then faced Applejack, trying to smile warmly.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story," Applejack began. She might as well admit to it. "It started a while ago. I had just got back from the Gala, and I was tellin' Big Macintosh about what we had done. So he gets this funny look on his face and starts lookin' around, like he was trying to make sure we was alone. So he asks me to follow him into the barn, and I do, and he starts talkin'. He tells me that you probably weren't really happy with me, and that I should be more careful. I ask why, and he gestures to the — ya know, the *rhubarb* I was growin' in there..."

Applejack paused, looking uncomfortable. She continued, talking faster, "I know it's not legal, see, but some of Rainbow's friends wanted some, and Granny Smith needed a hip replacement, and I was gonna stop after the Gala but the stand was a

failure, so I thought I'd just be doing it for a few more—"

Celestia cut her off. "Okay, you were growing rhubarb. There's really not that big a penalty for that, as I'm sure you're aware. That still doesn't explain why you would mistrust Twilight so badly."

"Well, it wasn't just that," Applejack began, shuffling again. "I had also been talking about – with some of my friends, see – how I thought rhubarb shouldn't actually be illegal. I mean, sure it can be used as a poison, and was very famously with the Mayor Cloudchaser, but it's so delicious I thought it was worth the risk, so I told Big Mac, and he tells me how you don't question the princess, and gets real nervous, and says how Twilight probably told ya." Applejack's voice began a crescendo, turning into a scream. "Then he goes on this big story about how he had a friend who thought that treaty with the Gryphons was a bad idea, and was telling Mac about it at a bar, and then, he says, these ponies come up and tell his friend he shouldn't be talkin' 'bout that kind of thing, and they rough him up a bit, so Mac starts yellin' about how I put them all in danger, and how I put Applebloom in danger, and how when people came I should go silently or they might hurt my family, and he starts cryin' and I'd never seen him cry before, so I start thinkin' about what might happen to my family, and I start to—"

Celestia cut her off, trying to sound in control. "Applejack, you're rambling. And screaming. I don't care about the rhubarb. It was a silly law anyway. I only put it in place after Cloudchaser was assassinated in an attempt to comfort his family. Everypony breaks it, myself included; I don't know why you're so worried about the whole thing."

Celestia closed her eyes for a second. *Why did those ponies hurt Mac's friend?* she thought. She got that feeling again, like she was drowning in sand, but she suppressed it. No, no time for that now, she had more pressing matters.

Applejack blushed, then muttered, "Well, Big Mac was yellin' a lot, and..."

Celestia walked up to her, putting a hoof on her shoulder. "Look, you don't need to be afraid of me. No pony does. . ."

Her voice trailed off. For the first time, Applejack looked into Celestia's eyes. They didn't look powerful and wise, like she had expected. Instead, they looked sad and confused.

They stood in silence for a while. Then, Celestia spoke up.

"Actually, that's why I'm here. . ."

"So, Mr. Cake, did anything happen while I was gone?" Pinkie Pie said, putting away yet another bag of flour. She had been supervising the import from Manehattan for the past few days.

"Well, Celestia stopped by," Mr. Cake said tersely. Pinkie had never heard him talk in that tone before.

"Oh, Super-Duper!" Pinkie said beginning to bounce, getting flour all over herself. "Did you make her cake? Ooh, did you throw her a party? I hope not, I would have liked to be there!"

"Well, no." Mr. Cake said, lifting another bag onto the shelf. "It didn't really go so well."

"Why not?" Pinkie said, ceasing her bouncing. Why did Mr. Cake sound so... scared?

"Well, she and Lampsworth had a bit of a run-in." Mr. Cake said. "So we fired him."

"Fired him?" Pinkie asked. She had liked Lampy. He was nice. A bit of a filly-izer, but nice.

"Well, yeah. I don't want to have to pay his life insurance." Mr. Cake muttered, avoiding Pinkie's eye.

Pinkie stopped lifting bags, then looked at Mr. Cake. "What do you mean, life insurance?"

"Well, shouldn't it be obvious?" Mr. Cake grunted, heaving another box. "He disrespected the princess."

"So?" Pinkie asked. Mr. Cake had never been like this before.

"Well, he's not going to around much longer, is he? The Princess can just do whatever the hay she wants. It'll be a miracle if she doesn't go after us as well." Mr. Cake slammed the next bag on the shelf, grunting, then seemed to catch himself. "As she should, I mean. She is the wisest being in Equestria, and we dared to disrespect her."

Pinkie looked at Mr. Cake. His eyes were wide, and he looked - well, he looked terrified. He noticed her looking, then snapped, "Pinkie, go outside. I got the flour."

Pinkie was astonished. Mr. Cake had never been this nervous before. Pinkie walked out the door, and bumped into Twilight.

"Oh, Pinkie." Twilight said. She was in bad shape, tears leaking from her eyes. "I wanted to talk to you. Celestia needs some help. Could you come with me?"

Twilight appeared to brace herself for something horrible, digging her hooves into the ground. Pinkie hadn't seen her so upset before either. Well, today was a day for firsts.

"Okie Dokie Lokie!" Pinkie said, attempting to lighten the mood by bouncing again.

"That's it?" Twilight said, relaxing. "No yelling? No screaming at me for betraying you?"

"Silly, why would I do that?" Pinkie said. She did feel uneasy, but she trusted Twilight more than Mr. Cake.

"Oh. Okay then. Well, I guess we'll get Rarity next. . ."

Rarity dug, once again, into her closet. Celestia was in town, and she had to have a good dress for the occasion. No, she had worn that to the Gala... this was too cheap... that went out of fashion a year ago...

She slammed the door in frustration. She was going to have to make an entirely new dress. And at such a short notice!

Rarity set to work, turning on the sewing machine and getting out some paper. She had to look perfect for Celestia. She dreaded to think what might happen if she didn't. With one comment, the princess could make her the laughingstock of the fashion world. Or, for that matter, the most renowned dressmaker in Equestria.

Rarity was just beginning the designing phase when she heard a knock. She put down her pen and walked to the door.

By looking through the peephole, she was able to determine that it was Twilight and Pinkie knocking. She opened the door a crack.

"Hey Rarity, we were just looking for you!" Pinkie said, bouncing again.

"Hello, Rarity," Twilight said. She looked downtrodden.

"Oh, hello girls," Rarity muttered, "I would love to come outside, but I'm a bit-"

"Rarity, that can probably wait. Celestia needs you." Twilight said flatly. She certainly wasn't that happy.

"Really? Like, now?" Rarity asked, beginning to panic.

"Yeah! As soon as possible!" Pinkie said, cheerily.

"As soon as..." Rarity went into full-on panic mode. She muttered "One minute," and ran back into the shop.

I need something new! And fast! Rarity thought, running to her closet. She quickly grabbed a rather plain white dress, then ran to a sewing machine. In the space of thirty seconds, she had managed to sew a few jewels onto it, and gave it a floral pattern. It didn't look amazing, but it was acceptable, at least.

"Okay! Coming!" Rarity yelled at the door, hastily putting on some shoes. She stumbled out the door, and almost fell on her face.

Pinkie caught her. "Rarity, you have your right shoe on your left hoof."

"Oh, yes I do." Rarity muttered, looking down. She quickly fixed the problem, then asked, "Where to?" If the princess needed her, it would probably be in her best interests to get there quickly.

"Well, first we have to get Rainbow and Fluttershy." Twilight said, looking as if she was dreading the task.

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard, should it?" Rarity said, looking towards Twilight. The look on Twilight's face told Rarity she was wrong.

Chapter 4

“Okay, there you go. Stay off that leg!” Fluttershy said, closing the door. She walked to a chair and sat down. She didn’t often get three patients in one day, and she was tired.

A knock at the door. Fluttershy was beginning to worry. Why were so many animals getting hurt today? She got up from her chair and trotted to the door.

A look out the peephole informed her that it wasn’t another hurt animal, but rather Twilight Sparkle. Relieved, she opened the door. “Twilight, how nice to see you!”

Twilight looked at her. “Nice to see you too. Fluttershy, I need your help.”

Fluttershy instantly became concerned for her friend. She had never seen Twilight so sad. “With what? Is everypony okay?”

Pinkie Pie bounced into view. “Oh, we’re super! But Celestia isn’t.”

“Celestia?” Fluttershy asked, confused.

“I’ll tell you later. Can you get Rainbow Dash for me? I would, but I can’t, well, fly.” Twilight said, avoiding her gaze.

“Oh, right away! She’s clearing the clouds. I’ll be right back!” Fluttershy said, taking off.

She flew for about five minutes before seeing the familiar streak of Rainbow hair. Fluttershy flew a bit closer, then called out “Rainbow!”

Rainbow turned around, confused. “Who’s calling... Oh, Fluttershy. I didn’t expect to see you up here.”

She swooped over to Fluttershy. “Did you get on the Emergency Weather Patrol too?”

“What’s the Emergency Weather Patrol?” Fluttershy asked.

“They just formed it. Since Celestia’s going to be in town for a while they decided the weather had to be perfect, so they got almost every pegasus to try and clean up the storm we were supposed to have today.” Rainbow said, out of breath. They had evidently been working hard.

“Well, no.” Fluttershy said, glancing around at all the pegasi kicking clouds. Rainbow was right, everypony was working on it. “Twilight sent me. She said that Celestia needs help.”

Rainbow laughed. “Celestia? Really? Help with what?”

“I don’t really know, but she seemed a bit frantic,” Fluttershy murmured.

“Twilight? Twilight Sparkle?” A bright white pony threw himself into their conversation. “Isn’t Celestia staying at her house?”

"I think so," Rainbow said, looking a bit annoyed that he had interrupted them. "But, Snowflake, we were-"

Rather rudely, Snowflake interrupted her again, talking rather loudly. Several other Pegasi looked in their direction. "That pony is so lucky! I didn't even know Celestia was into-"

Rainbow quickly cut him off, looking embarrassed. "Snowflake, it's not like that at all."

Snowflake rolled his eyes, then spoke again. "Still, it would be an honor to even be in her presence."

"Why?" Fluttershy asked behind her. Rainbow turned around. Normally, Fluttershy wasn't this assertive.

Snowflake looked at Fluttershy. His eyes made Rainbow uneasy. "What, darling?"

"Well, I've been to a few parties with her, and she didn't seem to make a huge deal about things." Fluttershy said, shivering a bit.

"Well, you obviously weren't paying attention. Celestia is so wise, so brave, so regal that even being near her is a great honor." Snowflake said, his voice dipping in pitch.

"Well, she seemed like a pretty normal pony to me." Fluttershy said, her voice getting even closer to silence than usual. "She seemed to like pulling that joke with the Phoenix..."

Several ponies gasped, and began to scan the skies. Rainbow had never seen them all so nervous.

"Celestia is far too intelligent to enjoy simple pranks," he said, moving closer to Fluttershy. "Plus, I doubt the wisest, most beautiful being in Equestria would waste her time on you."

Snowflake spoke up. "This pony doesn't like Celestia very much!"

A guard flew below, not paying much attention. Everypony in the sky began to breathe faster, tensing up. They were terrified.

"And I don't think she should feel that way!" Snowflake was screaming now. The look in his eyes would have been disturbing on anypony, but Snowflake's normal pleasant demeanor worsened the effect.

"Snowflake, stop it!" Rainbow hissed. Things were getting entirely out of hoof.

"Oh, somepony else agrees with her!" His voice was shrill and hysterical. "So, we have two traitors!"

"I'm not a traitor, and you're screaming." Rainbow said, suddenly getting nervous. An awful lot of ponies were looking at her. She tried to move between the crowd and Fluttershy, but Snowflake blocked her.

“Oh, screaming, am I?” Snowflake said, scanning the crowd. “Well, maybe I should be! If you’re stupid enough to think Celestia could possibly be *wrong*, then maybe you’re stupid enough to get us all in trouble!”

A pony to his left shouted “Yeah!”

Rainbow saw the crowd being riled up by Snowflake. She felt a sudden burst of fear, a desire to fly far away. Oh, no. She looked to her right to make sure Fluttershy was still close.

“And, maybe,” Snowflake began, his voice wild, “Maybe we need to stop you from doing so!”

“He’s right!” “Yeah!”

“And, maybe, we should take you to her!”

Rainbow felt a wave of pure terror. What, exactly, did he plan to do?

“Take ‘em!” “We have to!” “Save ourselves!”

“Fluttershy, get out of here! Fly away!” Rainbow screamed.

Rainbow felt a hoof on her wings. She struggled, trying to break free, but she saw that more ponies were coming at her. She struck out in a burst of adrenaline and fear, but it was no use. There were too many. Beside her, she heard Fluttershy scream.

“Let’s take them!” Snowflake shouted again.

Rainbow felt yet more hooves grasp her. One hit her. She tried to scream, but another hoof covered her hand.

More blows, more screaming. She was disoriented, panicking, screaming internally. She barely even felt the hooves hitting her. She saw Snowflake standing above her, his eyes bloodshot and wide, eyebrows arched, his mouth contorted into a terrifying smile. Then, mercifully, she lost consciousness.

Applejack left to reassure Applebloom. Most likely, the poor kid was probably still crying about her ‘dead’ sister. The farm wasn’t that far away, and Applebloom wouldn’t take that long to fetch. Applejack promised that she would be back within the half-hour, possibly bringing Applebloom along.

About fifteen minutes after she left, Celestia heard a commotion outside. It sounded like a large crowd of ponies screaming. She tried to ignore it, but then a *slam* came from the direction of the front door.

She rushed to the door, then hesitated. Maybe she shouldn’t open it...

Another slam. It sounded as if somepony was throwing something at the door. Well, this couldn’t be ignored. Celestia took a deep breath, then opened the door. On the step, two familiar ponies lay, bloody and battered. She recoiled in shock, then looked up to see a crowd of pegasi.

At its head was a brilliant white pony, bloodstained in places, grinning like a maniac. "Celestia, these ponies insulted you and denied your superiority. We decided to put them in their place - at your feet."

Celestia felt, briefly, that drowning feeling, before it turned to intense, burning rage. The moon above tinted slightly red, reflecting the light from her sun.

Snowflake glanced into Celestia's eyes. Instead of praise, he saw a thousand years of hatred, directed on him and him alone.

"What. Have. You. **Done?**" She roared, her voice resonating across the sky. With a shiver, he realized the sound was coming from the sun as well as her mouth.

Chapter 5

Twilight looked up, concerned. It had been almost ten minutes since Fluttershy had left. Where could she be?

Is that... it is. The moon is red. Why would it be- she thought, but stopped when a voice resonated from the sky.

“What. Have. You. **Done?**” It was ancient and powerful, frightening in a way she had never thought possible. Yet, it was familiar... it was Celestia’s.

Twilight froze. What could have possibly made Celestia that angry? She started to gallop in the direction of the library. Rarity and Pinkie followed close behind her, just as frantically. They were about a mile away when they stopped, shocked. The sun sprang out of the sky, larger than Twilight had ever seen it. She began to sweat - it must have been hotter as well.

With it rose two figures. One was instantly recognizable as Celestia, her horn glowing, with an expression of such fury Twilight could feel it. The other was much smaller, but still had wings. Twilight’s heart skipped a beat. *Fluttershy?* But no, this was obviously a stallion, and a white one at that.

He was struggling, obviously terrified. Twilight noticed that he was glowing. Celestia must have been holding him aloft.

Suddenly her vision darkened, as if she was wearing sunglasses. She tore her eyes off the two to scan the sky. It had been encased in some sort of magical barrier for as far as she could see. Such a spell would have required enough magical energy to kill a regular unicorn, but Celestia didn’t seem to even struggle. She looked the white pegasus in the eyes, then flew even higher. Twilight realized with a chill that Celestia’s eyes were glowing with magic.

Celestia was barely visible at this point. She seemed to summon strength, then release. Twilight waited for a minute. Then two. It looked as if nothing would happen.

Eight minutes later, she saw she was wrong. A tendril had broken off from the sun, and was moving closer faster than she had ever seen anything move. The white pegasus saw it too. Even though he was at least a thousand feet in the air, Twilight could have sworn she heard the screams.

Twilight closed her eyes. She couldn’t watch. Two minutes later, she felt heat on her face, a flash burning through her eyelids. It was terrifying. She looked up. Where two figures once were, one remained, glowing with magic. Celestia slowly flew down to earth. Twilight didn’t know what to do. She stood there for a long time.

Then, she felt something falling on her shoulders. She looked back. Pinkie was still staring at the sky, and Rarity had fainted. She checked her shoulder. Ash. She had a feeling she knew who it was from.

She went to the side of the road and threw up.

Celestia struggled to regain herself. More magic than she had used in a century pulsed through Celestia. It was a good feeling, being so completely in charge of the world around her, but it had an effect on the mind. She regained most of her control, then smiled, extending her wings to glide.

It had been a spectacular display, a brilliant show of force. That mob wouldn't be trying anything like *that* again. She giggled slightly, remembering Snowflake's begging when he first saw the flare. Did he really think she was going to forgive him for what he had done? What an idiot. He deserved what he got.

Celestia faltered. Had she...

Oh Sol.

They were right.

She was a tyrant.

In every way.

She started breathing faster, hyperventilating. She should not have come to Ponyville. She wasn't a victim. They were right. She was a tyrant.

She was suffocating in sand, buried alive, her throat severed. She couldn't breathe. She had to breathe!

She forced air into her lungs. There was something else she needed to take care of... something important...

Rainbow and Fluttershy were still on her doorstep, probably bleeding to death. She tucked her wings in and dived.

She landed a few yards away from the library, then galloped towards it. The pegasi weren't in good shape. Blood everywhere, numerous obvious broken bones, but nothing a bit of magic couldn't fix...

Oh Sol. Their wings. Oh no. She couldn't fix that easily. They were bent off at odd angles, the feathers gone. Rainbow had a huge gash down the middle of hers.

Gingerly, Celestia lifted them via magic. Slowly, methodically, she started to move them. There was a hospital in town where their condition could be stabilized, then they could be rushed to the Royal Infirmary.

Celestia glanced at them. Fluttershy appeared to have broken several vertebrae, and Rainbow's other wing was almost ripped clean off from her body. No, she couldn't take them to a local hospital. She had to get to her palace immediately.

She summoned what energy she had left. Teleporting three healthy ponies together was dangerous, but this was almost suicide. Still, she had to try.

She released the energy. She didn't quite know the mechanics of teleportation, but she did know that a million things could go wrong. She braced herself, knowing there was a chance the pegasi would die.

She looked in the direction of their floating, comatose bodies. A quick magical check told her they were alive, but fading fast.

She scanned the area. She had managed to teleport them less than a mile away from the Gates to the castle. Good, the Infirmary wasn't far beyond those. There were some guards running in her direction, fear on their faces.

"Celestia, what happened! We saw you raised the sun early, then we get reports of a solar flare hitting the earth, then-" one began, but stopped when he saw the state of the ponies Celestia had taken with her.

Celestia brushed past him, taking care not to move her passengers to fast. The guards regained their senses and formed a standard V formation behind her. One ran off towards the armory, presumably to get some heavier weapons. Celestia rolled her eyes. She had just incinerated a pony, and they still thought she needed guarding.

She made it to the hospital, a small trail of blood behind her. The nurses inside froze for a minute, staring at the damage, then set to work. Within the span of two minutes, Rainbow and Fluttershy were safely in the OR, the best medical unicorns in the nation working on them.

Celestia felt sick to her stomach. She wanted to crawl up in her bed and sleep, but she had other matters to take care of. Twilight and her friends would probably want to be at the hospital, waiting to see if Dash and Fluttershy would be okay.

Celestia got up to tell a guard to fetch them, then stopped. Twilight had probably seen her kill Snowflake. Explaining that to her wouldn't be easy... Still, she had to try.

She started to walk outside, but had to sit down again. She had used a lot of magic, and she needed to rest. She groaned, causing a few nurses to rush to her side and start taking vitals. One of them explained, rapid fire, that she needed to sleep immediately or she could suffer permanent damage.

Reluctantly, Celestia told a nearby guard to fetch Twilight and her friends, then closed her eyes. She was asleep immediately.

Rainbow spread her wings to glide, savoring the wind on her mane. These joy-flights always managed to lift her spirits. She smiled. Having flying as a special talent meant that doing this for a living was probable.

She flapped a few times, gaining altitude. As long as Rainbow was flying, she might as well train. After getting to a comfortable height, she tucked her wings in to dive. Being able to do a Sonic Rainboom at will would be sure to impress them Wonderbolts.

She felt the familiar friction on her face. Rainbow had only done this twice, but she would never forget the feeling. Just being in the air was absolute bliss, but breaking the sound barrier, being that powerful... That was the best feeling in the world.

Then, suddenly, she lost speed. What was happening? She wasn't diving anymore, she was falling, spinning out of control. Looking back, she gasped.

Oh Celestia. She had no wings. Her wings were gone. Ripped clean off. By what? Why?

No time to think of that now. The ground was approaching fast. She closed her eyes, waiting for the end.

The best young flyer in Equestria hit the ground.

Rainbow Dash slowly woke up, the effects of magical anesthesia wearing off. She had a splitting headache. Groggily, she tried to remember the last day or so.

Let's see... The organizers had formed an emergency weather patrol since Celestia was in town, she was clearing the sky, then Fluttershy had told her that Twilight wanted her. Then... Snowflake had started talking, and...

Snowflake. Why did she feel hatred at the name? She liked Snowflake. He was a pretty nice guy. So why did her skin crawl...

Oh Celestia. The mob. She realized, for the first time, where she was. Magical machines beeped in time to her pulse. The walls were a stark white. She was in a hospital.

She looked around, her vision clearing. Princess Celestia was beside her. Rainbow supposed she should bow, but she was in no state to do so. Beside Celestia, Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie stood, concerned. How bad did she look?

She tried to turn her head to the left, but a searing pain stopped her. There was obviously something wrong with her neck.

Behind her, she heard a groan. The voice was unmistakable, even in pain. Fluttershy had obviously gotten hurt as well. Rainbow tried to speak, but had trouble. Her mouth wasn't working.

She waited for a few minutes, then tried again. "I... Uh... I.... What..." Her head was still foggy from the surgery she must have had.

"What is... what's... wrong..." Rainbow coughed. Her voice was raspy, and her throat felt like sandpaper. Celestia, this was awful. She coughed again, blood coming out. She wasn't doing too good.

A unicorn in a white coat walked from a set of double doors in the corner of her vision. He glanced at the machines, then went to Celestia and whispered something to her. Shock registered on the princess's face, her wings involuntarily flaring out behind her. She glanced at Rainbow, then turned away for a minute. The doctor continued speaking, but Celestia nudged him away, saying, "No, I'll tell her."

Celestia walked up to Rainbow, head down. "Hey there. You doing alright?" she whispered. Rainbow could tell that Celestia was trying to be as warm as possible.

Rainbow tried to speak, but coughed instead.

"Well, first off, Snowflake's dead." Celestia said, unsure if that would make her happy or not.

Rainbow was confused. "Wh-Why?" She managed to choke out, before going into another coughing fit.

Celestia really didn't want to have her explain this. "Well, they brought you to me, and I saw what they had- and- I lost control. I didn't just kill him, I blasted him with a solar flare. I- I..."

Celestia's voice trailed off, then, in a near-silent voice, she murmured "I'm sorry."

"And, well, Rainbow," Celestia started shuffling on her hooves, dreading the next part. Still, she pressed on, "That mob... Well, they beat you guys up pretty badly. And, well, your wings got... a lot of the damage. We suspect it might have been intentional. But, anyway, a... a lot of damage was done. The doctors tried as best they could, but..."

Celestia took a deep breath, looking away from Rainbow, who was already crying a bit. "And, while they were able to fix some of the damage, they had to use a few long-term spells. You're not going to be able to fly for a while."

"How... long..." Rainbow choked out between coughs and tears.

"Well, the doctors don't really know. Pegasi wings are quite delicate... and yours were damaged pretty badly." Celestia said, trying not to be too blunt.

Rainbow broke into a new fit of sobs. Not flying for a week would drive her crazy, but a month or, more likely, a lot longer...

"Hey, it's not that bad!" Pinkie piped up, trying to sound positive, "You're still alive!"

Rainbow wasn't sure if being alive was a good thing. She loved flying. It was her special talent. She was born to soar above the clouds, to gain enough speed to break the sound barrier, to be the best flyer in all of Equestria. And, now, she couldn't even get off the ground.

"Look, why doncha' sleep?" Applejack asked, her voice wavering. Rainbow was normally such a strong pony, which made her breakdown so much worse.

"No, I ca-" Rainbow muttered, struggling to turn her head, "Flut- Flutter- Fluttershy, is- she- flut-"

She coughed again, more blood staining the white sheets.

Celestia gingerly laid a hoof on her shoulder. "Be still. I've got you."

She turned the bed Rainbow was on so she faced Fluttershy.

Rainbow wished she hadn't asked. Fluttershy was a mess. She had several stitched-up gashes along her flank, most of her fur was missing, and she had obviously had major internal injuries that had required surgery. A few unicorns stood by her side, keeping her encased in a purple cocoon of magic. They seemed to be taking special care with her back.

Rainbow closed her eyes, a nauseous feeling in her stomach. She couldn't look anymore.

Celestia turned her back around, but she didn't open her eyes. She was sleeping again.

"We should go for a while." Celestia said, quietly, to her friends. They left the room, leaving Rainbow to a fitful sleep.

Chapter 6

Celestia left Twilight and her friends at the door to the palace, telling the guards to treat them like they exactly would have treated her. While a few cooks and guards fussed over Twilight and her friends, she walked slowly up the palace stairs. She had killed somepony. Not just killed him, but made an example out of him. She had whipped him to death with a solar flare, so everypony on the ground could watch. Could learn.

She made it to the top, intending to go to bed, when she saw her sister. Ah, that might be able to cheer her up.

"Luna?" She called, her voice unsteady.

The small alicorn froze. Celestia hadn't expected that. Slowly, Luna turned around to face her. "Yes?" she asked, in a voice near silence.

"I- I want to talk a bit," Celestia said. Why was Luna looking at her like that?

"Oh. Sure, sis." Luna said, somehow getting even quieter. She slowly paced to Celestia, then looked up at her. "What about?"

"Well, I don't know. Anything." Celestia said. Luna's eyes...

"So. Ho- how was your day?" Luna said, her eyes shifting away from Celestia.

"Well... not too good." Celestia said. Luna's voice wasn't as cheery as usual.

"How was yours?"

"Well, okay, I guess. I had a lovely breakfast. And I think the moon was nice." Luna muttered, then seemed to catch herself, "...of course, uh, your red sun was better. Very neat."

Celestia jerked back as if slapped, then tried to hide it. "Oh. You saw that."

"Yes. Everypony in Equestria did. It was very impressive." Luna said. She was visibly distressed.

"Oh." Celestia said, entering her own private hell. Everypony. Everypony had their suspicions confirmed. She swallowed, trying to hide this realization, then continued. "So, what was the breakfast you liked so much?"

"Well, it was some nice apples and hay - grown in your brilliant Sun, of course - mashed up in some oatmeal. It was very good." Luna said, still avoiding Celestia's eyes. She shuffled slightly on her hooves.

"Oh. That sounds lovely. So... did you do anything fun today?" Celestia said. This conversation was getting worse by the minute.

"Yeah. I went to the garden and flew around a bit in the spectacular sunlight. Then I answered some mail. Then I got fitted for a dress for the Summer Sun Festival." Luna muttered, shuffling again.

Why is she praising the Sun so much? Celestia thought, her heart sinking. She had a hunch as to the answer to her question. "Was the dress nice?"

"Oh, yes. Very much so." Luna muttered. Her distress seemed to get worse.

"Luna, are you alright?" Celestia said, bending down at the knee to look her in the eye.

She immediately regretted the action. Her sister's eyes contained no love, no affection in any way. They were wide, black pools of terror, screaming at Celestia in fear. Her eyes wanted to run, to hide, to get away from the monster standing before her.

Celestia tore herself away from Luna's gaze, then galloped down the hall. She had to get away. She had to leave.

Celestia got into her room and locked the door behind her. When Luna walked by later, she heard sobbing.

Once Celestia had went upstairs, Twilight and her friends were immediately escorted to a large kitchen, where about thirty cooks fussed over their food needs. Twilight wasn't hungry, but Pinkie Pie asked for a few cupcakes. The cooks, obviously eager to please, quizzed her on the intimate details, from the sweetness (very) to the frosting (liberal amounts) to if she wanted any toppings (rainbow sprinkles). It was almost scary, how fast they had managed to get the baked goods.

After Pinkie had finished, a few servants practically stampeded them.

_____ "Is there anything we can do for you?" One asked. Unlike the others, he had a small gold star pinned to his lapel.

"Well, not really..." Twilight had the sudden feeling that he was afraid of her. She brushed it off, then continued, "So, where exactly are we sleeping tonight?"

"We have only the finest amenities. Would you prefer separate rooms?" A black pony next to the leader asked, stepping forward.

Twilight glanced at Applejack, who mouthed "Together." Twilight agreed; that would give them a great place to talk.

"We'll be together, please. We've had a rough day." Twilight responded.

"Oh, lovely," the pony said, trying to hide his fear with false cheer. "Right this way!"

Twilight followed him through the palace. Everywhere, she saw gold and marble statues of Celestia, paintings of Celestia, busts of her head... Twilight could see why she didn't like to live here. Getting stared at by yourself all day had to be terrible.

That wasn't the only thing she noticed. Ponies around her generally looked away as she walked by, but those that didn't... Twilight could feel the terror like heat on her face. A few even bowed. She tried to ignore it, but. . .

They arrived shortly. The servant opened the door, then stood outside as she and her friends entered. Twilight gasped. This was *the guest room*? The ceiling was

ludicrously high, and the floor probably had more surface area than the entire library. It looked as if a pegasus could fly comfortably around inside it. Sitting in the middle was a set of four beds, with what seemed like a hundred decorative pillows on each. There was a large mirror on one wall, an even larger wardrobe which was probably filled with dresses that would make Rarity jealous on another. Twilight walked inside. A door off to the left probably went to a bathroom, which was most likely just as luxurious. Pinkie Pie ran past her, immediately jumping onto the bed.

"Hm, this doesn't seem to be too bouncy," she said, then promptly laid down. "But so comfortable! Wow, no wonder Celestia likes it here so much!"

Twilight could tell that Pinkie Pie was trying really hard to be positive. Still, what could she do? Twilight also plopped herself down on the bed, surprised at how comfortable it was. She was almost falling asleep, despite her nerves. It was rather nice, really...

Then she noticed a small hole just below the pillow. Sticking out of it was was- How did Celestia get pegasus feathers? As far as she knew, those weren't easy to grow back, and Rainbow had only shed a few in all the time Twilight had known her. Twilight trusted Celestia, even after what she had done, but this was still unsettling.

Twilight trotted to the door, earning her a strange look from Rarity. The servant was still at the door.

"Excuse me?" Twilight muttered.

The servant jumped, then turned to her. "Yes, miss?"

"I was wondering... how exactly did you manage to get so many pegasus feathers?"

"Oh, those." The Servant look relieved. "Well, Celestia often gets them in the mail along with letters, as a kind of tribute, so we have the royal seamstresses make pillows and beds out of them. Down comforters and beds are very rare, you know. We normally don't use them in the guest room, but Celestia wanted us to treat you like we would her, so..."

The servant let his voice trail off. Twilight turned and walked back in the room. A tribute. As far as Twilight knew, a lot of pegasi kept their old feathers, as a memento of sorts. Anything to do with their ability to fly was very special to them. Rainbow had lost one at her house once, and she had promptly picked it up and flew back to her cloud home, without even saying goodbye. When she returned, a few minutes later, she apologized to Twilight and explained that she had kept all her feathers in a jar. As far as she knew, Fluttershy did the same. Giving a feather to the Princess would have to be either an act of extreme fear or deep love, to the point of fanaticism. But she really didn't want to think about that now. It reminded her too much of her hospitalized friends.

Applejack was waiting for her at the door. "I think we need to talk, Sugarcube."

"I know, Applejack." Twilight sighed. She had that same look again.

"Well, see, I left Applebloom back at the farm, and she probably saw the whole thing. And she really didn't look too certain that Celestia wasn't really mad at me. So, I think she might be back at the farm, worryin' that I'm next on the Sun lightning bolt thingy-

"Solar flare," Twilight corrected

"Solar flare, right, well anyway," Applejack continued, "Well, she might think I'm next on her solar flare list. Or that Snowflake was me."

"Well, you do have a point. I'm sure all the fillies and colts in Ponyville were disturbed by that..." Twilight considered this for a minute. Everypony had just seen a member of the community executed in front of them, in the most spectacular way possible. It was almost as if Celestia intended them to watch. "But that pony had wings. I think she might have saw that."

"Well, what if Big Macintosh saw it, and thought it was me?" Applejack questioned, "I mean, he probably saw it, but he would have been too far away to see any details."

"Well, that's out of our control," Twilight said. "You could always ask Celestia to send someone."

"I might take yah up on that offer." Applejack said, starting to panic again.

"Guys, have you tried these beds?" Pinkie said, starting to bounce on the bed, "So comfortable! I mean, it's like you're sleeping in a mound of snowflakes! Oh, wait..."

"Anyway, darling, I'm sure they'll be fine," Rarity said, jumping into the conversation, "Although I'm still not sure that Snowflake deserved that..."

"Well, he did almost kill Fluttershy and Rainbow," Applejack muttered, "And Celestia was probably pretty angry. But, I mean, what if she's angry about the rhubarb?"

Twilight noticed Applejack beginning to panic again. She was concerned, before what Applejack had just said hit her.

"Wait, rhubarb? What about it?"

"Well, uh, I was growin' some, ya see," Applejack's panic was briefly overtaken by awkwardness, "In the barn, ya know, to get some money for Granny Smith. Celestia said she was okay with it, but if she was just lying to cheer me up..."

"Hey! Guys! You should go and get some cupcakes from the kitchen! They were so good! Especially the sprinkles!" Pinkie Pie said, swinging her hooves in the direction of the door while in mid-air.

"And she could have just been messing with us the entire time! What if she never really wanted help, and just wanted a way to get rid of us? Rainbow and Fluttershy could have been a happy accident! And now, we're not only in Canterlot, but in her palace! Rainbow and Fluttershy could be gone already, and we could be next!"

Applejack was almost hyperventilating. Twilight tried to calm her down. "Applejack, I don't think she needed to lure us here. Snowflake proved she doesn't need

to be subtle. Plus, you saw Rainbow and Fluttershy. They were being taken care of. If Celestia wanted them dead, she could have just left them where they lay."

Applejack seemed to calm down a bit, although Twilight could tell that her nerves were still on end.

"Well, I don't think she has anything against us, but I'm rather shocked she actually killed Snowflake. I never really thought of her in that light," Rarity said, joining in again, "And Snowflake was probably begging for his life the entire time he was up there. That must not have been easy to ignore."

Twilight thought about it for a while. "Actually, I'm pretty sure she couldn't even hear him. The amount of concentration that kind of magic would require... well, I don't know if Celestia even registered anything around her."

"Well, that might be true, but-" Rarity began, before Pinkie Pie cut her off.

"Girls, you need to cheer up a bit! We're going to the kitchen. *Now.*" Pinkie shouted, grabbing Twilight by a leg. She proceeded to drag her out the door and down the corridors the servant had previously lead them down. Rarity and Applejack followed behind her, exasperated. Twilight wanted to continue talking, but Pinkie Pie was obviously taking the situation pretty hard.

Halfway down the hall, a guard rushed them. "Excuse me, ladies, is there anything I can do for you?" He bowed halfway through the sentence.

"No, we can get it ourselves, thanks," Twilight said, still being dragged by Pinkie Pie. When she looked back later, the guard was still bowing.

They reached the kitchen shortly after. A few cooks were still standing around the entrance, apparently waiting for somepony to request something. When they saw Twilight and company, they quickly bowed.

"Is there anything we can get you, ladies?" One asked, her face still touching the floor.

"Cupcakes! Those delicious ones you made for me!" Pinkie Pie said, starting to bounce.

The cooks immediately got up and trotted into the kitchen. Twilight was glad they left. Having people bow to her wasn't exactly fun.

Pinkie continued to bounce, evidently happy her plan had succeeded. No pony talked for about five minutes, then the cooks came back, carrying a tray of cupcakes. Pinkie promptly began to walk towards the dining room, Twilight and company following behind her.

After they sat down, the cooks placed the tray on the table, then bowed their heads and retreated back to the kitchen. Twilight took a bite of her cupcake. Pinkie was right, these were delicious.

They finished their food in silence. Applejack got up, still obviously nervous, and began to walk back. Twilight did likewise. Rarity and Pinkie didn't look like they really wanted to leave, but they followed Twilight all the same.

Applejack was still pretty far ahead, evidently desperate to get back to their room. She turned a corner, then abruptly halted, bending her front legs at the knee in a deep bow. Twilight took about a minute to catch up to her, expecting to see Celestia, but this princess was smaller, her coat the blue of a bright night sky. Twilight gasped slightly, then bowed herself. She hadn't seen Luna for quite a while. She was mysteriously absent from the Gala, most newspapers, and even word of mouth. No pony really talked about her much. That, combined with the fact Twilight had hit her with ridiculous amounts of magic at the last Summer Sun Festival, meant Luna probably didn't like her very much.

"I would like a word," Luna said, gesturing for them to rise. She turned and walked down the corridor, expecting them to follow.

Chapter 7

Luna closed the door, making sure to lock it behind her. A guard rushing in would not be good. She swallowed. This was mostly likely a very bad idea, but she needed answers. She took a deep breath, then turned around to face the others.

They were standing in a rough semicircle some three feet away from her. The purple one -Twilight? Yes, that was her name- was standing slightly ahead of the others. Luna decided to address her.

"Okay, on to business. Could somepony please explain what is going on?" Luna said, bracing herself. She had gotten over most of her initial fear of Celestia, but it still lingered.

"Well, a lot of things are going on. Could you be slightly more specific?" Twilight said, evidently surprised at her question.

"Well, there are a lot of questions," Luna said, still trying to be at least a bit reserved. No, this wasn't working. Being blunt would be best. "I want to know why my sister, whom I have never seen shedding a single tear, is sobbing like a mother who found out her filly is dead."

Twilight recoiled slightly in shock. Hm, so she didn't know after all. This might be a waste of time...

Twilight cleared her throat, then spoke in a measured tone, "Well, there might be a few reasons for that... She did just kill somepony."

"I don't really think- I mean, she started when- I think it might be my fault." Luna felt her voice lose some of its authority. "She seemed stressed but okay, then I started talking to her, and..."

Her voice trailed off. It was as if she had lost the ability to speak. She took a few deep breaths before continuing, "I was scared of her, and I tried to hide it, but... I think I failed."

Twilight seemed confused. "But why would you be afraid? You're also a royal sister, right?"

"Well, I thought we were pretty equal, yes," Luna began, suddenly not wanting to be in the room, "But she just- She made the sun red and-"

Suddenly Luna started talking faster, frantic, "And she moved the moon out of the way! Without a second thought! And there was so much magic in the air- I got hit with the Elements of Harmony, and I had never felt that kind of power before! She didn't even have to think to push me out of the sky! I thought she had struggled to trap me in

the moon, that she regretted it, but after that, I think she might have been merciful! I'm disposable, she can easily raise both on her own..."

She had run out of breath. She tried to inhale to continue, but Twilight spoke before she got a chance. "Well, there was a reason for the red sun. I mean, she was already under stress from all the fear, and seeing Fluttershy and Rainbow like that... I think it pushed her over the edge."

"Wait, fear?" Luna's panic was replaced by sudden confusion. Celestia had never spoke about fear to her.

"Of all her subjects. The normal ponies that fear her, you know. She's told you about this, right?" Twilight looked concerned, then took a step towards Luna.

"Well, no... And, wait, what happened to Fluttershy? Rainbow? Those names seem familiar." Luna said. Everypony else in the room was staring at her. "Aren't they friends of yours? Celestia reads your letters to me sometimes, I think you mentioned them once or twice."

"You... You really don't know anything about this, do you?" The orange one to Twilight's left spoke for the first time. Luna shook her head.

"Well..." Twilight attempted to speak, but she evidently had no idea what to say. "Maybe it would be a good idea to- H-here, let's-"

Twilight was interrupted by a loud banging on the door. Luna froze. Who was it?

"Are Twilight and her friends in there?" Celestia said, sounding panicked. "Something happened. With Fluttershy."

There was a collective gasp from the smaller ponies in the room. Luna didn't know what was going on, but Twilight and company were evidently very concerned. The pink one rushed to the door, struggling with the lock for a while. Twilight and the other two quickly followed.

Finally, she managed to unlock and open the door. Celestia saw them, then started galloping in the direction of the hospital. The others followed hot on her heels. Luna thought for a moment, then chased after them.

Fluttershy awoke with a jolt. She had been dreaming that she was... that a mob was...

She tried to sit up, but couldn't. Why couldn't she? Why wasn't she...

She tried again. Nothing. She tried to move her wings. Nothing. She opened her eyes, just now registering that she hadn't done so. She was laying down in a bed, but it wasn't hers. She wasn't even in her room. The ceiling above her was white, not the green she had. She tried to move her hind legs again. Nothing. She tried to move her neck. That, at least, worked. She lifted her head slightly.

Oh Celestia. All her fur had been shaved off. She had a horrible, long, surgical scar straight down her stomach, and several more off-shooting that. That wasn't the worst part, though. All over her body, various instruments protruded. A large tube stuck

out from her stomach, two smaller ones went from blood vessels in her arms to a large machine, and various metal rods stuck out from most of the bones in her body. She felt something coming from her neck as well. Her hooves were strapped to the table, as if to prevent movement.

Fluttershy stared at it for a moment, then tore her vision to her right.

There was a doctor standing there. Maybe he could explain what was going on. She tried to talk, but only managed to throw herself into a coughing fit.

A medical unicorn turned around. "Oh, horseapples, you're awake. Here, Celestia wanted to know right away. I'll send a guard to fetch- ask her if she wants to come here."

As he ran off, Fluttershy remembered it all. The mob... Snowflake... She had liked Snowflake. He was so nice. But- but he- but...

A cough from beside her derailed her train of thought. Fluttershy managed to turn her head to the left, then immediately regretted it.

Rainbow Dash was sprawled on the bed next to her, wings in some sort of harness. A nurse rushed up to Rainbow and wiped some blood from her chin. Normally Rainbow seemed so strong, but now... she had such a look of hopelessness that Fluttershy couldn't look at her. She turned away, looking at the ceiling.

She still had no feeling in her legs. That, combined with the various metal she had sticking out of her back, suggested a spinal injury. Fluttershy knew there was a chance she wouldn't be able to even walk after this was all over. Then again, she was in Celestia's royal hospital. The medical Unicorns here *were* the best in Equestria, and Celestia herself might be willing to donate magic for her recovery. . .

Fluttershy's thoughts were interrupted by the door opening. Through it walked Celestia. Fluttershy attempted to bow her head, but the tube on her neck got in the way.

Celestia swallowed. "Can you understand me?"

Fluttershy wasn't sure how to respond, so she tried to make an affirmative noise. It didn't sound good, but Celestia evidently took it as a "yes."

"First of all, I'm sorry. So sorry." Celestia said, sighing slightly. She looked down for a moment, then continued. "The magic wasn't enough. You were hurt too badly. The doctors... They tried something different. An old earth pony method. The metal should make sure your bones grow back correctly. You've been in surgery for almost a full day."

Celestia looked to the ground again, then seemed to summon strength, and continued talking. "They are also going to try to use it to conduct healing magic, but it might not work. There is a possibility you won't be able to walk again. Flying again is unlikely."

Fluttershy had no reaction. Why didn't she react? She should be afraid- or sad- or depressed- or angry at Snowflake- or anything. But she couldn't seem to feel any emotion. Just... hollowness. It was worse than anything else.

Celestia swallowed. "But you don't want to talk to me. You probably don't want to see me. And you have good reason..."

She walked to the door, muttered "Sorry," and exited.

A few minutes after she left, the door opened again. Twilight, tentatively, showed herself. She had been waiting, panicking, since Celestia had hastily explained the emergency surgery. "Fluttershy?"

She saw the broken pony on the hospital bed, then quickly sucked in a breath. Nothing could...

She tried to summon some energy, something that would let her continue with her head up, but to no avail. Slowly, near-tears, she walked in. Applejack tried to follow her, but stopped at the door. She managed to force her legs to keep walking, to keep her upright, but she wanted to collapse. She had never seen anything... No, she couldn't think about that. She took a few more strides. Rarity tried to enter as well, but it was too much. She retreated back into the waiting room, then fainted.

The last to enter was Pinkie Pie. She went through the door bouncing, but stopped after getting a look at Fluttershy. For once, Pinkie Pie didn't feel happy at all. This was worse than thinking her friends didn't like her parties. So much worse. She tried to talk, to say something that would make everybody happy like she always did, but nothing came to mind. Something always came to mind. She was Pinkie Pie. She was the Element of Laughter. But... there was nothing here to laugh about.

Pinkie felt something she hadn't felt for a long time. She had banished the emotion from her mind the minute she saw that beautiful rainbow and decided to throw a party. It was that feeling that things would never get better, that she would be stuck on a rock farm her entire life, that the world was gray, that parties couldn't make anything better. She felt a tear slip from her eye. She hadn't cried in a long time.

The feeling brought with it a flood of thoughts. She had the worst special talent in Equestria, didn't she? Parties might make people feel better for a short while, but they were temporary. She'd never make beautiful music, or feed hungry ponies, or draw a beautiful picture. She just threw stupid parties. She was worthless. She was absolutely-

A noise from the other end of the room snapped her out of her thoughts. She glanced over. Rainbow lay in her bed, still a bit out of it. "Pinkie, are you..."

"No. I'm not." Pinkie said, full-on crying now. "Why did this happen?"

"Because... I don't know." Rainbow coughed, her lungs sounding worn out and dry, "There was really no reason. I guess... I don't guess."

Pinkie nodded. There was no reason. The world used to make sense. Everypony was happy. No, that wasn't right, she saw that now. They acted happy, but they weren't. Things had always been this way, hadn't they?

"You're right. No reason." Pinkie said. She didn't feel like Pinkie Pie anymore.

Twilight glanced at Pinkie. She should say something, but she couldn't. A few tears slipped from her eyes as well. She looked at Fluttershy again.

Her eyes no longer had something to them. They were lacking a certain luster, a certain uniqueness. They were empty. No fear, no love, no hate, no... anything. Twilight knew she would probably get over it, but seeing her like that now... it was awful. Pinkie was the same way.

"I'm sorry. About all of this. If I hadn't tried to help..." Twilight caught herself speaking. The words had just slipped out.

"It's not your fault." Dash said. She looked as if she wanted to say more, but she remained silent.

From a crack in the door, her thought was finished. "It's mine." Celestia whispered.

Chapter 8

Celestia paced away from the door. She didn't need to watch anymore. She went to a nearby window. Luna reached out to grab her shoulder, but Celestia gently nudged it away. She looked her sister in the eye. They stared at each other for a second. Something passed between them, and Luna made no attempt to stop Celestia as she jumped, her wings automatically flinging out behind her. She almost wished they hadn't. She descended in a smooth spiral, hitting the ground softly.

She looked around. No pony was around the hospital this early in the morning. Good. She didn't want to see anyone. She began to walk again, head down.

I'm a murderer. I'm a tyrant. I'm a tyrannical god. She thought, not paying any attention to her surroundings. *I am the reason two ponies are lying broken in a hospital bed. I made some pony beg for his life for ten minutes.*

She couldn't think of anything else. She was an awful pony. She walked in silence for a few hours. She should probably be raising the sun, but she didn't. She didn't have the energy.

Ponies began to get up, surprised it was still night. Uneasy, most went about their business, before stopping and bowing after seeing Celestia. She glanced fleetingly at a few. All were shaking, terrified beyond measure. Every pony in Equestria had either seen her kill somebody, or heard the story by now. There would no longer be any slight fears. Terror would reign from now on. And she could do *nothing*.

She walked on. She had no real idea where she was going. Just... away. As far away as her hooves would carry her.

She briefly thought about flying, but decided against it. The temptation to tuck her wings in and just fall would be too great, and her dying was the only thing worse than her living.

She had made it out of Canterlot, and was now on a small mountain road. No pony else was around. Good.

After about three hours of walking, she glanced around. She had gotten off the mountain and into a large empty field. It most likely belonged to a farmer who was resting it this year.

Celestia looked around. The grass here was really tall... Probably tall enough to hide her. She walked about a hundred yards in a random direction, then collapsed on the ground. She had walked at least fifteen miles today, and she hadn't slept for a while. She was asleep in seconds, Luna's moon still lingering over what should have been a nice day.

I'm diving, my wings tucked in, gaining speed. I must escape. I need to escape. My life depends on me flying as far away as I can as fast as I can. They cannot catch me.

The world around me is a canvas of dim purple light. It's the middle of the night, and I am being chased by an unknown force. I force my wings out, breaking the dive, and flap hard. I use my magic to aid my flight, reaching speeds that I never thought possible. But still they gain. Their leader grabs me.

"You murdered me." The white pony says, ash leaking from his burned eye sockets. "You killed me in front of everypony I knew."

I want to beg for mercy, but he's right. I go limp, waiting for him to hit me. He does, his charred hoof making contact with my chest. Another blow, a hoof to the face. I can feel my bones breaking, my wings being torn off. I am near death. I beg for it to come, to remove the guilt and pain, but it doesn't. I continue being beaten. He forces my eyes open. Blood and ash pour from his mouth and eyes. Then, he drops me.

I fall into a room. I'm suddenly fine now, but this fact seems to have no effect. A pegasus couple is eating dinner in silence. The mare is crying. I realize the stallion is snow-white, and know who he is. Suddenly, he turns around.

"*You!*" he screeches. "Come to finish the job?"

Snowflake's mother sees me too. "You bitch, you killed my colt! You killed him! And I had to watch, I couldn't tear my eyes away! My poor little Snowy..."

She breaks into a new fit of sobs as the father stands up. He has a knife in his mouth. I get into a defensive pose, then relax. I deserve this.

He advances to me. Metal pierces flesh, and my blood is spilled all over his floor. He stabs me again, between my ribs. I feel it puncture my heart. I give into death gladly.

I'm standing in the courtyard of my palace. Ponies in cloaks are bowing all around me.

"All hail Celestia, the holy one!" they begin chanting.

"No, I'm just a pony!" I'm screaming. "Just... No!"

One of them brings a small filly up to me. She doesn't even have her cutie mark yet.

"Accept this sacrifice, oh great one!" he says, placing her at my feet. I try to run away, but I can only get outside of the circle before my legs stop working. I am forced to turn around and watch.

"I want my mommy!" The filly begins to cry. "Mommy..."

A pony walks up to her. She suddenly stops sniffing. "Mommy!"

"Yes, sweetie, mommy's here," she coos. Maybe it's not that bad after all.

The filly is still laying on the ground. "Mommy!" She says happily.

The pony suddenly pulls a knife from her cloak. "For Celestia!" She screams, then drives the knife downwards.

I'm in Ponyville. I look around. I'm in the town square, ponies surrounding me. They are holding rocks in their mouths.

Twilight approaches me, holding a paper. "For the murder of Snowflake, you are hereby sentenced to death by stoning."

She looks me in the eye, and I see she is crying. "How could you? I love you." She whispers, then gallops off.

A stone hits my flank. I don't see who threw it. Another hits my ribs. I feel them crack

More rocks fly, propelled by magic and kicks. They hit my legs, neck, face. My vision is going dark. I look back. My ribs are sticking out of my chest. Everything goes black.

Twilight's friend Applejack has a noose around her head. A hooded pony nearby pulls a lever.

I try to scream "No," but it comes out as "Yes!"

I am forced to look to my right. Her sister is standing there. "That's what she gets for growing rhubarb."

The voice is mine. The filly begins to cry, and I hear myself laughing.

Sudden darkness, my laughter still ringing then a crack of light and silence. I am floating above my palace. I glance downwards.

I'm dead. I have hung myself from the balcony outside my window. I can still somehow see the scene out of body. Luna is trying in vain to raise the sun, but it no longer exists. Ponies all around scream, hug each other, share one last kiss. The planet drops in temperature. Ponies begin to weep, mother sobbing for the short lives of their fillies and colts. Ice forms everywhere. Some ponies decide that immediate death would be preferable to freezing, and jump off the various cliffs. A few pegasi fly high, then plummet to their deaths. I see one unicorn couple stab each other with their horns. The world goes black.

I'm back in Ponyville. Twilight and Luna stand above me. They're both alicorns, somehow.

"Dear Princess Celestia," Twilight begins, her tone mocking, "Today, I discovered that friends with power are the best friends. I also found out how much I hate you."

Luna laughs. "Twilight, shall we do it together?"

Twilight laughs as well. "But of course!"

Their horns both glow, and I am vaporized by the only two ponies who love me.

"Crack!"

The telltale sound of a stick snapping tore Celestia from her nightmare. Her eyes shot open, her heart racing. She had just... It was... Only a dream.

Well, running away isn't going to change anything. She thought, still laying there. *And I can't take the coward's way out...*

Her breathing slowed, her heartbeat returning to normal. It was still dark. Celestia stood up, then froze.

A very old, gray stallion, presumably the owner of the field, was standing some three feet away from her, cowering in fear. He had a cart full of firewood strapped to his back.

"Oh..." Celestia muttered, but the stallion had already unhitched himself and started galloping away. "Wait!" She called after him, but he didn't react. Well, he had just seen the ruler of everything and goddess of the sun asleep in his field. He had a right to be freaked out, really.

Celestia watched him for a while, then turned around. *Things aren't going to get as bad as that nightmare*, she thought, then looked around. She could barely see anything in the dark. She had probably only been asleep for...

The dark. It was still dark. She hadn't risen the sun...

It had been at least a day since anypony had seen sunlight. She muttered some choice obscenities, then opened her wings, rapidly gaining altitude. This was her responsibility, and she wasn't going to leave it by. She had already caused enough harm. In her haste, she flew slightly clumsily, and managed to hit herself with a wing more than twice. When she was about 30 feet off the ground, her horn began to glow. Slowly, she forced the sun - herself, really - to rise. The entire process took about ten minutes, which was a lot longer than usual for her.

Celestia stayed in place for a while, flapping her wings only enough to stay up. She really needed to get back to the palace. Most ponies would probably assume she was leaving the sun down intentionally, as some sort of punishment, after seeing her vaporize Snowflake. Mass panic was likely...

She snorted in frustration. She had screwed up *again*. Any hope she had was running through her hooves like sand. Well, great. Maybe Twilight had some idea- well, assuming she didn't hate Celestia for what had happened to Dash and Fluttershy...

She turned around. Well, nothing she could do about that now. She began to flap again, heading towards the castle. She was in Canterlot in a little less than thirty minutes.

She glanced downwards, then did a double-take. Well, she was certainly right about mass panic. The city was a mess. A few buildings were on fire, and those that weren't had most of the windows broken. Graffiti was everywhere, from ornate drawings of a dead Celestia (captioned with "Ponykind killed her") to simple text ("Celestia is DEAD," "we DESERVE this," "WE DIDNT LISTEN.") The city was almost unrecognizable, and it had only happened in a few hours...

Celestia flew faster. Her castle in the distance appeared to be untouched, but she wasn't sure if the same could be said of the residents within. A few minutes later, she had made it. She touched down right outside of the room containing the broken ponies, then bolted for the door. She practically kicked it down, desperate to-

Celestia was hit with a burst of magic the second the door was open. She was knocked back a good ten feet before colliding with a wall.

"You *do not* touch my fr..." She heard Twilight say, before she realized who she had just blasted. She gasped. "OH! Princess, I am so so sorry, I just thought that you were one of those crazy rioting ponies, and that you were going to hurt Dash and Fluttershy, and I really didn't mean to-"

"It's fine." Celestia groaned, attempting to dislodge herself from the drywall. "Just glad you're okay."

"Thanks." Twilight squeaked. "Here, let me..."

Celestia felt herself being tugged from the wall by Twilight's magic, then being placed gently on the floor. She stood up, her head aching.

"Damn, I can see why you're my prized pupil," she muttered, trying to stay up. "That was some powerful magic..." She got up, before falling to the ground again. Maintaining consciousness wasn't going to be easy.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Princess. I was just afraid that..." Twilight began, before being interrupted again.

"No, no, it's okay." Celestia said, getting up again. "I'm glad you defended... wait, where are my guards? Shouldn't they have been... you know... guarding?"

"Well, they're all out looking for you. Princess, things have gotten really bad. The city is going to burn to the ground if you don't do something."

The sudden seriousness came as a bit of a shock to Celestia, but she shook her head and cleared her confusion. "Okay. I guess... would it... Twilight, what do you recommend?"

Twilight looked a bit taken aback that the princess was asking for her advice. She had always looked up to Celestia, and the thought that she wanted her input... it was almost touching.

"Well, I think a public address would be best. And soon." Twilight said. "You're not really going to have a chance to write anything, so I guess you should just... wing it?"

Behind them, Dash groaned. "That was insensitive."

"Oh, sorry." Twilight muttered, then turned to Celestia. "And, really, you should do it really soon. Like... now."

"Okay." Celestia said, starting to panic. She had never been good at public speaking, and that was with notes in front of her. This would be interesting, to say the least. "So... where should I do it?"

"Hm. Well, a lot of ponies are in your courtyard, and those that aren't probably

followed you when you came here. You flew, right?” Twilight paused, then continued at Celestia’s nod. “Well, in that case, the ideal place to speak to as many ponies as possible would be that balcony outside your bedroom.”

Celestia swallowed. That was the balcony she had hung herself from in the dream. Well, no sense telling everypony about that. Besides, talking to Twilight had lifted her spirits quite a bit. Or maybe hitting her head had done that. Either way, she was feeling better.

A few minutes later, Celestia was in her room, preparing to walk out and face the crowd. Twilight, who had left the others in the infirmary with a few guards and followed Celestia, wished her luck, and she stepped out onto the balcony.

As she faced the huge crowd of ponies in various states of panic, she realized she had no idea what to say.

“Um. Hello, everypony...”

Chapter 9

Deep breaths. She had given millions of speeches before. Admittedly, a good portion of them... okay, all of them had been written by somepony else, but she knew the basics. Start out with a joke. No, wait, this was too serious. But lightening the mood would be nice...

"Uh..." She said aloud. "So... like I said, hi..."

Stupid Stupid Stupid! A voice screamed in her head. A good start was the best way to a good speech, and now that was out of reach. Okay, she could still recover.

"As most of you are probably aware, it has been night for the past day." She began, then realized the awkward wording. Whatever, she had this. "This is due to a series of factors that..."

No, this wasn't right at all. She should have apologized first, but now she was in the middle of explaining. Well, great. "Uh... Well, I should probably apologize first, shouldn't I?"

Oh no, that was a bad move. Now she sounded sarcastic, which she wasn't. *StupidStupidStupid.* "Well, um, sorry, then..."

This was not going well. The best plan at this point would be to dive right into the thick of things. "And, in addition to the night, you are probably aware that I... erm, whipped somepony with a solar flare."

Nope, that wasn't the best plan at all. Great. But she could still rescue this. "There are concrete reasons for that, however."

And now she had made it seem like she thought Snowflake deserved it. Which, to be honest, she almost did, but murder was a little far. Okay, deep breath. "I think that starting at the beginning of this story would be best."

Well, great. Now she would have to tell them about all the trauma the fear was causing her, which was a very bad idea. She supposed she could just gloss over it... "Well, basically, I was having a very stressful day. Week, really. So, to cool off, I went to my student Twilight's house for a night."

NO! That was not how she should have worded that. A quick glance at the crowd showed a strange mixture of repulsion and jealousy. Great.

Behind her, Twilight simultaneously hit her forehead with a hoof and blushed. *Did she just... If we ever get out of this mess, I am never living that down.*

Celestia scrambled to find a way to fix the sentence, suddenly blurting, "It wasn't like *that*..."

There was something about the inflection of that sentence that was entirely wrong. Her exasperation had been twisted somewhere in her larynx to come out almost flirtatiously, which was only slightly behind “random meteor kills me and the sun goes out” on her list of the worst things that could happen at that point in time.

Behind her, Twilight facehoofed again. *Well, we’re screwed.*

“Anyway... Twilight decided to get her friends while I was asleep, to try and help with a problem of mine she couldn’t solve her own...”

NONONONONO! She hadn’t said anything about them trying to help her relieve the fear yet, and in context this was-

Dammit, she was blushing! Yes, she was embarrassed, but not because she had just told something she shouldn’t have, but because... she stamped a hoof in frustration.

Twilight briefly considered running and jumping off the balcony, before deciding against it. *If any of my friends hear a single word of this... oh buck, my parents live in Canterlot! They’re probably hearing all of this!*

Jumping suddenly became a much more attractive option.

Maybe I should just pretend that never happened, Celestia reasoned, then spoke. “So, Twilight went to get her friend Applejack, and it turned out her family had been afraid for some time that Twilight would come calling and bring her to me...”

She had just done it again, hadn’t she?

Behind her, Twilight tentatively took a step towards the edge, but decided against following through.

“So, let’s cut to the chase: Twilight went to ask one pegasus friend to get another since she can’t fly. On the way to do so, said pony said or did something that made another pony angry. Very angry. And he somehow managed to get a mob formed, which proceeded to *beat* both pegasi that Twilight was friends with half to death. And they did it in *my name* and threw them at *my doorstep!*” Celestia realized that she was obviously crying. And screaming. Before she could calm down, she spoke again. “And I was so angry I took their leader, who only did this horrible thing because I’m the damn Sun, and *killed him* with the thing he *valued so highly.*”

She was almost surprised at how bitter she sounded. “So, then I have the *honor* of taking ponies who are severely injured, because of *me*, to the hospital. And, after major surgery, I got to tell a pony who’s dream is to be a Wonderbolt she’s *grounded for a year - at the very least* - and may *never fully recover.* And, of course, watch her reaction.”

She was hysterical. “Not only that, but I get to tell another pony that there is a good chance she will never even *walk* again, much less fly. *Because of me.*”

“I try to run away, to just leave town and sleep, but that’s not enough. My own brain has to compound my guilt with a nightmare so terrible...” her voice trailed off. “That... that I couldn’t raise the Sun.”

She was a wreck, sobbing like crazy, and the entire point of this speech was to reassure the populace. She glanced around. Everypony was silent, shocked. And *scared*. She had no idea what to do, nopony to turn to. In desperation, she ran back into her room and closed the door, crying, "I'm sorry!"

As she began sobbing on Twilight's shoulder, she heard the crowd erupt into chaos, even through her solid oak door.

After Celestia's speech, nopony knew what to do. Hide? Riot? Just go home? Everypony was confused.

Everypony, that is, except for a select few, Space Bloom included. The minute the speech was over, she rushed to a local pub on the corner of Rosebud and Sunny. Once there, she went into the back and tapped the wall with her horn four times. The wall swung open, and she stepped inside.

The floor she was standing on descended slowly. She wiped a drop of sweat off her brow. This wasn't good.

She made it to the basement, immediately beginning a brisk trot down the hall. She turned a corner, entering a room filled with other ponies. She sat down in a chair.

"Well?" Night Oil, who was sitting at the head of the table, asked.

"It's worse then we thought. The idiot Snowflake hurt one of Celestia's - praise to her name - friends, as we guessed. But Celestia - the holy one - is more upset about this fact then we thought. She is feeling incredible guilt over the entire affair," Space Bloom said formally. "Additionally, she has confirmed our suspicions regarding her relationship with Twilight."

"That lucky filly," A dark blue pegasus snorted behind her.

"Evening Sky, silence," Night Oil ordered. "Snowflake was a mistake from the start. He loved Celestia - the one deserving of all love - a bit too much. It clouded his judgement. We should never have let him in."

"Agreed," Space answered. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well, we have a few members who might tell everypony everything in this time of crisis. They need to disappear," Night Oil said.

The table muttered in agreement. "Which guardians do we take out?"

"Cloudy Sky, Lightning Bolt, Blueberry Blitz, Loose Soil... most of that crowd. Basically, everypony with three hits or less under their belt."

"That's a lot of hits for one night. What do we do with the bodies?" Space asked.

"The usual," Night replied. "I know this is a big task, but the guardians of the holy one must remain intact. For the good of our princess and Equestria. Now, on with your mission!"

The ponies left the room at once, leaving Night Oil alone with Space Bloom.

She spoke up tentatively. "Sir, are you sure we're doing the right thing?"

"Of course. Those who would dare disrespect Celestia must be dealt with. It's what she would want. That's why this organization was founded." He replied. "You mustn't lose faith. We are doing the right thing."

"Of course, sir."

The brown pony walked home in silence. He had made a serious mistake. That group he had joined was hurting Celestia more than it was helping. He had to tell everypony about it.

The horror of the things he had done struck him from the minute Celestia ran inside. Arson. Murder. Bribery. He was a terrible pony, but he had a chance at redemption, if he could only get the word out. It wouldn't be that hard, would it? Once word got out that Celestia wasn't the one-

He heard a noise behind him, and his heart sank. "Hello?"

"Loose Soil," a voice muttered. "You are about to dishonor Celestia and her guardians. You know the punishment."

"No! No please!" Loose Soil backpedaled. "Don't you realize what we're doing is wrong?"

"Celestia is worth the life of somepony as worthless as anypony who would disrespect her," the pony retorted, advancing on him, knife in hoof.

The assassin knew that she was fighting another guardian, so her job was going to be harder. This pony had less experience than her, but he was bigger...

Soil jumped at her, hooves flailing. He wasn't himself. The assassin smiled. This would be easy...

She dodged the clumsy blows easily, smoothly stepping to her left. She brought the knife upwards, catching Soil across the face.

His eyes went wide in shock, then she brought it down. It caught his brain stem cleanly, killing him instantly. It was good work.

She smiled slightly. No witnesses, clean kill. Perfect. She grabbed his rapidly cooling hind legs with magic, dragging him into a nearby field. His body was burned in less than an hour.

She made her way to the pub. One threat down, a few more to go.

Chapter 10

Celestia couldn't sleep. The events of the past few days were playing over and over in her head. Killing someone. The nightmare. Giving everypony in Equestria the idea she and Twilight were-

She snorted in frustration. There wasn't a single thing she had done right for almost a week. She laid there for another hour before realizing that sleep wasn't going to come any time soon. She rolled out of bed, not fully landing on her feet. Her chest touched the ground, the marble cooling her hot fur slightly. She got up, and then checked a wall clock. 2:30 AM. Well, as far as she knew, only one pony would be up at this hour.

She walked to the mirror that dominated the wall in front of her bed, turning on the small vanity sink there. She splashed her face with water a few times, removing the residue of her previous tears. She paced across the room and magically opened the door.

The corridors of the castle were empty, the lights dimmed. Celestia used a bit of magic to make her horn glow so she could see easier. The various portraits and busts of her face seemed to stare at her mockingly through the dim light. She quickened her pace slightly, trotting up the long staircase to the observatory.

A few minutes later, she reached the summit. Luna was sitting on the purple-and-black tiled floor, using the telescope to gaze at the stars. Celestia had used that telescope to gaze at the moon during her sister's banishment, regret dully welling up inside her.

"Sister?" Celestia asked, still a bit groggy.

Luna quickly pulled herself from the eyepiece. "Oh, you're awake."

Celestia sat next to her. "Couldn't sleep."

"I can understand why," Luna said gently. She nudged Celestia with a shoulder. "Hey, as long as you're up, take a look."

Luna motioned for Celestia to look through the eyepiece. She obliged, putting her eye against it. The moon was bright and vibrant, just beginning to come down from the sky. Solar dust and stars painted the sky a canvas of blue and purple. "It's a beautiful night..."

Luna nodded, "I try."

Celestia leaned back from the large telescope, looking at her sister. "So..."

"So..."

They sat in silence for a while, before Luna spoke up. "It wasn't your fault, you know. No pony could have made a good speech in that situation."

"That might be true, but I screwed up in the worst way possible. Most of Canterlot now thinks my relationship with Twilight is-"

She was unable to finish the sentence.

"I know." Luna said, placing a hoof on her shoulder. "But it's still not your fault. Any pony would have done the same thing under the stress you were under."

"I guess."

They looked at the stars for a few more minutes before Celestia cleared her throat. "I sometimes envy you, you know."

Luna looked startled. "Why?"

"You're not always in the limelight. I know that you once wanted to be-" Celestia hesitated. She hadn't brought up the entire Nightmare Moon incident since it had happened. Still, she pressed on. "But it's really not worth it. I mean, look at me."

Her sister did so. Celestia's head was slightly drooping, and she was sitting slouched back a bit. Everything about her posture screamed that she was depressed, almost broken but somehow continuing on. Luna didn't even have to look in her eyes to realize the pain her sister was in.

After a while, Celestia continued, "And, to be honest, I almost like the moon better. I mean, you can actually look at it without going blind, it doesn't give off enough heat to cause some poor lost ponies to die of thirst... Admittedly, the sun keeps everything alive, but that's a hard job to do."

She sighed, stretching out until she was lying on the floor. "I don't really know anymore."

After about ten minutes, Celestia was asleep, her sister watching over her.

Night Oil gazed up at the sky. About ten minutes until sunrise. He took a slight breath, glancing behind him. The other five were in place, as were the various instruments which would also be needed. The herd was in place as well, patiently sitting on rocks. A prick of red light appeared above the horizon.

Night Oil flung off his yellow robe. Now that the night was over, he could safely bask in the first rays of the dawn. Space Bloom rushed behind him, handing him a large book with Celestia's cutie mark on the cover. He opened it to the proper page.

"Another day dawns at last!" he said aloud.

"Praise to Celestia!" the crowd behind him chorused.

"Today is a glorious day indeed, my fellows," Oil continued, turning to face them. "Today we have purged our own herd, to make it more glorious in our god's time of need!"

The five behind him made various affirmative noises. "The unclean have caused our deity pain in the fullest degree, my brethren. The evil one, Snowflake-"

He was cut off by the more zealous of the herd shouting, "May he suffer the curse of Nightmare Moon!"

Night Oil smiled. This was easier than he had thought. "Yes, my brothers and sisters, yes. The evil one, Snowflake, was foolish enough to harm ponies who were not only friends of Celestia, but also Elements of Harmony! Reports from the scene indicate that he decided to harm them after the Element of Kindness said she considered Celestia 'normal.'"

The crowd was confused. No doubt they all thought this crime would be worthy of punishment. But, of course, they were wrong. Oil continued, "He thought this was an insult to Celestia, but it was not, my friends, it was not."

He began to pace. "Of course, Celestia is not normal. She is worthy of all love and praise, and much wiser than a normal pony. But the Element was not normal either. You see, the Elements are the closest ponies in power to Celestia. Not as powerful, not even close, but closer than other ponies. So, of course the Element would think Celestia is 'normal.' To her, such a level of greatness almost is."

Understanding dawned on his herd's faces. "And Snowflake made other mistakes as well. He was foolish enough to take them directly to Celestia, to attempt to gain credit for himself. He actually thought he was worthy to stand in her presence. You can see his folly clearly in hindsight."

They had finally realized the truth. He could see it on their faces. Satisfied, he turned around, facing the sun again. "But behold, the moment is at hoof!"

The very top of the sun was just visible over the horizon. Automatically, Oil bowed low. The herd behind him did the same. Oil sighed. "And, as you know, today happens to be the first of the month..."

The crowd behind him lost some enthusiasm, but stayed vigilant. They were getting to the less tasteful part of the celebration. Space Bloom rushed up to him again, this time carrying a cage. An owl was fluttering around inside, scared. "And, being the first of the month, we must show our

allegiance to Celestia and the day by removing one who is allied with the night by their nature...”

He used magic to lift the owl out. A gray pony behind him placed a wooden plank on the ground. He laid the owl down, and Space Bloom spread its wings out. The gray pony tied it down. Night Oil took a deep breath, then turned around. He grabbed a lens with magic, floating it to the owl. It hooted in fear before Space Bloom kicked its beak, cracking it.

He positioned the lens carefully, until it focused the light properly. The owl was obviously in pain. Good, that meant it was working. A few minutes later, he saw he was correct: the owl had a large burn in the center of its chest. He coughed. Burning feathers smelled so unpleasant.

Celestia yawned, walking into the kitchen. She hadn't eaten much in the past few days. She was swarmed with servants the minutes she walked in, but she brushed them off. "I'm going to make my own food, please."

They cleared the room immediately. She yawned again. She hadn't really slept well on the floor. She took a few steps over to a nearby counter, glancing at the food on it.

"Henry's Hay!" was in large letters over a picture of a smiling unicorn wearing a rather ridiculous hat. She turned it around and read the label. "Place 6 forks of Henry's Hay in 18 cups of boiling water. Let stew for ten minutes. Remove hay and magic dry. Place flavor packet in 10 cups of boiling water, let stew for a minute. Take water off heat and let cool to comfortable temperature. Add hay to broth, stirring well. Pairs well with salt lick."

Celestia grimaced. If she had managed to screw up scrambled applesauce, "Henry's Hay" was sure to be a disaster. Suddenly, raw hay didn't sound that bad. She opened the package and took a bite. It wasn't

terrible, but something more would definitely be better. Celestia turned back to the shelf. Almost all of the foodstuffs there were outside of her range of culinary skill, except one: "Equestrian Mills Oat n' Honey Crunch." That looked simple enough. She took the box to a table, setting it down. Let's see... milk, she needed milk. She walked to a nearby icebox, opening the door. After a bit of searching, she found the carton and set it on the table as well. Now all she needed was a bowl and a spoon. After searching in the cupboards for a minute, she was all set to eat.

She poured the milk, then added the cereal. After seeing that it floated, she realized that she had the wrong order. Still, though, she could eat it like this. Just pour enough cereal to make it almost overflow, eat that, then pour again. It wasn't the most efficient way to eat it, but it worked. She was full in a few minutes, and nothing the servants made had ever tasted as satisfying.
