

# Elements of Discord

By Midnight Shadow



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## Chapter 1

“AJ!” yelled Twilight over the pouring rain from what was left of her balcony, “three more ponies to the mayor’s house! Another tree went down!”

“Cornsarnit! But we ain’t finished here yet!” protested AJ from the square below, where she had briefly turned around from the work-gang behind her working to clear the debris from a fallen branch which had badly damaged some pony’s dwelling.

“Leave it! It’s down, there’s nopony left in that house and nopony’s going back tonight, there might be at the mayor’s place!”

“Ten-Four TS - MOVE ‘EM OOOONNNN!” AJ bellowed above the storm to her crew. With the wind howling and rain lashing the normally quiet town of ponyville that was no mean feat. She always had been a tough pony and was a natural at getting things done - with a little help. However, the forces of nature this night were proving a trial for everypony, and keeping up with the situation was more than a full-time job.

If things don’t ease up soon, thought Twilight, we’re going to be in *real* trouble...

Normally the weather in Equestria was controlled by its princess Celestia, helped along by the pegasi ponies that ruled the skies. Nopony remembered a time when a storm like this had snuck up unawares - they’d had storms before but this was something else, and barely under control. Rainbow Dash, a brave if foolhardy and brash pegasus, was leading her flock fighting the worst of the thunderheads. Two ponies had been downed already by lightning, and five more were suffering torn pinions and very soon were going to be forced to retire.

Dash gritted her teeth and pushed harder, *come on Dash, this is just like threading the needle in the flying competition, you can do it, you can’t let everypony down!*

She swept back her wings and punched upwards through the swirling vortex, breaking symmetry and dispersing the formation. For a brief moment, one brief quiet moment, she was above the noise and chaos. It was moments like this she lived for, when it seemed everything in the world

was there just for her. The stars, above the dark heavy clouds, were bright and cold, the moon full, its light illuminating the darkness. Since Luna had returned from her thousand-year exile, much had changed, and now it glowed brighter than ever.

Moments like that, however, seldom lasted. Dash's curve upwards flattened out and her smooth trajectory down was suddenly painfully bumpy.

*Crosswind! No!* Thought Dash to herself as her right wing was bent painfully back. With a squawk, she felt some important feathers being ripped away by the force of the gale.

"Oh horsefeathers," managed Dash, before any further words were stolen from her lips and she fell, plummeting like a rock.

Something heavy and yellow collided with her, it was Fluttershy! The normally quiet and reclusive pegasus was out here, for her! Dash felt a warmth that almost chased the pain in her wings away,

"I've got you, Dash," said Fluttershy softly, yet somehow through the noise was still heard, "but not for long...can you break our fall?"

"I think the ground's gonna do that Flutter...brace for impact!"

The two ponies hit the treetops in a clutter of hooves, manes, tails and wings - the snapping noises as branches gave way was terrible, but the actual injuries were somehow minimal. When the motion stopped, both were groaning quietly.

"Oh my my my, this is just awful, awful!" came a posh voice, borne by what appeared at first to be a glowing horn. It quickly became apparent that the glowing horn was attached to a unicorn-pony, named Rarity. Usually found in her shop, sewing exquisite dresses, she had been press-ganged into first-aid and healing. True, she took a while matching swatches to hide-colour but her dressings were second to none.

"How's it look, doc?" quipped Dash

"A nightmare...simply awful!"

Dash groaned, "I'm never gonna fly again, am I? Are my wings torn off? They're gone, aren't they? I'm gonna be a *groouuunddd pounndderrrr....*"  
Dash started sobbing uncontrollably

"Oh dear, no, nothing like that, but your hair..your mane! awful! And yes...hmm...sprained ankle, I don't think the tibia is broken, but you might have a broken humerus...let me set that...thank goodness I have *just* the right blue colour for your bandages..."

Dash smiled weakly, fresh tears springing to her eyes as the bone was set by Rarity's magic, and the worst of hers' and Fluttershy's fleshwounds were sewn neatly and quickly. Whatever the weather, Rarity was Rarity...

As Dash passed out despite the attempts of her friends to keep her awake - she wasn't in shock, just exhausted - she noticed with a final clear thought that in the skies above, two powerful bright figures - one white and rainbow hewed, Celestia the elder sister, the other dark and light blue, Luna the now-reformed younger sister, had arrived, and were banishing the storm from whence it came.

"Oh good," mumbled Dash, "cavalry's here..."

## Chapter 2

Undiscovered yet in the bright, hard light of dawn was a dead patch of grass deep within the Everfree Forest. Marks through the undergrowth seemingly came out of nowhere, and vanished into the tangle.

The Wolf-boar stalked the forest, it was home to many dangerous creatures and the wolf-boar was one of them. It ate meat - it ate almost anything - and was a vicious, silent predator. The yellow animal it was following was anything but silent. It was also lame. As the boar grew closer, it noticed that one of the animal's wings was bent at an odd angle. Lame *and* flightless. It readied itself, and when the moment was right, it struck.

It didn't take long, a fraction of a second of a leap, the flash of teeth and hooves and it was all over. Bright blood spilled on the ground, and the yellow pegasus pony was licking it's lips and hooves daintily. She put her wings back into position and danced in the lifeblood of her victim as she devoured it greedily. Her trip had been short, but the magic had been exhausting, and after all, she hadn't killed anything for *hours*.

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Twilight Sparkle was worried. Celestia and Luna had dispersed the storm and were doing their best to reassure the populace, but a storm like that? Not natural - and when no storm is natural because they're controlled by magic then...well, there were only a couple of alternatives and neither were very palatable.

Twilight had survived the night's chaos without harm, and despite her talent for organization, she had decided that her other talents (namely snooping and deduction) may just come in more useful. Her saddle bags were bare but for some rope, some rations and a sketch book, so she made good time as she cantered hastily out of town in the early dawn light. Her destination was the Everfree Forest, and a ruined castle deep within it. The journey took several hours but she hardly noticed; she was transcribing from memory as she went various weather-control spells, known equations and sigils influencing thaumic discharge. The picture she was coming up with wasn't pretty - her first instinct was being borne out by the math, and a basic atmospheric test or two confirmed things. The storm wasn't the objective of whatever magic had been taking place last night but an inevitable side-effect. The problem was that for a storm of this size, there

was very, very little which *could* have been a legitimate objective and very, very few creatures known about could manage them. Of the very few objectives of such a powerful magic, none of them so far had been proven conclusively.

A nasty thought was percolating through her head, *what if*, the little voice suggested, *what if the cause isn't something known about?*

She shivered, maybe with fear and maybe with the cold, but she had arrived at her destination. The last time she had been here she hadn't been alone, she'd thought she'd learnt her lesson that time to take friends when going into unfriendly territory but with the hullabaloo going on in Ponyville she'd thought it best to go it alone. Her destination was the ruined castle of Luna, formerly known as The Mare in the Moon, or Nightmare Moon.

Twilight's footsteps echoed eerily as she clopped through the royal chambers. They stopped, the echoes dying away to complete silence, when she reached the raised dais upon which the remains of Nightmare Moon's harness and armor was still visible, untouched.

"Well, so much for *that* idea..." said Twilight to herself, aloud - they appeared harmless, devoid of light or signs of life, perhaps safe. She poked them with a hoof, spooking herself when the pile collapsed a little. Just what had brought her here, anyway? She wondered.

"*Twiiiiii-*" came a noise - at first she thought it the wind, and pricked her ears up, but it came again, a soft, sighing voice, "*Twiliigghhtt Spaarkkklllee...*"

"Who's there?" she said, raising her head immediately, ears pricking up. She stamped a hoof in warning and her horn began to glow, "I'm warning you..."

"*Twilight Sparkle...unicorn most powerful...bringer of harmony...*" said the voices - for there were more now, more than two...three...

"No, four..." said Twilight, and something worried her about that, she shook her head, she didn't feel right...

"*Twilight...oh great and powerful Twilight...*"

*"So powerful..."*

*"So wise..."*

*"So beautiful..."*

"Who are you?" she spun about, the voices were coming from everywhere, nowhere, and she was starting to feel worried

*"We welcome you, Twilight, you freed us from Nightmare Moon..."*

*"Broke the bonds..."*

*"Shred the armor..."*

*"Shattered the harness..."*

"I freed you?" she backed away from the dais, cantering about in circles - was it just her imagination, or was it getting darker?

*"We were a part of Nightmare Moon, and now we're free...thanks to you..."*

*"We thank you, Twilight..."*

*"Join us, Twilight..."*

*"Let us repay you, Twilight..."*

"I...I don't need payment...thank you, but..." she backed up, but there was nowhere to backup to...

*"We can give you gifts, Twilight..."* the four voices spoke as one, seemingly behind her ears, *"Power, beyond compare..."*

*"Beauty beyond vision..."*

*"Knowledge, beyond understanding..."*

"I...I..."

The voices didn't let up, and now she could almost see them...four ghostly horse-shapes, strangely bent, twisted, glowing - almost...almost an absence of everything else except a pony...but without the pony. She felt sick, worried, alone...and scared...and they promised so much. As they spoke, the voices showed her wondrous things, amazing visions - she could become as powerful as Celestia, perhaps more powerful. She would take her rightful place first as Celestia's right hoof, and then...her heir. Twilight would become Princess, Eternal, Beautiful, Beloved, Respected, a Goddess...



“Stop...wait...why...but...”

*“All this, Twilight, and more...so much more...”*

*“We love you Twilight...”*

*“We adore you, Twilight...”*

*“Let us love you, Twilight...”*

*“...LET US IN...”*

The sudden force of their will was too much - she had yearned for years to be loved, to be appreciated, but the more she studied the less it seemed to pay off...all those ponies in Ponyville, what did they know? Were they really her friends? No, the new voices said, of course they weren't. They said nasty words behind her back, even her best friends. They called her egghead and bookworm and nerd. They had to be shown what she could do, before they would love her. If they wouldn't love her, they would pay. If she couldn't have love, she would have respect, and if she couldn't have respect she would have fear.

The armor and harness on the dais glowed with unearthly light and rose into the air, Twilight looked at it and with a single thought shaped it anew. She snorted, why remain just a unicorn? she was more now, she was a god. Huge bat-like wings erupted from her side, dark as midnight, tattered and fiery with evil power and she laughed cruelly as she took off into the air.

Twilight Sparkle? No name for a goddess, that - no, she was Twilight Doom, Empress of Nightmares, and may all who look upon her know her fury and despair.

Far away, in an empty library, in a small town called Ponyville, the shutters flew open from the force of a powerful breeze, knocking a much-read tome to the floor. It fell open revealing a diagram: an odd star, a very rare cutie mark, with four smaller stars around it. The Mare in the Moon was no more, but those stars were still out there. Four phantoms, ancient, powerful, terrible...and awake.

## Chapter 3

Twilight Doom flew lower, revelling in her new found freedom and power. The voices were exultant, whispering to her, soothing now. She was great, she was powerful, she had the world at her hooves - all she had to do was *take it!*

A figure below caught her eye and she laughed a demonic laugh, swooping down to land gracefully in front of a blue unicorn pulling a wagon. The wagon was rather bare, non-descript. Paint was expensive and this particular pony had relatively recently had her entire life's work taken away from her, because she had been weak.

"Oh Trixie, Trixie, Trixie," said Twilight, shaking her head sadly, "if only you knew how *pathetic* you look right now..."

"Twi-Twilight? Is-is that you?" Trixie looked up in confusion. She was hungry, rather dirty, poor, and living hadn't been quite so glorious as the once Great and Powerful Trixie had been used to, not since the escapade with the Ursa Minor in Ponyville. She remembered a shy, non-assuming purple unicorn taking to task the huge creature which, in her boastful stories, she'd claimed to have conquered with all four hooves tied behind her back. For her troubles, she'd been run out of town - well okay, she'd fled with her tail between her legs - with her life's works in ruins.

This...creature before her - it couldn't be the same Twilight. This pony was large, much larger than before, slender yet powerful, sleek and beautiful and yet terrifying. Her head was adorned with shining star-metal and jewels, a harness and halter covered her head, neck and withers. Huge, tattered yet somehow regal bat-like, maybe dragon-like, wings sprouted from her similar to and yet quite unlike any pegasus she had ever seen. There were only two known winged unicorns, and this mare was neither of them. Trixie was afraid, deathly afraid.

"Oh, come now, Trixie, surely you remember me? Though it's true, I have...changed some since we last met. You, on the other hand, have not. How sad. Perhaps..." Twilight stepped closer to the petrified unicorn, leaning in close to one ear, almost like a lover, "perhaps I should give you a gift?"

Trixie was almost too frightened to answer, but she squeaked out, "No! Oh..n-n-no Twi-Twilight, you don't have to do that, not on m-my account!"

“Oh but I insist,” said Twilight, giving Trixie’s ear a sensual soft lick, “three gifts for the Great and Powerful Trixie.”

“Please,” whispered Trixie, her voice tight, eyes wide, whites showing as she barely kept the madness bubbling in her mind under control, “*please don’t.*”

Twilight laughed suddenly, cruelly, and with a swipe of her powerful, armored neck threw Trixie to the ground, where she reared up on her back legs and struck downwards, decisively, and Trixie’s horn shattered under the blow. Trixie was too shocked to cry out for a moment, before the thudding pain overtook her and she wailed loudly.

“My second gift is *silence.*” said Twilight, and with a touch of her horn to the mare’s throat, Trixie’s cries died away and she was left to thrash mutely in horror.

“My third gift, oh Great and Powerful Trixie, is lameness. No voice, no magic, no tricks. Just Trixie, forever after.”

With an evil bellowing cackle the nightmare apparition was gone, leaving a weeping, semi-conscious, wounded shell of a unicorn stumbling in her inability to walk, inability to talk, with the magic she had always relied upon *gone*. Trixie wanted to die.

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The day had been a very strange one for Fluttershy. She’d woken up in the hospital, more or less hale and hearty. She’d spent a good deal of the morning fussing over injuries and attempting to seek out her closest friends. She’d found everypony except Twilight Sparkle, she’d gone to the library but it was empty. Spike was holed up with Rarity and had slept most of the storm away - that baby dragon could sleep through almost anything. Rainbow Dash was healing. It would be a while before she’d be able to fly again, and Fluttershy had kindly offered her house for the injured pegasus to convalesce in. After the morning’s search had turned up fruitless, Fluttershy had decided to head home to prepare for her guest.

She knew something was wrong almost immediately - the fence to the henhouse was torn, ripped. Even worse, the henhouse was *wrecked*.

“Hoofprints? What’s this...blood?” Fluttershy bent closer and gasped, it was blood! “My chickens!”

Fluttershy could barely contain her horror at the sight. Most of the chickens seemed to have escaped but whatever had happened it hadn’t been pretty. Somepony - and who could do such a thing? - had kicked in the fence, destroyed the henhouse and murdered several of her chickens in cold blood! She gasped in fresh horror as she unwound the scene in her head - and then finally noticed the tracks heading towards her house. Hoofprints again!

“Oh no...ANGEL!” Fluttershy galloped to the house and burst through the door, in time to see a yellow pegasus pony with her bestest ever bunny buddy in it’s jaws, shaking it as the frightened yet spunky creature fought for it’s life.

“YOU PUT DOWN ANGEL *RIGHT THIS SECOND!*” screamed Fluttershy, and she bounded across the room and spun in the air, giving the intruder a swift, painful kick right in the midsection, throwing all three of them against the wall of the kitchenette. The second yellow pony rebounded nimbly and grabbed the stunned rabbit again in her maw.

“You got back just in time, sister...I’d keep your distance if I was you. I’ve had my fill of meat this morning, but with a little thing like this? I could snap his neck. *Just. Like. That.*”

“Put him down.” Fluttershy was quiet, deadly quiet.

“Ohhh no, you and me, we’ve got somewhere to go.”

“I’m not going *anywhere* with you. I’m not your sister, I don’t know who you are, I don’t WANT to know who you are and I want you to put the bunny back in the box and *get out.*”

“Oh we’re sisters alright, of a sort. Can’t you see the resemblance?”

Fluttershy looked - the mare was yellow, a pegasus, pink hair with blue eyes. Infact, she was the spitting image of herself! With one small difference. Where Fluttershy had three butterflies as her cutie mark, the newcomer had three knives - not nice knives like run of the mill butchers or carpenters, but ugly, serrated knives for injuring and maiming.

“You like my ugly mark, don’t’cha?” said Fluttershy’s dopelganger, “you know what it means. I know you know. It’s why my...friends...call me Slice’nDice. If you don’t come with me, I’ll do to you and your bunny like I did to your chickens. And I’ll enjoy it. So *follow*.”

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The yellow pony-double led Fluttershy the back way into the Everfree Forest, through paths less tread, to a non-descript glade. She marched triumphantly to the center, wherein was a dead patch of grass that looked somehow twisted. She did a strange dance and suddenly rocks surrounding the dead circle began to glow a weak violet, and a whirlwind sprang up in the center.

“Come, Fluttershy - what, you thought we didn’t know about you? - follow me in to the circle and I promise nothing will happen to your friend.”

“His *name* is *Angel*.”

“Nothing will happen to Angel. If you don’t, well...I’ll be in the wrong place without my objective. All I’ll have brought back is a tiny little snack.”

“*Please*,” whispered Fluttershy, “I’ll do what you say, just please don’t hurt him.” Fluttershy stepped closer to the growing whirlwind hesitantly.

“Hurry up you incompetent coward, it’ll open any second and your bunny will die soon after if you aren’t with me.”

Fluttershy shook, but not with fear. She was no magic-wielding unicorn, but she knew what magic felt like. She had only one chance, and she wasn’t going to waste it. Acting fearful, acting timid, acting dumb in the face of the rapidly growing tirade of abuse Slice’nDice was hurling at her, she bid her time until the moment came. Then she struck.

She leapt, and with a throw of her head she knocked the rabbit clear of the other pony's mouth. Angel squealed with pain as some fur and skin tore off with the impact, but he was thrown clear of the circle just in time.

"Angel! Run! Tell the oth-"

With a slap of pressure that set his ears ringing, Angel watched the tempest pop out of existence, and the glade was as silent and empty as it had been before their arrival.

Angel was safe, relatively speaking. For all the attitude he gave Fluttershy, he did love his mistress. He would do right by her. The only problems were that he was a small rabbit, injured and bleeding, and lost in a large, dangerous forest, alone.

## Chapter 4

“Angel! Run! Tell the others! Tell the others!” Fluttershy screamed, but the portal had closed with a disconcerting wrench. It felt like she had been turned inside out and put back together backwards. Everything felt...somehow wrong, an unnerving oddness which grated on her hooves. She didn’t know where they were, but it looked like the Everfree Forest...only it felt different. She got the feeling she wasn’t in Equestria anymore.

“Damn you and your stupid pets! Oh well, one blasted rabbit can hardly interfere with our plans. He’ll be dead before nightfall. Now you, get in the cage!” Slice’n’dice pointed with one hoof first at Fluttershy, then at the cage. Fluttershy considered flight - literally, which was something for the usually earth-bound pegasus - but two burly, mean-looking and armored pegasus ponies appeared from the brush and she thought better of it. Her usual shy demeanor reasserted itself and, head bowed, she clambered into a small, rickety barred cage on wheels.

“Come on boys, let’s get our prize to little miss Great One,” Slice’n’dice spat on the ground, “we’ll pick up the rest on the way.”

The wagon was hitched, the ponies pulled it and the group trundled out of the forest towards town.

“Ah Poniberg, how I loathe thee.” said Slice’n’dice as they crested the hill and the strange facsimile of the town Fluttershy knew of as Ponyville lay before them, “at least there’s somewhere to get out of the rain, unlike the sodding Everscream Forest. Always so dank and dreary.”

Fluttershy looked on in silence, so much was like Ponyville that it was disconcerting, though by now she knew differently. Houses were in the same place, but they were different. More run-down, faded and in disrepair. Windows were shuttered, doors were barred and every-place ponies trotted through the streets avoiding each other’s gaze. Ponies spoke in whispers, if at all, and scattered when they saw the wagon and who was pulling it.

Fluttershy felt her heart sink, whatever had happened, wherever they were, it was going to take a lot more than a little luck to get away. How would a

pony like her know how to get home from another world like this? She slumped in the corner of the wagon and cried herself to sleep.

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Fluttershy came to as the jostling and bouncing stopped, the echoing clip-clop of hooves on stone dying away to silence; A stick poked her and she roused fitfully from a painful sleep on the floor of a wheeled cage.

“Wake up!” hissed a voice mumbling through the stick held in its owner’s mouth, “the Great One wishes to see her prize.”

“Where are we? Who wants to see me? ...Are you going to let me out?” whispered Fluttershy quietly, almost squeaking.

“Silence! Silence or I kill you!” hissed the voice again, poking Fluttershy with the stick. The light grew bright enough to illuminate the same yellow pony who had captured her, Fluttershy realised it was the pony that was almost, but not quite, her double. She was not alone, and Fluttershy realised that, if she allowed enough leeway between her friends and neighbours, she could place all of the strange ponies accompanying the pony that called herself Slice’n’Dice.

“Hold!” rang out a voice, soft yet edged with a malice that made Fluttershy’s blood run cold, “you’ll not be harming our guest. My Mistress needs her, and in one piece. You know how you get carried away, dear Slice’n’Dice, not satisfied until every last ounce of enjoyment is gone - you’ll not touch her without *my* permission or I’ll have your hide.”

The last few words were spoken in a barking hiss, sibilant yet cutting. The other ponies flinched though Flutter couldn’t see the speaker. There were several pony-doubles around her cage now. Fluttershy recognized some of them, though they were twisted caricatures of her friends. A red pony, though fat and huffing instead of sleek and muscular; ironically, his “ugly mark” as Flutter had remembered her double had called it was an applecore. A pink unicorn pony, her forelegs covered in scars, head drooping low and hair covering her eyes, her ugly mark seemed to be more scars. Fluttershy wasn’t sure at this distance and in this light whether they were actually scars or just a picture. *Well that’s Big Mac and Pinkie Pie, sort of*, thought Fluttershy to herself, and noted an orange pony bowing and



scraping before a ruined stone throne though the pony upon it was entirely in shadow. Flutter's head lolled to one side and she screwed up her eyes to make sense of the ugly mark,

"A snake?" she said aloud, loud enough to attract the attention of the not-Big Mac.

"That's mah sister you'n talkin' 'bout, you'd best be silent and not be sayin'nother word none or imma go git mah beatin' stick. She aint no snake in t'grass though some's says she weren't too unhappy none when ar maw up'n keeled over...heehee, t'were right comical tha way that old nag were thrashin' and chokin'," the red pony blew a lock of hair out of his eyes, "mah sister durnt know how th'rat poison got in maw's tea none though - hee! But she sure made a good cup!"

"Hush now Big Mouth!" said Slice'n'Dice, and planted a swift rear hoof-kick in the red pony's muzzle, "you'd best keep that flapping jaw shut or I'll shut it permanently!"

"Ponies, please, our guest...leave us now. I must get acquainted before my mistress arrives and you needn't bother her with our plans for her friends." The words was spoken by the same quiet, soft voice that had silenced the small group before. It's power hadn't diminished, and the group of ponies dispersed, not without jostling and kicks, into the shadows surrounding the room.

"I know all about you, Fluttershy, and your world. Equestria...it shares so much with our own, even the name. Even it's ruler. I don't get it all, but your world is a mirror of ours" said the pony on the throne, stepping into the light, "where things aren't quite the same."

"W-why am I h-here?" asked Fluttershy, cowering at the back of the wagon as the pony who had spoken previously clopped closer. Fluttershy watched as the form of a grey pegasus pony stepped halfway into the wan circle of sunlight drifting through windows high up in the hall. The pony had grey fur, yellow hair and a single blue eye. She gasped when the pony moved closer and revealed she had only the one eye and was almost sick when she saw that the pegasus had only one wing, "Derpy..." Fluttershy shook her head, this wasn't the real Derpy Hooves, this was...somepony else, "but...what happened to you?" asked Fluttershy

"This?" asked the pony, raising the stump of her burnt wing and regarding it as if it were some alien tentacle, "My mistress demands a high price for obedience. They called me mad before, but I knew my place, and my mistress answered my call. She took my eye and she took my wing, boiled it away with her glory," the pegasus laughed, a shrill, mad laugh, "smoke and feathers, that's all it was, burning flesh, such a sweet, sweet fragrance, and the pain was exquisite - she took my offerings and bestowed gifts upon me. Power, glory, respect. They fear me now, Fluttershy, they fear Bubbly Grime, they fear my command of her minions, they fear my power..."

The pony was quite, quite mad, realised Fluttershy, as the grey pegasus changed tactics, stepping close to the cage so Fluttershy could smell her rancid breath, "I can give you so much, you *are* a pegasus after all, I can give you a place next to me, my right hoof mare, to dwell in glory in the world which is to come when my mistress ascends, when we her chosen ascend. Do you want that?"

Fluttershy shook with fear and she could barely speak, but she managed a few words, "in-in my wo-world you're the sweetest pegasus pony I know. You wouldn't hurt a fl-fly, Derpy, you may have...issues with your...eyes, and your flying, but we love you. I love you. You're the best mail-pony Ponyville has ever had." Fluttershy gulped, ears splaying low against her head, realizing what she'd said, "I don't know who you are, you're *not* our Derpy - you look like her, kind of, but you're not her. You're evil. You're twisted. I'll have no-nothing to do with you. Good day."

Fluttershy turned around and started sobbing softly to herself; the evil, warped mirror-image of one of her best friends, Derpy, standing there before her so full of cruelty and malice was more than she could bear, "go away, I'll never help you." said Fluttershy through her hooves.

"Oh I know," said the not-Derpy Hooves softly, "I didn't think you would, and that's not why you're here. It's really quite simple; Some ponies...just want to watch the world burn."

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“Get your butts in gear you lazy mules! We’ve got an invasion to spring! Git on up there, in formation! I’ll have your hides if you aint in position in ten seconds flat!”

There was the crack of a whip and a wail, another of the slave ponies went down under the brutal flail, he was too weak to rise and a couple of butch guard-ponies dragged him off out of sight. There were brief sounds of a struggle and then a single choked off cry, and then silence. No pony raised so much as an ear in interest. They were a haggard lot, almost to a foal their eyes were glassy and dull, without hope. The well-fed amongst them were armoured; guards and their lackeys, making sure the masses of predominantly earth-ponies were kept in line. Pegasus ponies flitted the skies above, delivering messages, delivering swift justice, harrying stragglers. Unicorns were huddled in groups, much better fed still, intelligent, haughty - and above them all, watching with an imperial gaze, was a beautiful winged unicorn mare - or she would have been beautiful if she had allowed her countenance to show an ounce of compassion. Behind her, dotted throughout the war-camp were her flags and standards. To those who could read - the elite unicorns, a few of her chosen pegasus consorts and guards - the script spoke of honour and duty. To the rest their message was simple - Obey.

Queen Celeste surveyed her lands with disdain; with the banishment of her elder, weak sister Lunaria a thousand years ago, her rule had been cemented and complete. She had controlled day and night with an iron hoof, bestowing boons and meting out her own brand of absolute justice to her pathetic subjects on a whim, yet always total victory had eluded her. The elements of discord had been scattered in that fateful battle which had seen her triumph over her sister, and had seen her powers diminished several-fold.

Then, with the resurgence of her treacherous goody-goody sister, Celeste had been forced to search once again for that source of ancient magic which she had lost so long ago. It had taken the investigation of a wall-eyed mare of inconsequential background to discover their location, and unlock the secret to their recovery, work which she had repayed well - loyalty was useful, as far as it went, though the uppity nag oft had thoughts above her station, although Celeste had to agree, the results had been worth the effort...so far.

Celeste turned to a faceless armoured unicorn guard, “fetch my six commanders, they are relieved of whatever duties they are currently executing and are required to attend their queen. Now.”

“At once, milady.” said the unicorn, and hurried off in a clatter of hooves. It did not do well to keep the Queen waiting, one did not get the opportunity to do so twice.

Celeste narrowed her eyes and watched with her magic as much with sight. Her mind cast back to her latest and greatest triumph, and failure. Her favourite pupil, one Daybreak Glitter, grown arrogant of the power heaped upon her, had attempted to depose her mistress the Queen and take her place. It hadn’t ended well, and the resultant visible constant lesson had spurred a new wave of loyalty and respect. Celeste smiled, her cronies had abandoned her, turning to the Queen herself and pledging their lives. She’d seen fit to reward them, tying them body, mind and soul to her. Amanita Jack, the self-appointed leader. Heartless in pursuit of her own best interest, able to stand up despite her deficiency as an Earth Pony, same as her brother, Big Mouth, useful only as bully and meatshield, but even brute strength had it’s uses. Weepy-Cry the pink unicorn...to be truthful, Celeste just liked to watch the despondent pink pony cut herself up over her inability to please the Queen. Everybody needed a jester to kick, even better when the jester kicks itself. Vanity the pegasus, oh yes, Vanity was a beauty, silver of tongue. The Queen kept her around purely for the ego boost, and because she, Celeste, was *the* most beautiful pony in all of Estrosia and she knew how much that cut at Vanity. And then there was Rainbow Crash, red pegasus stallion with the glorious rainbow mane and tail, her sometimes-consort, the brains of the bunch. Second in intellect only to her and Slice’n’Dice, who was by far the more crafty but only capable of thinking of herself. They lined up now in front of her and abased themselves. With a hearty thump that shook the plateau where they were standing, a huge, adult, purple dragon landed behind the winged unicorn queen, proffering a paw to her. She daintily hopped upon it and rose to stand on his head.

“Ah, my subjects, my worthy chosen few. All the preparations appear in order - may the hour of my glorious conquest begin?”

“My lady,” answered Crash, “your troops are assembled, trained, outfitted...some may even be called soldiers where they are not squalling infants. Your armies stand ready.”

“My magicians are ready,” whispered Weepy-Cry, “if it pleases Your Majesty.”

Celeste snorted, “if that feeble attempt at opening the gateways yesterday is anything to go by I think not, but it will have to do.”

“Logistics are a go, ma’am. Food, supplies, gear...you name it, you got it.”

“Then we march. I order the gateways opened; my trusted commanders you shall go first to prepare the way and my troops will follow on the morrow. Accompany Bubbly Grime and obey her commands as you obey mine, she comes now at my call.” the glorious winged unicorn monarch raised her head and looked expectantly to her left.

There was a flash of light and the grey, one-eyed, one-winged pegasus appeared, having teleported in. She flew gracefully, despite one wing being made of baleful fire and the other being stumpy and slightly mis-shapen. Celeste leapt from the dragon’s head and landed lightly before Bubbly Grime, and the latter bowed before her mistress. Celeste touched her horn to the pegasus’ head and with another flash of light and a painful grimace from Bubbly Grime, a small pearly white horn burst from her flesh and the pegasus-unicorn seemed to fill out, her empty eye-socket glowing with a soft blue-white glimmer where her long-gone eye would be. It seemed to stare into nothingness, infinity. The other ponies found it disconcerting, and kept their heads lowered, exchanging furtive glances.

“Arise now, Bubbly Grime, I name you my first and most favoured disciple. Your mastery of the black arts has earned you a place in my pantheon, and I grant thee my mark. Winged Unicorn, few amongst the many.”

Celeste turned, and clopped next to Bubbly Grime, bidding her stand and turn, she noted with cruel amusement the pain on Weepy-Cry’s face at the sudden elevation of a mere pegasus, “Go now, prepare the gates, fetch my prey and spread my power to this new world. I shall go have a talk with this...Fluttershy, and see what information I can wring from her.”

“At once, mistress!” the rest said in unison, though they stayed with heads bowed until the Queen had ridden her dragon away and her mad laughter no longer rung in their ears.

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In another world, near a town that was still reeling from a storm the likes of which had never been seen before, Zecora was trotting out of Ponyville on her way to check up on her own hut. She prayed it hadn't been destroyed by the weather or falling branches, though well before the onset her tail had been twitching and she had locked away her most precious tomes in safety and gathered up what cantrips and curios she could before the oncoming gale against their need. On the edge of the forest itself she spied a weakly hobbling pony emerging into the meadow, carrying what appeared to be a bundle of rags in her mouth - *no*, thought Zecora, *that's no pony, that's a unicorn, but what's missing...her horn?*

Zecora stepped closer, and the pony flicked her ears back and shuddered, her painful steps halting and then reversing as she tried to back away, “Ho now, dear pony, I'm here to help, no phony!”

In a whirl of motion that caught her by surprise, a small furry form leapt from the unicorn's back and puffed itself up as large as possible between her and the unicorn, it tried to growl and failed, but for all it's slight size the sheer bravado impressed the zebra-pony, “little one, do not fear, it is help you will find when Zecora is near. Calm yourself, calm, tell me all about it.”

Angel, for that is who the bunny was, backed up slowly and carefully, looking back at the blue pony for support. Wordlessly, the blue pony with the shattered horn nodded, and the bunny seemed to fall in on himself and collapse. Zecora rushed to his aid and noticed his injuries, and those of the unicorn she recognized as Trixie, for all their meeting had been brief.

“Trixie, unicorn of blue - what is it that has happened to you?” asked Zecora, trotting closer and nuzzling the unicorn softly on the face, “you've lost your horn...how?”

Trixie just wept, and the zebra found herself comforting the injured equine to the best of her abilities. Through rough sign-language, Trixie explained that she had been attacked, her horn had been shattered - she carefully

unwrapped the forlorn bundle of rags wherein she had secreted the pieces to display to Zecora, who looked like she would be sick - and somehow rendered lame and unable to speak.

“We must return to Ponyville at once! Mayor Mare must hear of this most heinous attack! Who did it, can you tell me, describe them?”

Trixie glanced about, and then drew very carefully a half-moon shape in the dirt, and a rough pony-shape around it.

“Luna...no...Nightmare Moon?”

Trixie shook her head, then nodded it, then deliberately drew a cross through the shape, and drew another next to it. This one was a star-shape within a pony.

“Celestia? Wait...no...Twilight? Twilight did this?”

Trixie again nodded, and then shook her head, and drew an arrow between the two, and eventually drew a moon-shape inside her Twilight-picture.

“Twilight Sparkle has taken up the mantle of the Nightmare Princess?”

Trixie drew a crown, and Zecora blinked, “Twilight Sparkle, the Nightmare Queen? We must hurry back with all speed, we must fetch Celestia, and Luna!”

Zecora was so agitated she forgot to rhyme for a moment, and could barely contain herself enough to proffer a small bag of snuff-like herb to Trixie, “I do not usually agree with such acts, but this herb here will give you a boost, that’s a fact.”

Trixie looked dubiously at the small bag, then gave it a sniff, and then more of a sniff. It was like firecrackers going off in her brain. She felt like The Great and Powerful Trixie again, it was *wonderful*! She felt light-headed and giddy and wanted to dance. She reached her head again for another sniff but the bag was taken away very swiftly.

“Woah there, that’s enough, you can get quite addicted to this stuff!”

With some begging, a little pleading, some pushing and a lot of cajoling Zecora managed to get her injured, hyperactive charge moving in the right direction. She now held Trixie's horn - in her euphoria she had ignored the bundle - and Angel the rabbit rode in Zecora's bag. She had recognized Fluttershy's pet even in his dishevelled state and vowed to heal him to the best of her abilities. Even more urgently, Celestia and Luna had to be warned.

In their mad gallop it seemed like only moments before they were entering the outskirts of Ponyville, but the trip had been rough, especially on the injured Trixie. In her doped-up state she couldn't feel it but she was pushing herself beyond tolerance, just one of the reasons Zecora frowned upon certain medicines in her collection except under exceptional circumstances, and these counted. The mysterious bag of herbs was beginning to wear off and Trixie stumbled and fell heavily into the dirt where she lay, breathing heavily, eyes white and a thick sheen of sweat matting her coat. She started to convulse, Zecora pulled up short and threw her hood back, yelling though she too was out of breath, "Spike! Spike!" she called loudly, rewarded with the pitter-patter of small draconic feet from behind her. Turning her head to see the young dragon approaching nervously, clasping his front paws together, she spoke clearly and without haste as she laid her hooves on the unicorn and attempted to stop her from biting or swallowing her lolling tongue, "quickly, I need you to fetch Princess Celestia at once, and a nurse! Trixie is injured most severely, maybe worse!"

The little dragon turned almost white at being ordered to fetch the princess - nopony *fetches* royalty! - but did as he was bid, pushing his way out of the crowd which had rapidly formed around the trio of exhausted animals and scurrying off to catch Celestia before she left back to Canterlot, her work done with containing and calming the storm from the night before.



# Chapter 5

When Celestia arrived on the scene, with Luna not far behind, the blue unicorn with the shattered horn was no longer convulsing, she was awake and drinking a little water from a cup held carefully out to her by Snails, who was talking softly to her, softer than many thought he could manage,

“Come on Trixie, you gotta drink some, you just gotta, you’ll be okay, you’re the Great and Powerful Trixie!”

At those words, Trixie started weeping, shuddering sobs wracked her body. Zecora lay down next to her to comfort her, Snips too wormed his way next to her. Celestia looked on, but her gaze was soft and eyes bright, “it seems my Twilight isn’t the only pony to need-”

At the mention of Twilight’s name, Trixie became agitated, and Zecora moved to quiet the unicorn with clucking and tutting noises before she turned to the princess, got up and motioned her to follow, “Princess Celestia, magic most foul has been cast upon poor Trixie - pray can you undo it? She cannot speak, has been struck lame and her horn...shattered, and there is more...”

Celestia looked quickly over at Trixie in shock, and then back to Zecora, “*More?* What pray tell could be worse than *that?*”

“Luna, you must hear this too: the one who has done this...was Twilight,” at the twin gasps of unbelieving surprise from the princesses, Zecora shook her head, “neigh you must believe me, but this is not *our* Twilight, somehow she has...she has become Nightmare Moon.”

Celestia looked critically at Luna for a half second, who looked at the ground in shame. Celestia shook her head too, and gently kissed her sister’s forehead, “Whatever has happened, dear sister, it was not of your doing.”

“I...I have my doubts. Go on, Zecora.”

“Trixie described a winged unicorn, with the cutie-mark of Twilight, bearing the mantle of the moon. She had been struck dumb by powerful magic, so her explanation was crude, but thorough. Perhaps if you can undo this hexing, we may get to the bottom of this unicorn vexing.”

“Indeed,” Celestia turned and lifted her head, calling for Spike, “but first, let us verify Twilight’s absence and perhaps begin to piece together this sorry tale.”

Spike was sent running to search for Twilight. No pony had seen her, a few thought she had retreated to her library to recover from the night’s exertions, but upon searching there, Spike found nothing but a book, the self-same book she had been reading and re-reading every night for weeks before Nightmare Moon - Luna - had returned. Placing it on the table thoughtfully, he scampered back out to the town square to report on his efforts.

As he returned he found Celestia and Luna together weaving magic over the prone, listless form of Trixie. As their joint spell culminated, Trixie stirred and slowly, shakily, got to her feet. She walked around in a brief circle before cautiously trotting, “I’m...it doesn’t hurt! I can talk! Oh, thank you princesses, thank you so very much, I can’t tell you - I can’t tell you what this means to me,” she burst into tears again, Snips and Snails leaned against her, rubbing their heads against the barrel of her chest. She bent and kissed their foreheads, “thank you for believing in me...but without my horn, I’m not the Great and Powerful anything, I’m just...just Trixie.”

“Trixie,” said Celestia sadly, “I’m not sure what can be done about your horn...if we had the pieces...”

“Ah, but I do, I can show them to you!” said Zecora, and hope flared in Trixie’s eyes

“*And* if we had plenty of peace and quiet,” added Luna

“We *may* be able to restore you!” enthused Celestia, flicking her flowing tail with happiness, her ears perking up.

"But first, we need to know what happened." Luna was down to earth, she nodded firmly, "I have a theory, but I want to hear what you have to say."

Celestia looked at her sister oddly, but remained silent. She motioned for the unicorn to speak.

Trixie spoke, haltingly at first, then with more clarity. She described the first sighting of Twilight, haughty and arrogant, exuding an aura of power which was unmistakably Twilight, but yet...not.

"And you say she had wings?"

"Huge, huge purple wings, like a dragon's, or a bat's. They were tattered and torn, like they were...I don't know...from something else, something older. And she had armor?"

Trixie nodded, "it was..." she blushed, looked down, unwilling to speak, though she carried on at the urging of the two rulers of Equestria, "it was like your...like Nightmare Moon's armor, but different. Similar, but...not the same."

Luna bowed her head, "I had thought myself, and Equestria, rid of them..." she said, darkly

"*Them?*" queried Celestia.

"I...in my anger, all those years ago big sister, I reached out with my powers to punish those who transgressed against me, against even imagined slights and insults. Something heard me, some *things*. I do not know in truth whether they reached me or I reached them, but they spoke to me, they whispered, they wheedled and promised, and wondered why I, the co-ruler of Equestria, was shunned and ignored, a pariah, an outcast..."

Celestia was shocked anew, "you never were! I loved you then and I love you now!"

"We all do, Luna, even before," Trixie spoke up, "the night is *different* to the day - and we always imagined you were sitting in the moon watching out for us, keeping us safe and we loved you for it. We'd heard the old stories, but there were others too, about your lonely vigil, and the song of the

moon...I used to look up at night from my bed and wish you a good night before I went to sleep,” Trixie blushed, “I still do the same, even after...no, especially after Twilight and her friends. We love you just as much as we love Celestia.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd who were raptly listening to this otherwise private moment, Luna thought her heart might burst. There had been many changes since those fateful days so long, long ago, but it had taken this sad, troubled trip to Ponyville for the last of the bad memories to fade, “After my return, even before I was...redeemed...I still loved my subjects, even though the voices told me I had been betrayed. Now I *know* you all love me, and I love you all. Not everypony sleeps through the night, but I watch over all of them just the same, just as my big sister watches you all through the day, even though some of you spend more time napping than you should.”

Rainbow Dash, at the back of the crowd, hunched down and tried to look nonchalant before hurrying off on other chores.

“But sister,” continued Luna, “I had thought the voices part of my...my madness. Made up justification...now I’m not so sure.”

“The armor,” Celestia’s eyes narrowed, “where did it come from?”

“I made it, or I had my slaves make it, from star-metal. A falling star crashed in the blue mountains. I had it fetched and shaped, but it was destroyed as Nightmare Moon was destroyed, by the Elements of Harmony!”

“I do not believe your armor was destroyed, little sister, I believe it was merely shattered.”

Luna nodded, lashing her tail angrily and thoughtfully, “Into pieces! I left them where they fell as I left behind my old life, in my castle in the Everfree Forest.”

“Which is where my faithful student, ever the brave and often the foolish Twilight Sparkle *would* go to seek answers to a storm like that. After the storm last night, brought forth from that wild place to produce so much

destruction, she would go looking for answers. I had thought she had learnt her lesson last time facing Nightmare Moon though...always take friends."

"I don't...I don't follow," said Trixie, "what has happened?"

"An ancient evil that I thought gone forever has returned, and ensnared Twilight - it was not she who cursed you so."

Celestia smiled at these words, and nuzzled her little sister's ears, "this does give us one cause for celebration, when all this is over."

"What?" asked Luna

"It means that the mare I sent to the moon...she wasn't you. Luna, please...I think I have a task for you," the princess raised her head and called for Spike again, who was nervously ringing his paws and hopping up and down, "Spike, I want you to fetch something for me..."

The winged unicorn mare bent down and whispered in the young dragon's ear, he looked up at her and said simply, "are you sure?" and then shrugged when she nodded in the affirmative. A few minutes later he returned with a simple black box bearing Twilight's seal on it. He placed it in front of Celestia.

"Spike, take a note please."

Spike pulled out a parchment and quill expectantly, and began to write as the princess Celestia dictated, "I, Princess Celestia of Equestria, divine ruler of the day, co-ruler of Equestria by birthright, do hereby place, temporarily at least, the gift and burden of bearer of the Element of Harmony known as the Element of Magic, upon my younger sister Princess Luna, divine ruler of the night, fellow co-ruler of Equestria."

She turned to Luna, "Sister, do you accept this?"

"Sister, I...but, it is Twilight's!"

"Luna, beloved, we all have our talents, we all embody the values we hold dear. The day is a time of planning and action, but the night...the night is for the heart, and it is the magic of the heart that we sorely need now, and that

Twilight will sorely need if we are to redeem *her* this side of a thousand years.”

Luna blanched, and bowed her head, “for the sake of Twilight, and our people, I accept.”

Spike had lifted out the bejewelled tiara from the box, but at Luna’s words it had lifted from his grasp and floated seemingly of its own volition towards the purple winged unicorn princess, where with a flash of light it became a halter, with a moon-shaped jewel set in a heart.

“Celestia, I will strive to do my utmost to fulfill your confidence in me.”

“Luna, it is your nature which enables you to wield that Element of Harmony, do not doubt your sincerity nor your ability.”

The pair hugged, necks entwined, and a ragged yet rousing cheer rose from the assembled throng; with a stamping of hoofed feet, the citizens of Ponyville showed their approval. In the midst of so much darkness, the princess of the night was there to provide the light of hope for them.

Slowly they broke apart, and Celestia closed her eyes for a moment, “Sister, I want, no I *need* you to do something *else* for me. If I thought I could do it I would, gladly, but...I need you to return to your castle. I sense Twilight is planning something, and if we are to get any sort of lead on my wayward student, it will be there. I must plan for war, war most terrible. I fear she will raise an army, the like of which we have never seen, and...and I am asking you to descend into the jaws of fate for me on a hunch.”

Luna blinked, rustling her wings, before answering very carefully, “Sister, I will do this that you ask of me.” and in a flash she was gone, turned to smoke and disappearing on the wind.

“Good luck, little sister.” said Celestia softly under her breath.

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A forest, dark and dangerous. A castle, deep within. The castle is ruined but lights shine wanly in the sudden twilight. The pony that approaches, swifter than the wind and twice as silent, needs neither light nor guidance

to find her way. She has been here thousands of times, a millenia ago when all this was new and pristine, she could never forget the route. Nothing could stop her entry, though that isn't what concerns her. What concerns her is her exit.

The blue-purple mist swoops through undergrowth and across chasms, around mountains to it's final destination in mere moments, before reforming with a swirl of light and energy into a smallish blue-and-purple winged unicorn pony.

Luna looked around carefully. The air was cold, her breath steaming, and the room seemed empty. She stepped towards her throne. She corrected herself, once it had been hers, then it became Nightmare Moon's. Now it lay in ruins. There was a small set of panniers on the floor, and a book strewn next to them. Luna stepped closer. The bag was Twilight's, as was the book, she recognized the hoofwriting. She gathered them up with her magic, placing the bags upon her back and tightened the straps. It was then that the jewel in her halter...twitched. She raised her head, ears pricked up.

There was a soft clop-clop-clop as somepony walked closer. A purple pony, though elongated and angular now; a unicorn, but with huge bat wings from her back, tattered and frail-looking yet possessed of a poise and strength that hinted danger from every pore, "hello, Luna. Come to worship me, have you?"

Luna backed away, her wings flicking nervously, head lowered, horn pointed at the abomination, "I will never worship you, just as you would never have worshipped me. What do you want, Twilight Sparkle?"

"*Sparkle?*" the pony-creature spat, "I am Twilight *DOOM*. I am the Empress of Nightmares, greatest, most powerful pony you or any other pony has ever seen and I demand my birthright. I demand Equestria. You will give it to me, you and your pathetic sister."

Luna squared her shoulders as best she could, "I am Luna De Selena, co-ruler of Equestria, Goddess of the Night, Defender of the Moonlit Herds, the Mare of the Moon, and you will take neither *my* crown, *nor* my sisters. Not without a fight."

Twilight, or what Twilight had become, laughed a deep, throaty, scratching laugh, "if a fight is what you want, a fight is what you'll get. You think my title of Empress of Nightmares is mere...posturing? You hapless foal. Behold my army!"

Twilight gestured with a wing, and balefire lit the ruined courtroom. Luna gasped, the chittering and scraping noises she'd been hearing in the back of her mind suddenly came in full force, previously hidden by Twilight's phenomenal magic. She felt sick to her stomach at the sight; lich-ponies, limbs missing, flesh dropping from their bones twitched and drooled, heaving their decrepit bodies closer to the warmth of Luna's living form. Nightmarish abominations of steel and stone, shaped like twisted, skeletal, viciously spiked wolves and dragons, clambered over the walls and up the ceiling. Two legged beasts with the heads of pigs, goats and oxen hammered at anvils, beating out weapons by the dozen, their grossly misshapen paws the size of Luna's head. Chittering monsters idly swung on hammocks that looked like they were made of still-beating flesh. They tore heartily into something bloodied and furry as they watched her with baleful squinting eyes. It might have been a wolf-boar, it might have been almost anything, even a pony. She backed away, horrified, as from a deep bleeding crack in the floor rose something like the head of a pony with long-dead vacant eyes and broken fangs for teeth, its body misshapen and missing in places, crawling, bleeding tentacles with sharp-fanged mouths. It pulled its way out of the muck and stench, hollow burning gaze fixated on her, and it started weeping. The noise was bone-chilling, it was a long lost foal, leg broken, far from home, calling for mother. It was the frightened whinny of a fellow member of the herd, cornered by some vicious animal.

"Help me," it cried in soft, tearful heart-jerking sobs, "help me, please, please save me..."

Luna shuddered, eyes growing wide and misty, the mournful sobs pulling her closer, slow agonizing steps as she fought against the compulsion with every fibre of her being, and lost. Mesmerised by the siren song of this eldritch beast as its tentacles and chitinous claws grasped her small frame, the bulging, pulsating mass overwhelmed Luna, pushing her to the ground where it slowly heaved it's bulk onto her muzzle, attempting to smother her, keeping her alive just as long as it could, feeding off the fear generated in the back of her trapped, screaming mind before it's clacking jaws could fasten around her neck...



With a sudden scream the pony beneath the dark behemoth flashed into nothing, smoke roiling wetly away into the ether, leaving the beast to clack it's jaws in impotent rage around empty air and haul it's sickening putrid bulk back into the crevasse and return to the dank hell from which it came.

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"They come, and they seek...they seek only death." Luna lay gasping for breath in the square in Ponyville, eyes wide and rolling.

"By Celestia's beard!" said Spike, rushing to help, glancing guiltily at Celestia herself, as the distraught blue unicorn apparated.

"Luna, are you alright?" asked the white and rainbow pony, "what happened? Catch your breath, slow down, tell us."

"It was...I found Twilight, but she's not...she's not Twilight. They have her now, like they had me. She's raised an army, an unholy horde of minions from some dark hell, oh sister, it's so much worse than last time." Luna squeezed her eyes shut, tears forming. She buried her head in her wings and sobbed quietly.

Celestia stood tall, proud, resigned, "it is as I thought. Sister, a thousand years ago you were at your peak, but even then you were my little sister. Twilight...her insatiable quest for knowledge has been warped into a quest for power and dominion. You never wanted anything but recognition, even though you could never be loved as the nightmare you were."

"I...you know nothing of nightmares, Sister, Twilight does."

"Indeed, I fear you were stronger than her, it kept the madness in check. Twilight has...Twilight has little hope but for the love of her friends. She'll be wanting it to end, her black despair will be fueling the monsters."

"Monsters she has, sister, the likes of which...almost too unspeakable. The dead walk, fear and perversion made flesh...what hope do we have?" her breathing was ragged and she shook with fear, remember the sucking tentacles, nipping at ripe juicy flesh. What if they were poisoned? What if it

was somehow inside her now, spawning...she sobbed, paranoia rearing it's ugly head even in the bright hard daylight of the friendly town of Ponyville.

"We have you, we have the elements of harmony, we will persevere. What else can we do?"

It was then that a distraught Rarity galloped up to the princesses, breathing heavily, "Princess, Princess...this is terrible, oh my stars...just awful - Fluttershy is *gone*."

"My faithful Spike, generous Rarity; summon the others - loyal Rainbow Dash, honest Applejack and bright Pinkie Pie the bringer of laughter. We will need as many of the bearers of the elements of harmony as possible for the coming struggle."

"At once milady," said Spike, "I'll tell Big Mac, he'll know where his sister is - he's much quicker than me. I'll explain what I can."

"And I shall fetch Pinkie Pie, she has been feeding the sick - I'm not convinced feeding them *cake* is in their best interests, but it at least brings a smile to their faces."

"Luna, you and I need to hold council. Zecora, I leave Trixie in your tender, capable hooves."

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Celestia was worried. She couldn't show it, but she was worried. Ponyville was a peaceful earth-pony town situated more or less in the middle of Equestria far from the normally wilder borders with the dragons, the harpies or the nomadic, warlike T'Shol of the Southern Deserts. It was why, apart from the whole "redeeming her little sister" play she'd sent her favourite pupil here, but just look what had happened.

"You seem troubled, Sister," said Luna, standing next to her elder, larger sibling on the cloud floating high above the central library. They were alone, as alone as you can get with pegasus ponies zipping too and fro reinforcing barricades, and unicorns exerting their magics to bolster the fortifications, as earth ponies toiled hard, lifting, dragging, felling. The diligent, urgent

sounds of preparation for war were unsettling in such an otherwise peaceful town.

Celestia frowned, “why would I be troubled? We only seek to preserve life and limb of a town of helpless, ill-trained ponies against a horde of darkness from the depths of pony hell itself.”

Luna sighed, “You were prepared all this time for a resumption of hostilities with *me* dear sister - you can do no more than what you do already. Summon the mages, arm the warriors, steel the healers. These helpless townsfolk believe in you, dare I say they believe in me. Perhaps we should believe in *them*.”

“I do, dear sister I do. I taught them all to be self-sufficient, intelligent and articulate. I taught them how to live. I just fear Twilight will teach them how to suffer and die.”

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Big Mac was in a hurry. Who wasn't? He galloped along the path back to Sweet Apple Acres hollering for his sister, AJ, “where you at, Sis? AJ, you silly pony, when I need ya the most y'all never around...”

“Hi, er, bro - what can I do ya for?” said AJ, poking her head out from the barn. She didn't have her hat on for some reason and was chewing on some grass lazily.

“AJ, what's got in to you? You don't look good at all, but get out here, y'all the hardest-workin' pony in town and right now *we need you*. There's an invasion on and we gotta git everyone t'safety pronto.”

AJ choked, almost swallowing the hayseed, “an invasion? How did you kn- ah mean, an invasion?”

“I 'unno, that Twilight's gone loopy or summat - poor gal - and she be hunkering summat fierce for a hoe-down.”

“*Twilight?* Twilight wh- ooohhhh, *Twilight*, course...uh...Big Mac...kin you come in here a minute? Ah got summat t'show you...”

“Ye wha’ in the where now?”

“Macintosh, come.”

Big Mac trotted closer, looking in the barn, “what could you possibly...”

There in the barn was an orange shape. It was distinctly horse-shaped, and as Big Mac cocked his head he could make out three red, rosy apples on the haunches, “AJ, what’re you doin’ over *there* if’n you’s e over *here*?”

“Big Mac, I swear, sometimes you are one *silly* pony...” said the fake AJ, and his lights went out.

# Chapter 6

AJ groaned, her head was sore and her eyes hurt. It was dark, she could smell hay and apples; she was still in the barn. Whoever those strange ponies were, they'd trussed her up something fierce but she could still see and hear, she guessed they would want to interrogate her once they worked out she was awake.

As her sight cleared she looked around cautiously, "Big Mac!" she hissed as she spied a familiar shape - the real one this time, she could tell from his cutie-mark. She tried to scoot around quietly to face him, "Wake up ya big lump!"

"AJ?" Big Mac stirred, "That you? Ah mean...that *really* you?"

"Big Mac, you think I'd be hog-tied like this if it weren't?"

"Good point but...Y'all sure ya ain't a spy?"

"Big Mac, so help me, when I get outta here I'm gonna bust you up so good..."

"Hush now, you two, and listen up," said a familiar yet off-sounding voice as the pretender Applejack stepped closer, "Big Mouth here," the pony looked at what appeared to be a fat and scowling version of Big Mac, "tells me y'all know about our invasion. I wanna know *what* you know, and I wanna to know it *right now*."

AJ looked up at herself. Sort of. The orange pony with the shocking blonde mane and tail looked *almost* exactly like her, but somehow different, that's if she didn't count the rattle-snake cutie-mark. AJ looked over at Big Mac, who looked back at AJ, "Missy, who the heck are you? And why're you wearin' mah duds an' trottin' up and down like y'own the place?"

"Amanita Jack at your service, and we're movin' in here 'bouts. As ye say, what's yours is mine and what's mine is mine. That includes your two butts if'n yews didn't notice."

"Now *you* jest listen *here* Missy," said AJ, struggling to get her hooves free and failing, "this here is Apple territory, ain't nopony gonna take it from me whilst I'm still breathin'."

"I can arrange for that." said Amanita, eyes narrowing.

AJ looked her right back in the eye, and *spat*. Amanita was furious for a moment then broke off laughing, "you got some guts there gally. As I said," she returned with a scythe held in her muzzle which she put at her feet menacingly, tone now serious, "if you don't start talkin', imma start slicing."

"I plum don't know what y'all talkin' about," said AJ at last, "all I heard was our gal Twilight got herself in some sorta trouble."

"Twilight, Twilight...hmm. Hey Big Mouth," Amanita turned to the fake Big Mac, and AJ was surprised to work out that this wasn't an insult, that was apparently his name, "what intel we got on a 'Twilight'?"

The big, fat, red stallion thought for a moment as he heaved his bulk away from the rest of the group and tapped his muzzle with a hoof, "if she's anything like the rest of us, she'll be a magician, maybe a pegasus...no, wait, it's only unicorns here that have magic. I can't imagine she's all that important if she's got herself in trouble."

Amanita ground her teeth together at the offhand way her older brother was handling the situation, "if you say so..."

"Now you wait just a minute, our Twilight is one of *the* most powerful unicorns I have ever met, and whatever she's up to, whatever *you're* up to, she's going to raise hell. You just untie us now and we'll say no more about it, y'all go home, we sort out our Twi, everyone stays happy."

Big Mouth thought for a moment, "Daybreak...what if Daybreak had succeeded with her masterplan?"

"Say what now?" asked both AJ and Amanita

"Her...what did she call them? Elements?"

"The elements of harmony?" whispered AJ to Big Mac, but Big Mouth heard her.

"Harmony? What useless pieces of trash they'd be. No, Discord. Chaos! Destruction and rebirth, that's where true power lies. She said she had located them, it was her initial research that led us here...I wonder."

AJ and Big Mac shared a look, in AJ's eyes was the silent pleading of *please, please, please don't mention I'm the guardian of one of the Elements of Harmony*. Big Mac winked, and then opened his mouth to speak, "I reckon your Elements of Discord are as much a myth as the Elements of Harmony are. They ain't nothing but an old mare's tale."

"Mare's tale nothing," said Big Mouth, bragging, "*my* research was phenomenal, it far surpassed Daybreak Glitter's paltry efforts. I discovered records of four of the Elements of Discord, indicating that they were lost to us over a thousand years ago through a rift in the fabric of our universe. The same rift we used to travel here, and it will be that same rift we use to bring the armies of Queen Celeste down upon your pathetic little hamlet and wipe it, and your Equestria, from the realm. *I* learnt the secrets to stabilising the portals, *I* taught our mages the necessary magics and *I* will be the one to receive the Queen's favour when her and her troops arrive."

Big Mac pressed the advantage, "I still reckon there ain't no such thing as no Elements of Discord - why, what would they even look like?"

"*Look* like? Foal, they are barely-contained elemental spirits of destruction, birth and renewal. They can look like *anything*."

"Hah! Y'all be looking for something that don't exist that can look like anything else. If'n you wanna believe that load o'bullpucky, I got some apple-*pie* trees t'be sellin'!"

"Our legends tell of them as bright stars, once encircling the palace of Celeste - until Lunaria stole them away and sought to bring down our glorious Queen with them. She was defeated and banished for a thousand years to the moon, the elements of discord were thought destroyed - but I knew they never could be, they're older than the universe, they were *there*

when it all began and they'll be there long after we're gone. Lunaria sent them here, somehow, and I aim to locate and retrieve them."

AJ opened and then shut her mouth. For all his stoic silence, Big Mac was much better at this sort of thing than she was. When he spoke, he turned heads. She kept silent. *I reckon, she thought to herself, I reckon this trouble with Twilight that Big Mac mentioned has summat to do with these Elements of Discord somehow. I don't know why I'm seein' double all of a sudden, but coincidence can take a hike...just like I gotta...but how?* AJ decided to keep her mouth shut and play it by ear. She'd get a break.

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Celestia had done her best, the townsfolk had done their best. Things were as good as they were going to get for the future site of a battle. Those old folks and foals they could were being teleported or airlifted to safety by the unicorns and weather patrol pegasi respectively, others who would not or could not fight were fleeing through Whitetail Wood towards Hoofington. Tearful goodbye's were being said, some likely to be final.

"Report, General?" Celestia asked Bucephalus 'Buck' Stormhammer, an aged, wise pegasus stallion who had been in her faithful employ his entire life. She had grown close and saw him as a friend, as close as one can get with such differing lifespans.

"Our recon missions are coming back short, Princess, but we can estimate the Nightmare Force's speed of travel. Permission requested to keep our distance. We're not learning much more now than that which Princess Luna came back with, and we really can't afford to lose any more fliers on these trips."

"Permission granted. Is that all?"

"I...I don't know Celestia. Something doesn't smell right."

"Howso?"

"Ma'am, you keep me around for my brains as well as my good looks, I take it?"



Celestia smiled despite herself and the situation, “That I do Buck. Speak your mind. Permission to speak freely.”

“We’ve got our eyes on the wrong ball.”

Celestia’s heart sunk, “what makes you say that? An army barely a few hours’ march from a hastily-reinforced and otherwise defenceless town is the wrong target?”

“The bigger picture agrees, yes. That storm was *not* the cause of your pupil’s...transformation. It was a wholly unconnected event. It also preceeded it. Whatever or whoever caused that storm has yet to play their hand and they’ve had a couple more days to prepare. Maybe our sudden preparations spooked them, maybe they’re reconsidering, but we don’t know what they want. This might cause them to retreat, or it might embolden them or force their hoof.”

Celestia nodded, her own examination of the book found in Twilight’s saddle-bags painted much the same picture, “General, alert a few trusted ponies. I don’t care the rank nor company, the standing nor status. If they’re alright by your books then I shall abide by your decisions. Tell them your fears, tell them to keep their eyes open. If my own investigation is correct, the army we need to battle is not out there,” Celestia pointed with one wing, “it may already be much, much closer.”

“Inside Ponyville limits?”

“Neigh, inside *Ponyville City proper*, inside the barricades. General, the signs point to a massive teleportation grounding spell of some strange, unknown sort. All signals tell me it was successful, the next logical move would be direct invasion by a well-prepared force undetectable by my resources until they move, by the time we do know where they are, it may be too late.”

Buck went white, “by your leave, Princess, I will do what I can.”

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Earlier that morning, Bright Eyes had been delivering the mail. Her real name Bright Eyes, but she was often called Derpy Hooves for her slightly

clumsy nature and a lazy eye - it didn't bother her so long as it was said without malice. The mail always needed delivering and she was nothing if not dilligent. Banking in the air as she passed over Sugar Cube Corner flying south, she noted a lot of commotion around Ponyville Town Hall. She could see Zecora; the pretty stripey zebra pony was easy to spot even when she covered herself up in her trademarked shawl. With her was a semi-familiar blue shape. Bright Eyes' eyes weren't the best, especially not the one that tended to have a mind of it's own, but she was quite certain it was Trixie she'd spotted. She did a loop around and headed out towards Mane Street, almost colliding with a grey blur zooming the other way.

"Hello little grey thundercloud," said Bright Eyes, giggling, "where are you off to at such a hurry?" Bright Eyes remembered her father's favourite nickname for her when she was in a mood.

To her amazement, the 'raincloud' swirled around and around her, the air sizzling like a skillet, before stopping. A grey shape became visible and Bright Eyes gasped, clapping her hooves in delight, "you're a pegasus like me!"

"Oh, *you*," said the strange pegasus, sneering, "I'm very like you indeed. Where it *doesn't* count at least." the strange pegasus alighted on a cloud, flicking her tail and her single solid wing in annoyance.

"What happened to your eye and your wing?" Bright Eyes landed on the same cloud, and stretched her neck out inquisitively, wings half-open as she examined the newcomer, "don't that hurt you, miss pegasus? I hurt myself plenty when I'm not careful. Papa says it ain't my fault none but it sure does smart. I've still got two good wings though, even if we do share a lazy eye."

"You're *nothing* like me," said Bubbly Grime with a snarl, her bale-fire eye flaring like a miniature sun of blue lightning, the ghost-wing stretching and flickering as the power warped in response to her anger, "you're a weak, pathetic fool."

Bright Eyes was taken aback, this strange not-Bright Eyes wasn't very friendly. She pouted, "Papa says I'm no fool. I'm not the smartest pony, but I work hard! I can carry all the letters of Ponyville and I never lose *even one*. You shouldn't be so mean. Mama always says mean ponies just hide

their hurts. You gotta clean out your wounds for them heal. Mama's smart. So's Papa. I reckon I'll be smart like them one day."

"You're a fool and so are they. They despise you like everypony else. Father and Mother just wanted to get rid of-" the strange pegasus shook her head and snarled, "why am I even here! Get out of my way you imbecile!"

With that, Bubbly Grime took off, almost knocking Bright Eyes from the cloud as she sped towards the town hall.

"You don't need to be so mean! My Ma and Pa love me plenty, and I always wanted a sister! Do you like muffins?" she called after the retreating shape, "I'll bring you a muffin! Then we can be friends, you can be my sister!" Bright Eyes watched the shape go, and said under her breath, "I always wanted a sister." then she shook herself, straightened her mailbags and took off once more for her rounds, which were mostly uneventful until she headed finally for Sweet Apple Acres and the last delivery of the day.

Sweet Apple Acres looked strange, Bright Eyes thought, there weren't enough ponies around working on a day like this. She landed on the barn roof. It was very bad form, but something didn't look right. She peeked in the skylight, and saw the oddest thing. Two Big Macs, and two Applejacks! One of each was tied up, and the other two were alternatively talking to the tied-up pair and to a bunch of strange ponies she didn't recognize. She looked again, they looked...sort of familiar but sort of not. Papa and Mama always said to listen to *how* things were said more than *what*, so Bright Eyes listened. The small group of strange ponies spoke harshly with one another, and harsher still to the pair of tied up ponies. Alternatively, the two tied up ponies were sitting close to one-another, reassuringly, their tails crossing. Bright Eyes stood tall, this was a very, very special day.

She did the unthinkable. She took off the mailbags.

"I am not a clever pony," she said to herself, "I am not a strong pony. I am not even..." she gulped, "a particularly brave pony, but I am a pony. I will do what I must. For Stampy, for Celestia, for Luna, for the mail and for muffins!"

She would have *one* chance. The barn door on the way *in* was barely big enough. Going out, was only the high window - though fortunately it was large for adding hay to the hayloft, and more importantly open. One way in. One way out. Two ponies. One mail-mare.

Bright Eyes steeled herself. She stood up straight, she breathed in like Papa had said when learning to fly. Feathers out! Wings up! Tail free! Head to the sky!

“FOR DOUBLE CHOCOLATE CHIP MUFFINS AND CAKE! BRIGHT EYES TO THE RESCUE!”

She sprang into the air and swooped faster than a speeding lightning-bolt through the open door, tucking both wings in as she did so. Her front hooves collided with a very surprised-looking Amanita and Big Mouth, spinning them both around and dropping them to the floor as Bright Eyes hooked said hooves in one smooth solid motion through the ropes still tying Applejack and Big Mac up. She *wasn't* the biggest, strongest, or fastest, but she was big enough, strong enough and fast enough. Many years practice carrying the mail through hail and storm had strengthened the slight-looking mail-mare beyond mere first appearances. Now when it counted she had what it took, and she took AJ and Big Mac with her.

With a disbelieving glance as she regained her breath, and then a whoop of joy, AJ shouted, “So long suckers!” to the open mouths of the astonished dopelgangers as they shot out of the building and up, up and away.

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They didn't get far, but then they didn't have to. They couldn't, they daren't go much further - they were already deep enough within the Everfree Forest and Big Mac was...well...big.

“Derpy...Bright Eyes, that were the plum craziest, loco darned thing I ever did see. You could'a got hurt!” said AJ, struggling out of the ropes now Big Mac had bitten through them.

“You *were* being hurt,” said Bright Eyes, and she giggled despite how worn-out she was, “it worked, didn't it?”

Big Mac looked up from chewing through his own ropes and said in his magnanimous way, "Eeeyup. She got ya there, sis."

"Well we can't stay here none too long. If what you says is true, Macintosh, Twilight and her nightmare army are'a commin'. They'll be here afore too long. I gotta get me my harmony halter. I need that jewel." AJ stood up and shook herself, she'd somehow kept her hat and she straightened it in a determined way.

"Fluttershy is missing too, AJ. We need somepony to get *her* jewel." reminded Big Mac.

Bright Eyes straightened, she'd been delivering mail for years. She was pretty sure she knew how to pick a package up, "Bright Eyes will do it!"

"Do you even know where..."

Bright Eyes frowned, "Who is best mailpony in Ponyville? Never late, always on time? *Knows where everypony lives?*"

AJ blinked, and blushed, "sugarcube, how could I have doubted you? I owe you an apology. Bright Eyes, *you* are that pony. Get us Flutter's harmony halter and bring it to the town hall. Big Mac and I will head back to Sweet Apple Acres, and when the ruckus has died down I'll raid my secret hidey-hole for m'own gem and meet you back at the town. Clear?"

"As muffins!" said Bright Eyes.

"One, two, three, break!"

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Bright Eyes flew north, skirting Sweet Apple Acres in a wide circle. Some of those mean ponies had wings and whilst Bright Eyes didn't think they'd be after her, she didn't want to take any chances. She dropped down into the trees relatively silently. No pony was about. She shivered at the mess made of the chicken coup, and pushed open the door to the house carefully. The building was empty. Angel was missing. Without the bunny who was always so protective of Fluttershy hovering around, the small cottage felt vast and spooky. Bright Eyes poked her nose around looking for

Fluttershy's special halter. The quiet little yellow pegasus had showed it to her a few times and Bright Eyes was sure she remembered where it was. A few steps later and she had the box before her. She carefully opened it with her nose.

There it was.

If those big meanies had even suspected...Bright Eyes's brow furrowed, they were bad ponies. They should really be taught a lesson. Papa and Mama had always said to show kindness to everypony, and they were right. Bright Eyes had lots of friends, she wasn't going to let them down.

She bent to pick the jewel up in her mouth...but something strange happened. It started to glow, it lifted into the air, and so did Bright Eyes! She squawked and flapped her wings in surprise but it didn't feel bad. With a sudden flash of light, the gem-covered halter disappeared and reappeared around her neck.

"Oh no...I've broken it!" Bright Eyes shot out of the cottage and headed straight for Ponyville as fast as she could, this wasn't supposed to happen! She'd never failed in a delivery!

At Ponyville, she hurried straight to the town square; there outside the town hall were Celestia and Luna. They looked up with amazement as the grey pegasus with the cutie-mark of seven bubbles came speeding out of the sky towards them in tears, hollering, "I broked it! I broked it!"

"Calm yourself, be calm little one," said Celestia softly once she'd got Bright Eyes to stop her frantic yelling and prancing, "what have you broken?"

"Flu-Fluttershy's pretty!" sobbed Bright Eyes.

"Let me see...oh! Oh my, Oh Bright Eyes, it's not broken...it's perfect!"

The jewel, previously shaped like a yellow butterfly, was now in the shape of a muffin.

"I see in the absense of our poor Fluttershy, wherever she is, the Element of Kindness has found a new bearer and a new totem."

“And just in time no less!” cried AJ loudly, panting and sweating as she and Big Mac entered the square at a flat gallop, AJ’s apple-themed jewel glowing on her chest, “we’ve got trouble, *big* trouble, back at Sweet Apple Acres. A bunch of hooey-acting doubles have turned up, they look just like us, sorta, only different. They took me an’ Big Mac hostage until Derpy here, uh, I mean Bright Eyes, saved us.”

“Doubles?” asked Luna and Celestia together, sharing a glance.

“Uhuh, when you see ‘em, check ‘em. There’s one ornery cowpony looks like me, and another big galoot that looks like our Big Mac, only not so handsome.”

“Is this true?” asked Celestia earnestly

“Eeeeyup.” said Big Mac, it was clear which part he thought was most true.

“In that case I fear we have little time to lose, we must-”

Whatever Princess Celestia was about to say went unsaid, as the ground started shaking.

Terrified ponies ran out of shops into the streets as windows shattered and tiles fell from rooves. Many stopped and stared at the town hall behind Celestia, at a burgeoning light show that was beginning from the very top. A grey figure, a pegasus with one wing and one balefully glowing eye, was performing magic. She had no horn but her entire body was glowing in the same way that a unicorn’s horn usually does. There were horrified whispers amongst the crowd, wondering what it could mean, how a pegasus could have mastered magic, and such powerful magic at that. The lilting, gibbering voice of the pegasus could be heard over the steadily rising winds, growing more manic and detached as the spell reached it’s culmination. Wtih a sudden huge burst of lightning, the top of the town hall was vaporized, raining rubble down into the crowd. There were several painful shrieks as injuries occured, and the crowd scattered.

“Stars of Equestria,” swore Celestia, “we’re too late. It has already begun.”

“Hold fast, ma’am,” said AJ, steeling herself, “t’ain’t nothin’ too late.”

"I'm scared," said Bright Eyes, "but I will be brave. For Papa and Mama."

"Such...such shambles. This simply will not do." Rarity stepped daintily around the wreckage as she emerged from her shop, also bedecked in her jewel. AJ nodded to the white unicorn mare with the gorgeous purple mane and tail, she nodded back.

"Let's get this party started!" said Pinkie, and she growled - and then giggled, as she emerged looking suspiciously fired-up from the nearby coffee shop.

"I came as fast as I could, guys!" said a blue streak of lightning playfully.

"From napping to action in?" prompted AJ with a smile.

"Ten. Seconds. Flat." They bro-hoofed and the speedy young filly alighted next to AJ.

"Sister, your place is with the generals, I could never forgive myself if something happened to you." Luna pointed with her horn urgently skyward.

"Luna, dearest Luna, how can I ask you to do this? How can I forgive *myself* if something happened to *you*?" Celestia looked aghast, her great head turning from the devastation and rising clamour in the ruined town hall and back to her smaller sister.

"You must - you have already proven you can raise the sun and the moon during my exile. I am the bearer of the Element of Magic, or were your words hollow and meaningless?" Luna looked defiant as with a single thought she tapped into the nascent energy of the jewel around her neck, a piece of the device which so long ago had banished her to the moon. In moments, she grew in size, her wings expanding to full adult status, her horn extending and armor sprouting from nowhere, made manifest by her will alone. She looked shockingly similar to Nightmare Moon, but her voice was calm, kind and without malice, "I am the bearer, for good or ill, it is my task. I do not have time to argue, now *go!*"

Celestia wavered for a second, and then bowed to her younger sister, "Your will." and she took off, calling for her generals and starting the counter-attack.



Luna watched her go, then took a deep breath and yelled “ONWARDS!” and galloped full-tilt into the town hall, inside were rising voices and sounds of battle. Ponies didn’t usually fight, but when they did it was brutal. There had been but few guards in the hall, an oversight which had cost dearly. Mayor Mare was bloodied and had lost the marks of her station somewhere in the fight, she was cornered by three strange armored earth-ponies. Luna didn’t hesitate, she speared one through the ribs and threw him across the room where he impacted with deadly force into a unicorn emerging from the huge glowing pillar of light. She dispatched the second with a flash of her hooves that almost took his head off and reared up screaming in front of the third, who promptly fled before her fore-hooves could find another victim.

“Mayor! Out! Get out now!” Luna covered her escape, rearing and bucking, her huge wings flapping and large horn on fire. The earth-ponies scattered before her and piled up around the back of the large room. A few brave but foolhardy unicorns from the rift tried attacking with lightning bolts but the goddess just shrugged them off, throwing them back with baleful fire.

“Pathetic foals, you think you can just waltz in uninvited? I’ll bring this building down and close this portal around your ears. Flee if you value your lives!”

Luna sprung into the air, swirling around the pillar of light, weaving her magic to destabilize it. Chunks of masonry started lifting into the air as the expeditionary force ran for their lives through cracks which soon became defacto doorways out of the building as it crumbled before their very eyes. With an almighty explosion the building collapsed and the pillar of light twisted and twirled out of control before collapsing in on itself in a pattering implosion.

The pegasus who had performed the spell looked at the devastation and laughed mockingly, “You think that’s it? You really thought one measly gateway was the extent of my power? Behold. Second-level transportation harmonics.” Bubbly Grime took off, fleeing from the enraged Luna and laughing maniacally, as all over Ponyville were appearing bright blue spots of light, out of which popped horses, one by one and two by two.

Celestia watched from her perch, she was as ready as she could be, "Generals, lay waste to the invaders. Take no prisoners. Buck and Swift Arrow, If your ponies have reached our allies, let us hope they will assist."

"Ma'am, our treaties have been in force for close to a millenia - very few times have we had to call on aid, each time it has been answered." Swift Arrow answered, with dark troubled eyes for all his brave words. The white pegasus with sky-blue mane and bow-and-arrow cutie-mark was another of her trusted advisors, grown strange in his long history of diplomatic association with alien cultures, but no less loyal for it.

"Let us hope it arrives in time."

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Down below on the ground, the fight had turned to melee and chaos. Pinkie seemed to be the only one enjoying herself. She was singing as she whirled and twirled, her hooves flashing every which way, finding their targets with pin-point accuracy.

*Oh an earth-pony battle is the best place for me,  
for Pinkie!  
for Pinkie!  
With a big ol' coffee-powered hoof kick I can kick me some pony,  
for Pinkie!  
for Pinkie!*

AJ shook her head. Unbelievable. Even in the midst of this. "Did that...did she say somepony gave her *coffee*?"

"Eeeyup," said Big Mac as he fought off two armoured earth-ponies with nothing but a stave held in his mouth, "I wouldn't stand too close to her for a while if'n I was you."

As if in answer, Pinkie Pie came twirling past and the pair of attacking ponies found themselves flying senselessly through the air in two different directions - somehow Pinkie had kicked them with all four feet. She landed daintily, "tadaa!"

“I reckon...I can do...better!” said AJ, and she put her famous back legs into action, sending another attacker flying into three more who were cornering Bon-Bon and Lyra.

“Yay! This is so much fun!” said Pinkie, bounding off again.

“Pinks, sometimes you worry me...”

Rarity wasn't dealing much better. She had her custom camouflaged helmet on - even though it mussed her mane and chafed. It was a lucky thing she did too, as a broken spear-point from a spear held in an earth-ponies mouth spun overhead, bounced off, and sliced through her tail. She stopped, her eyes went wide, “You...you...MY TAIL! MY BEAUTIFUL TAIL! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW LONG THIS TOOK TO GROW OUT FROM THE LAST TIME!”

She was mad. She was *livid*. Her eyes flashed brighter than her horn as she turned to her shop and summoned an armada of scissors, “I am going to need EXTENSIONS because of this! They will require A PERM! They will require EXTRA CONDITIONER!”

With every yelled punctuation, Rarity sent more scissors flying through the air where they sliced off clothing, tails and manes from enemy fighters, clearing a circle around her as she raged.

Rainbow Dash flicked past her, wings whirring, fending off missiles and other attacking pegasi. Aerial combat was vicious, they'd already lost some good flyers but Dash was determined to stay in the air. A sudden flash of red and she found herself spiralling out of control where she slammed into the ground, winded.

Four heavy thumps and a large, red, rainbow-haired pegasus stallion landed in front of her, “and you are the famous Rainbow Dash, huh.” The stallion snorted, furling his wings, “I don't see what's so great about you. Scrawny thing.”

“Go eat clouds,” said Rainbow Dash, struggling to stand up, “you're nothing but a big bully. I've dealt with worse than you back at flight school.”

“Flightschool, huh? They don’t call me Rainbow Crash for nothing. I earned my respect in that shithole, nobody crossed me and got away with it. Where I go, ponies *move*.”

“Heh heh, it’s probably the smell. Keep up if you can flyboy!” Dash sprung into the air and swung low over the surprised pegasus, giving him a kick in the forehead. Crash snarled and sprung into the air after her. Dash was fast, but her double was faster. Where she went, he followed. They twisted and spun over the battlefield leading a merry chase, before Dash pulled up to gain height and hopefully the advantage. It was a small shrill yell that caused Dash to end the climb - Scootaloo had slipped the pegasi taking her to safety and the flightless young foal was in trouble. Without a second thought, Dash spun in the air and swooped past the surprised Crash without a second glance, who turned to follow, his bulk not so agile.

Dash sped downwards towards the young filly, she was surrounded by a group of ravenous-looking armoured ponies, the type that wouldn’t think twice before ripping her wings off. She pushed fast, hard, faster, harder, gritted her teeth, put *everything* into her dive...and with an explosion of multi-coloured light she broke the rainbow barrier and rode the sonic rainboom. She banked low, so low her hooves brushed the ground, her passage so swift and the energies swirling around her so barely under control that it sent fighters flying left and right. Dash hooked the filly from behind with her hooves and snapped upwards in a smooth motion. The heavier, stockier Rainbow Crash couldn’t quite manage the same feat. He went spinning through the group and slammed heavily into a building, where he lay, stunned.

Scootaloo opened her eyes and looked up into Rainbow Dash’s face and her smile lit up like the sun, “feels good, don’t it kid?” said Dash above the wind, her words whipped away by the torrent.

They were high up now, far above the chaos and destruction, “is this what it feels like, to fly?” Scootaloo spread her wings experimentally.

“Sure is. Want a real taste?” Dash grinned suddenly and let her go. For a brief second Scootaloo was frantic, but as she stiffened with fear she found herself gliding and tumbled to a stop on a cloud. Looking up, she found herself gazing into the very disapproving gaze of Celestia.

“That’s no fair Dash! You tattled on me!” called Scootaloo, jumping up and down on the cloud with anger.

Rainbow curved around and saluted Celestia, replying, “You stay there Scoots, out of trouble!” to the angry young foal before she flapped off.

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Luna let fly a bright blue bolt of energy at the retreating, laughing pegasus with one wing, it burst over her head, passing harmlessly, though it sent eddies and sparks of balefire swirling through the darkening sky, “You will not escape me!”

“I don’t have to!” crowed the triumphant Bubbly Grime, “I just have to get close enough to activate the bridge-spell. It took a lot of work, this pattern, the vortices were hard to channel but I managed it. I stared into the Abyss, Lunaria! I stared it down and opened the ways, and our troops come en masse! You cannot stop us, we have won! The victory of my mistress will be complete before dawn breaks on this pathetic realm.”

Luna shrieked in anger, but the spell had been cast - for the second time that day the ground shook. The energies harnessed by the mad pegasus-mage made the very air come alive with crawling, velveteen power as a great pillar of light burst forth from a clearing just inside the outskirts of the Everfree Forest. Bubbly Grime broke left, Luna right and they slammed into each other around the other side with horns and hooves flailing, wings entangled as they dropped to the ground. Luna rolled to her feet first and shook her head. As Bubbly Grime got to her hooves, the goddess of the moon backed away, ears splayed flat against the back of her head, eyes wide.

“That’s right you foal, flee! Flee whilst you ca-”

There was a screeching roar behind Bubbly Grime and she turned and looked up in horror as a dark, bat-winged, slavering shape stomped out of the darkness to snap huge jaws at the pegasus. Luna turned to smoke and fled, but the pegasus-mage wasn’t going to have things so easy.

Triumphant sounds of an invading army turned to screams of pain and agony. Panicked whinnies and sickening sounds of breaking bone rent the previously peaceful evening.

Twilight Doom and her Nightmare Army had arrived, just in time to greet the invaders with open jaws.

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Twilight Doom by MadMax (thank you so much!)

# Chapter 7

There was barely a lull in the fighting, nary a breathing space. Celestia was exhausted but still she barked orders. The battle had long since ceased to have any sense of order, it was pure chaos, blood, sweat and tears. Several buildings were on fire, Rarity's shop was a wreck and the Cake's cake shop had seen better days. She was doing her best to keep her people alive, but for every enemy soldier she or her people felled, there seemed to be another take their place.

"Third Battalion reports heavy skirmishing on the East side, Princess, but Intel thinks it's a feint." said the flier, a young, worried-looking cream-coloured Pegasus with light brown mane and tail. Whiskey Jack, the Princess remembered, supposedly a distant relative, but then many were these days. The boon and curse of immortality, a long Winter's Solstice Card List but few to truly spend it with.

"Aye, that it is, Ma'am, their forces have been circling us around Eastward ever since the sun dipped in the West. That'll be where they'll be coming from next, you mark my wo-"

The general didn't manage to finish his sentence before a bright, powerful flash lit the darkening skies, brighter than the sun, and a huge column of light rocketed skyward. Seconds later came the rumbling forces of nature as the ground was stressed and the air rent asunder.

Celestia narrowed her eyes, but General Stormbringer was faster, "The Everfree Forest?"

"It makes sense General; the pegasus-mage who was taking measure of my sister was headed off in that direction." Celestia's muzzle was troubled.

"Is your sister..?"

"Princess Luna is...she is safe." Princess Celestia closed her eyes, feeling for the link with her sibling, "She is worried, frightened, but safe. She comes even now."

Like a bolt of blue lightning, Princess Luna fell out of the sky in a glowing swirl of light and reformed, shaken, breathing hard, but otherwise unharmed, "We may..." she caught her breath, "we may have just got our Season's Gift come early, dear sister, or otherwise we may already be

doomed. The Nightmare army is here. Our foreign enemies just met our domestic, both seek to take what is ours. If ever your powers and mine, and the Elements of Harmony, are to protect what we hold dear, we must strike. Do not hold back."

Celestia bowed her head, troubled, "Luna, so long ago as we battled, we decimated untold tracts of land, the very hell-hole that has spawned the second army on our doorstep was the result of our last foray into battle."

"Celestia, if you do not act, all that you have fought for, all that I now seek to share - in friendship - will be lost."

"Then gather your cohorts, my dear. We ride. General Bucephalus, I am promoting you to Field Marshal with all rights, privileges and responsibilities thereof. I trust you are worthy."

Buck inclined his head, landing beside his Princess and bowing, one forehoof outstretched, "I shall do my utmost."

"I know you will," she gave him a tender kiss on the forehead, "keep your ponies safe. Keep yourself safe." Then she rose up into the air on her great, white wings and flew into the thick.

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The fighting was desperate. The invading army, harried from behind by Twilight's nightmare forces, surged forward unceasingly, without flinching even in the face of death. Celestia's forces were hard-pressed to avoid complete annihilation let alone stem the tide, the first infantry battalion had already suffered heavy losses but would not fold, not whilst there was a mare or stallion left to defend their homeland.

Celestia and her reinforcements were just in time, though she wasn't sure it would be enough. As yet another pony fell, the sight twisting a knife in her heart ever deeper, she leapt into action, bringing her power to bare. She lowered her head, concentrated, and shot a beam of pure energy from her horn at the battlefield. Where it struck, the light was incandescent, it threw her enemies across the field and her cheering, charging subjects surged into the breach.

"I grant you my boon, brave soldiers!" she called from on high, "May it carry you onwards to glory and victory!" she threw back her head as she swooped over the advancing tide and sang lightly, wings, tail and mane glowing with all the colours of the aurora, powerful in the darkness. As if in response, glowing brighter with every note, the hooves, mane and tail of her soldiers shone gold and they felt renewed vigour and health.



The advance was one-sided however, as bold lightning shot out from the sidelines, groups of unicorn-mages attacked the princess, attempting to bring her down, or at least harry her and halt her attempts at succour. Celestia brought her wings together in one mighty downbeat, a thunderclap rent the air and a blast of wind assailed her opponents. They moved as one, shielding with a bright plasma-bubble and lunged out again with tendrils of fire. Celestia ducked under them easily and skipped across the pothole-strewn battleground, where her hooves touched burst bright flames seemingly without fuel, lighting the night with dancing shadows. Celestia's own mages retaliated, with their sudden ability to see the previously-hidden enemy they could do more than rescue the injured or fend off the bold. With multi-coloured lightning streaking the sky, the battle was joined.

Bubbly Grime snarled and barked orders, choking the life from a hapless soldier too slow to move before she threw the body to the demons barely held in check by her magic and the spears and shields of those left behind to secure the landing.

The worst had been the zombie hordes, slow, stinking, filthy creatures; long-dead ponies, ancient boars, rotten wolves, they were hard to stop and almost impossible to kill. Enough bites infected the victim, and minutes or hours later, depending on when their own life-force faltered and died, they would rise again. Above this all was a whirling, cackling demoness, spewing green boiling fire from her mouth, slaying her own forces as indiscriminately as she decimated Bubbly Grime's. Her abject hate of all existence was the only thing tempering her unnatural forces. Bubbly had had enough. She took to the skies and headed straight for the purple, glowing monstrosity, where she lashed out with hoof, teeth and wing, screaming incoherently with rage, stabbing with her horn.

Twilight Doom laughed, a deep throaty laugh and threw off the attack with one single swipe of her great torn batlike wings, "Foolish mare, to think you can touch me. You stink of dark magic but your power is weak, your spirit falters."

"I will tear you limb from limb and feast on your entrails!" screeched Bubbly Grime as the pair slammed into each other, lofted fireballs and kicked, sliced and spat. The match only halted when a bright plume of red fire foamed down from the heavens.

"Dragons?" hissed Twilight, "you bring dragons?" she growled and fled from the startled mage-pegasus, heading towards the fireball with murderous intent.

“Those are not our dragons...” said Bubbly, dumbly, before swearing and heading back to the landing. She lashed out with her hatred and anger, searing burning wave after burning wave of liches and gibbering parasites before harrying her surviving minions towards Celeste the Sun Tyrant and the rest of the invading forces. Dragons were something new. Bubbly idly wondered *other* surprises the resourceful, annoying folk of Equestria would come up with.

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Celeste was furious, her triumphant emergence into Equestria had gone wrong even before the echoes of her first spells had faded. This land was supposed to be undefended! Pastoral! Instead she faced an army - a small and untested army, but an army all the same - of well-armoured earth-ponies, squads of powerful battle-mages and a barricaded, prepared populace. This was before she even *contemplated* the nightmarish horde which had severely impeded her advances. The only thing to go right so far was when she felt the answering vibrations from the other Elements of Discord sing in her blood, calling out to her. They would be hers, and when she had them she would crush these pathetic weaklings beneath her hooves, rip the sun from its orbit and dash it to earth, squeeze the moon until it burst...they would pay for not abasing themselves before her and offering up what was rightly hers.

She snarled, “find me that idiot Big Mouth and get him here, have Sky Reaver and Demon Claw bolster our aerial defences and whip those useless mages into order, I will not be denied my victory!”

“At once, my Queen.” The red pegasus was breathing hard, cuts and bruises marring his otherwise handsome, if cruel, face and body.

“Rainbow Crash...just what has happened to you?”

“War madame, war happened.”

“I heard a young sky-blue filly bested him in aerial combat,” suggested a rich voice, cruel laughter echoing with every syllable

Crash turned, snarling, “you keep your whore mouth shut or you’ll not look so pretty, Vanity, I don’t see *you* out there fighting.”

“A lady’s place is not on the front lines, some of us have more important work to do.”

“You wouldn’t know the meaning of the word.” spat Crash, and he flicked his tail angrily and took off, looking for the delinquent red earth-pony.

Celeste turned to Vanity with a smile, "as much as I adore our sessions when he is angry, I feel he is right. Make your mark, Vanity, ply your trade."

Vanity looked in horror at the maelstrom beneath them, perched on her cloud, "Moi? Down *there*?"

"If you don't," added Celeste, "I will pluck out every single one of those glorious feathers of yours and line my seat-cushions with them. Especially the ones that don't grow back."

Vanity fluffed up and sniffed, "As you wish, my queen."

Vanity was a pegasus-mage of Estrosia, well-trained in the darker arts. As she flew over the heads of friend and foe alike, her subtle magic wended its way into the hearts of the fighters. Her own were bolstered with courage, the enemy...the enemy felt despair, anger, hatred of fellow ponies. Soon there were swings of mouth-held swords going astray, hoof-kicks missing their marks and unfortunate accidents aplenty. She laughed a cruel, hollow laugh and readied herself for a second display.

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Celestia was barking orders again, the furious assault of the invaders - she still didn't know where they were from or what they wanted though their intent appeared obvious - had reached a crescendo and her own troops were in disarray. Fireballs sizzled down from the sky, igniting all they touched. Both sides deployed battle-mages; her own were purely unicorn, but the enemy seemed to be using unicorns and pegasus both, she wondered at that.

Her defences were crumbling, her forces scattering, the line would break...she was about to order a full retreat when with a screeching and flapping of wings, golden shapes dropped from the skies to tear and harry the advancing enemy earth-ponies, rage fuelling them as the hook-beaked, clawed monstrosities threw their might into the ring. One such shape alighted on the cloud where Celestia stood, he was standing proud though almost breathless. She half-spread her wings in surprise and two pegasus guards leapt forwards, but after a moment she waved them off with a smile on her face. It was a weary smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"Prince Valaar, I presume," Celestia addressed the large, feathered and haughty-looking male griffon coolly for all she was inwardly relieved of his presence.

"Ah, Princess Celestia," he intoned, accenting the *princess* as if it were an insult more than a title, "it is so good to see you again. What, pray

tell, lead you to send the People of the Great High Reaches such a missive as I found in my claws this morning?"

"See for yourself, young prince, I invite you to war."

"And why, dear princess, do you presume to think I or my people would have the slightest interest in fighting and dying for you?"

"Your *father's* people, young prince, should be interested in only *one* thing. I offer you that which you most crave, but the offer is short and I am fickle of temper. I offer you horse-meat."

The griffon blinked, momentarily taken aback, "How is this? You offer us your own, rogue subjects?"

"Those are not my subjects, dear prince, they are interlopers, vagrants, charlatans, pretenders and usurpers and they are *yours* to do with as you please whilst they lay arms against me or my people." Celestia pointed with a wing, sweeping it across the devastation below, "but beware, prince; I feel every blow laid upon my people in my realm - and this is *my* realm - if you or any of your subjects so much as muss a single hair of a mane on one of *my* subjects it will not be turkey I offer to the meat-eating delegates at Midwinter's Feast, is that clear?"

"You *dare* to threaten-"

"Young prince, I dare to gut you right now if you so much as raise your voice or look at me with impertinence...but calm yourself, we are all friends here and I have put on a candle-lit feast for you." she gestured again, this time with a hoof.

The griffon-prince looked at the land below, dotted with walking horse d'oeuvres and screeched loudly, "you have a deal, Princess Celestia. My warbirds and I, We will fight, we may die, but we will feed."

"Agreed. So much easier than cremation, so much less mess."

As the griffon and his forces engaged the enemy with a hearty, blood-thirsty vigour, one of the pegasus-generals alighted, "madame, our cause is dire but can they be trusted?"

"In all my time as your Princess, they have never reneged on an agreement. They are a strange, warlike race, quick to anger, quicker to strike. Many wrongs have been committed between them and us but when they have given their word they have never been known to cross it."

"And the dragons?"

"The dragons are old allies, many of them as old as the hills and several older than I. The flights they sent are young, juvenile, but capable. We may yet see tomorrow."

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For a time the war had been going well for the Estrosian invaders - until the dragons acted. With searing bolts of red and orange flame, the dragons attacked en masse. They were seemingly impervious to the frantic mages of Estrosia, roaring their defiance and sweeping the unicorns and pegasi alike off their perches. They dove at the soldiers, scattering them like cattle.

The shape of the battle changed in moments. The screeching roar of the winged bringers of fire sent fighters from both sides scrambling for cover. In the confusion, the griffons struck. They fell from the skies, powerful front talons outstretched where they would land, piercing the flanks of the stunned earth-ponies. Some barely bothered to escape with their prizes and just dipped great, bloody hooked beaks to feed on the weakly-struggling ponies clutched in their death-grips.

Crash found Big Mouth, or what was left of him, struggling feebly to get up. His left rear leg was missing, nothing but a bloody stump to show for it. Great rents of griffon-claws had torn open his insides, spilling steaming entrails onto the slick, wet grass.

"I think you've finally found your niche, dear friend," said Crash, weaving his head about as he checked for dangers. The wide, white and bloodshot eyes of his 'friend' spoke volumes, but Crash just sneered, "like all bad apples, only fit to feed the worms."

Crash took off as vaguely pony-shaped gasts, hungry ghosts made of nothing but teeth, claws, shadow and an endless, hellish appetite, closed in, chittering and wailing, flexing fang-filled mouths to impossible angles as they began to feed. Big Mouth's last breaths were spent screaming.

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Rainbow Dash dodged the fluttering scratching batwings of some impossibly-skinny flying creature and barrel-rolled through the air trying to shake off three more. With a screech overhead, a dark shape collided with her and bounced off. Rainbow cried out in pain as feathers and flesh were rent free of her body, but the shape had torn off the biting terrors too, twisting them into flailing lumps of dead flesh before throwing them to the ground.

"It's nice to see you, Lady Prism Radiance Windemere Silverhoof." said Gilda, circling.

Dash's mouth opened for a brief moment in surprise before a small smile graced her lips, "it's nice to see you too, Lady Wildfeather Longwing

Strongbeak of the High Reaches Clan...Titles, such a mouthful, can't we just stick to you calling me Dash, and me calling you Gilda?"

"Just like old times in Junior Speedsters, huh?"

"No, no Gilda, not like old times. These are my people now."

"You've never even told them who you really *are*."

"I'm Rainbow Dash, the best filly flier in all of Equestria, I don't need a title to be that. You don't need a title to be my friend."

"Still loyal to what we had, huh?"

"Still loyal to my *friends*, as long as my friends stop being such *huge butts*."

"I...I missed you Dash. Call this payback for how I acted." The griffon princess was hesitant, nervous.

"Apology accepted, Gilda."

The griffon and the pegasus pony embraced awkwardly in the air and split, swirling around to rejoin the fray.

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The fighting was sporadic now, the only army still more or less intact was Twilight's, and that was because she could raise the dead as animated meat-puppets dancing to her wicked whim. Applejack and her brother Big Mac found themselves in the middle of a circle, surrounded by the moaning, groaning, fetid walking dead. they were breathing hard, neither were uninjured, Big Mac had lost part of his ear and AJ's tail was noticeably shorter.

"Well, Big Mac, looks like it was nice knowin' ya."

"Eeeyup."

They touched noses briefly before turning back to fight, but the universe had other plans. Pinkie Pie bounced in to the circle and gave her friends a huge hug. The coffee had worn off but she was unbowed. She was Pinkie.

"You here for the last goodbye, Pinks?"

"Last goodbye? Why, you going somewhere?"

"I..."

"Oh, you mean goodbye to *them*? Hee hee! That's a great idea!"

Pinkie was mad, AJ was sure of that, she'd gone loopy, around the bend, batty, off with the fairies, she was...she was...she was laughing?

Pinkie bounced around the circle, spinning and kicking any undead horror that got too close, but somehow her demeanor was having a positive effect on the other two ponies.

“Don’t they look silly? I mean look at them! How can they stand up!” she giggled, “Every time the wind blows hard their legs fall off! And then...and then if their heads fall off they have to stop and pick ‘em up! Have you ever seen something so ridiculous?”

And Pinkie laughed, and she laughed, and she guffawed, and she giggled, and pretty soon AJ and Big Mac were laughing too despite themselves. The horde stopped, and stepped back, but it was too late. As Pinkie passed, giggling and chortling as she went, it was like a fresh summer breeze. The jewel on her chest glowed a bright rosy pink and as the hyperactive happy pony bounced, little flashes of light sparked from her hooves and the horde melted in their wake. They fell down into little neat piles of dust and bones, and despite themselves the trio found themselves laughing all the harder. Like a great wave of happiness, the laughter spread and everywhere it touched the nightmares faded away.

Celestia landed with a heavy thump, followed by Luna. The two monarchs lent their voices to the throng and as she spread her wings, Celestia began to glow with a warm golden light, banishing the darkness.

“Everything looks better in the morning,” said Luna softly, laughing still as day broke on the war, “even I, Princess of the Moon, know that.”

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Twilight Doom was furious, she would not be denied! Her nightmare army was in disarray, those that weren’t simply annihilated by the ridiculous gem-bearers and their thrice-damned element of laughter. Celestia had called in powerful new allies and crushed those other invading fools with her magic. To round it off, her teeth were on edge. The voices were insistent now, louder, telling her she could be greater still if their siblings could be found.

“Leave me you demons! I am complete! I am powerful!”

“*Still greater you could be...the Element of Chaos is calling out to us...*”

“*It yearns.*”

“*It feeds.*”

“*The Element of Lust would give you so much more...enjoyment.*”

“*Sensual.*”

“*Gratifying.*”

Twilight roared, “Then take me to them! They will be mine!”

Twilight’s advance, ignoring her army for all it’s hell-bent destruction, was halted by one thing. Six ponies. That pathetic mewling foal, Luna, had

dropped to the ground and joined her friends, bringing all six bearers of the elements of harmony together. She would strike, she would triumph and she would rule...

"Woah Nelly," said Applejack as the first tremors started, "are they openin' another o' them portal doodads?"

Luna shook her head, "I think not, this is something else...a portal perhaps, but not to any place I feel ponykind could flourish..."

The sky grew dark with roiling stormclouds, pregnant with rain and flashing with fire as the ground ripped itself to pieces before them, great gaping cracks split and earth, trees, soldiers and nightmares alike fell screaming into a black bottomless abyss out of which came nothing but a rancid, fetid stench like the recent dead, rotten meat from the kill of a carnivore, left in the sun.

"Step back my friends, I fear this is something other than mere theatrics. I recognize this creature, though I wish I did not...cover your ears, look away..."

Despite Luna's warning, the ponies looked upon the very face of madness itself, a force barely held in check with Luna's powerful magical shield. Out of the hole into some dark nether-realm of insanity and cruelty climbed the *thing*. It rose on slick tentacles with hundreds of fanged mouths, ripping and tearing at anything they could reach, and those tentacles could reach far. They lashed out, latching on to any warm, living creature within reach and, dragging itself out of the hole at the same time, dragged its victims towards it. The worst thing though was the sound it made. Mewling kittens, crying foals, lost lambs - it spun tales of woe and tragedy that tugged at the heart and blinded the senses, it whispered of carnal delights beyond fathoming if one would only stop resisting and just come closer...

There was no screaming, not even as horns and fangs slit throats and bellies, tore armour as it torn limb from limb, broke bones and devoured the flesh of everything it came into contact with.

Twilight Doom, the Nightmare Queen, was laughing; deep, burning, scornful calls that alternated between mocking and screaming as she circled up above, "Now you see, now you know the power of nightmares. I *am* the nightmares. I bring them to you and none can resist. I will lay waste to this world, render it nothing but fat and meat spoiling in the sun before I quench that senseless ball of light and devour it. Then, dear Luna," Twilight



flew lower, Luna pawed the ground and snarled in answer, "the night *will* last forever, but it will be *my* night, darkness and pain for an eternity!"

"When will you just *learn to shut up!*" came a defiant voice. A light blue unicorn with sky blue mane and shattered horn pawed the ground, "You already gave me my nightmares, and you know what? *It has no power over me.*"

"What is she...is she serious?" asked Rainbow Dash, turning in shock at the new voice of Trixie, broken but unbowed, injured but resolute.

"She's serious alright, we gotta help her!" replied AJ.

The six watched in horror as the hornless unicorn pawed the ground and charged the nightmare beast. She struck it full on, and the creature seemed unable to retaliate for a moment, the very idea that something would attack *it* seemed entirely foreign.

"We simply *have* to help her!" said Rarity, bringing her flying attack scissors to bear, harrying biting tentacles where she could.

"I'd laugh," said Pinkie with a gulp, "but I'm not sure it could hear me! What do we do?"

"Muffins!" said Bright Eyes.

"This aint no time..."

Bright Eyes shook her head, "*muffins!*" she said again, and pointed to her chest and then to each of their jems in turn.

"I...can we do that again?"

"We must. We simply must."

Luna nodded and took a deep breath, her horn started to glow, as did her gem - as did the gems of her friends. All six, the bearers of the Elements of Harmony, stood as one.

Nothing happened.

"But...why? How? We have to do *something!*"

"I...I don't know how!" sobbed Luna, panic rising on her face.

Trixie wasn't stopping, she was cut, she was bruised, she was bleeding, she'd lost an ear, she'd lost half her tail but she was furious, "YOU THRICE DAMNED HELLSPAWN," she screamed, "YOU HAVE NO POWER OVER ME! I REJECT YOU! I DEFY YOU! I FIGHT YOU! AND I WILL. NOT. STOP!"

"We have to help her! I'm not waiting! I won't leave a friend!" Dash took off, and as she moved the gem glowed all the brighter.

It was Rarity who reacted next, "I am with you! I offer my help!"

AJ twiggged, and smiled, "In all honesty, I can't stay out of this one."

"I...I'll help too. For the muffins!" said Bright Eyes, which caused Pinkie to laugh harder than she had before,

"Oh Derpy, you so silly." at that, her gem too was burning a bright cheery pink

"And now I see," said Luna, a determined smile on her face, "the true magic of friendship."

Trixie was screaming incoherently now, flashing hooves and teeth embroiled in a death-struggle with the beast from some unknown hell, and she was losing...until the glorious, burning rainbow summoned by the bearers of the Elements of Harmony sliced out of the sky like a titanic blade and bore it's way into the creature, which threw back what passed for a head and screamed a rattling ululation as it dissolved to slime, then shadows, then nothing at all. The rainbow wake spread out, igniting the very air with multi-coloured sparks, burning away the nightmare army as if it had never been.

In the middle of the devastation was a unicorn, light blue, with a lighter mane, a magic wand sprinkling pixie dust as a cutie mark, and a pearly, pristine horn that glowed like the sun. She stood up, bathing in the multicoloured shower of magic and threw back her head and laughed, dancing for joy. She had faced her nightmares, faced them down, and won.

Twilight, burnt by the magic of the rainbow, screamed her defiance but once again found herself unwilling, perhaps unable, to intervene personally. Even the voices were arguing against it now; they whispered and wheedled. She was incomplete, with only four of her own elements she could not stand against the awakened six. She needed all the colours of the dark rainbow, and the last two were close, so very, very close...she fled in search of them.

Trixie looked up into the faces of her new friends and couldn't help but smile, despite everything, "It's back." she said, eyeing her horn, going crosseyed which only made Pinkie giggle, before she continued softly, "*I'm* back."

"Y'all ready to be the Great and Powerful Trixie again, huh?" asked AJ, with a frown

"I...I'll take a raincheck on that one. I couldn't have done...whatever I did...without you."

"If you have learnt that, then perhaps," said Luna, "some good has come out of this."

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Celeste was mounted on her dragon, his effortless tonnage floating through the skies with raw magic boiling off of his great wings and she sneering down at the chaos beneath. If she couldn't have victory, she would have annihilation. "I'll see you *burn*..." she whispered, her horn glowed red and sheets of flame sprung up from fissures in the ground or rained down from the clouds.

"Two can play at that game, usurper!" yelled Celestia, finally coming face to face with her double. She stamped a hoof. The dragon Celeste was riding bucked in what appeared to be pain as flames shot out from his nostrils and behind his eyes, "dragons are not so flameproof from the inside, you know."

Celeste hissed, focusing her magic on quenching the flames and simultaneously lashing out at her winged unicorn double. The red heat from the land below - hot enough to have formed glass in places - rose, buffeting the pair and throwing them around like leaves in a whirlwind.

"Your meager powers cannot hope to stand up to mine! I am no mere princess, no mewling foal still wet behind the ears, barely earning the throne I sit upon, I am a queen! I have the power of the Elements of Discord behind me!" Celeste spread her wings, and there seemingly tattooed on their undersides were two stars that glowed with their own unearthly light.

Celestia looked aghast at the winged unicorn queen before her, "What are you..?"

"Your worst nightmare..."

"I beg to disagree, ladies," shouted Twilight with a cackle as she swooped down on the two, "but I believe *I* am the queen of nightmares, and *you*," she turned to queen Celeste, her face a mask of hatred, "you have something that belongs to *me*, and I will have it and your hide..."

Celeste's hackles raised, "Bubbly Grime," she called, "deal with this pathetic princess whilst I deal with the bearer of *my* Elements of Chaos."

Bubbly Grime, who had been fleeing from the combined dragon and griffon attack, turned to look up at Celestia.

"You...you don't have to do this," said Celestia softly, "renounce your queen and lay down your arms, I will give amnesty."

"I don't need any charity from you or your kind," spat Bubbly, "I never have and I never will."

“As you wish.” Celestia readied herself, closing her eyes - the power within her grew and she spread wings of fire that reached from horizon to horizon. When her eyes opened they were twin orbs of flame barely held in check by her monumental will.

Bubbly Grime screeched obscenities and with a roar launched a powerful blast of balefire towards the hovering princess.

Celestia spoke but a single word, and that word was “*Now.*”

With that, Philomena, the princess’ prized phoenix, swooped out of the heavens to take stanchion in front of the monarch. She raised her beak to the sky and spread her wings in a single glorious down-beat in time with the princess’ own. As her wing-tips met, the bright glow from the magical beast grew even brighter, Celestia channelling all of her power through the bird in a single fireball brighter than the sun. It grew so bright that none could bear to look at it. All save Bubbly Grime averted their gaze, even Celeste the Sun Tyrant. Like the finger of some enormous cosmic creature reaching out to touch the fabric of creation, heat and light bore down on the faltering shield of the distressed pegasus-mage.

Celeste snarled as she watched her faltering favourite fight back against the pillar of sunlight bearing down upon her, “You fool!” she called above the burning, crackling air, fighting off bolt after bolt of energy from the insanely possessed purple winged unicorn demoness, “You bring me here to face not yokels and dunderheads but a mistress of magic near my *own* might and glory! If it weren’t for you and your stupid schemes I would have bested this witch in moments. Now? Now you will pay for your lack of vision, your lack of talent and your inability to perform.”

“Celeste, Mistress!” squeaked Bubbly Grime, sweat pouring from her forehead, “Do not forsake me-”

Celeste withdrew her boon with the single slice of her horn through the air and the glowing plasma-shield which was already buckling under the furious assault simply collapsed and failed. For a brief moment, a brief incandescent moment, Bubbly Grime’s world burned brighter than a thousand suns, and then it, and she, were gone.

“So end all traitors to the crown.” Celeste snarled and flung a fireball at Twilight before calling out, “Fall back! Fall back I say! Retreat!”

Celeste opened the portal to her own world barely long enough to get her own prized minions through. It started to close almost immediately; straggling, desperate soldiers hurried as best as they could through it.

The tyrant monarch turned to the circling Twilight Doom, calling out, "Nightmare Queen! I am the bearer of the last two, and greatest, Elements of Discord! Come take them from me if you dare! I will rip out your wings and feed them to my dragons! I will boil your eyes for my servants and I will personally skin your hide for my throne you weak-willed foal! Come take them from me if you dare, you coward!"

The furious Twilight Doom slammed into the closing portal moments before it faded from existence, screeching like a banshee as she did.

It closed with a snap and a rumble of thunder, leaving the broken battlefield finally at peace.

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Celestia surveyed the damage. Hundreds of brave fighters lost, maybe thousands. Buildings destroyed - Ponyville wouldn't be in one piece for a long time to come and there were many lives that never would. Then there was the *other* problem, though that was hopefully simple to deal with, and there was no time like the present. She addressed the assembled ranks of prisoners, they flinched and shook under her gaze, but she spoke quietly and without malice, "Yesterday you were soldiers. This morning you were enemy combatants. Today I give you a choice. Tomorrow you may be citizens of Equestria," she paused and looked up at the waiting griffon horde, "or tomorrow you may be lunch. I have no plans to repatriate soldiers, there is no cease-fire and I cannot be sure there ever will be. As absolute ruler of this realm, I offer you a free choice. Fulfill your original purpose or choose a new one as my subjects. Bow to me, open your hearts, and I will set you free. The alternative is one last, glorious battle."

"Princess!" said Buck, hobbling - he had lost all the feathers on one wing and would likely never fly again, "That is monstrous!"

Princess Celestia stiffened, "I offer them what every warrior wants - a glorious death. I also offer them what every soldier wishes - a way home.

"But how can you..."

"Buck," she said softly, "you of all ponies should know I speak truly. If they submit to me, they will be my subjects like any other."

"What if they do not?"

"They that is their choice. They will be given their weapons, they will be given their armour and they will be set free, but they will roam in a world hostile to them - my treaties with the griffons, the dragons, the sea-serpents - none of them are binding on alien invaders."

One by one, the soldiers bowed their knees and swore fealty. Wordless, almost soundless. When they dipped their heads down, they were defeated, without hope, without life. When their heads came up it was as if a weight had been taken from their hearts. A murmur went through the crowd and Celestia eagerly stepped forwards, "If that is your choice, then welcome, welcome, thrice welcome, new sons and daughters of Equestria!"

A ragged cheer went up, echoed by Celestia's soldiers who, only moments before, had been guarding prisoners and now found themselves welcoming brethren.

\*\*\*

The glade was silent. The sun had long ago gone down, the moon still rising, when the grey pegasus entered. Mere hours ago it had been the scene of a climactic battle which still raged somewhere beyond the senses of mortal ponies. Bright Eyes would have to face that battle still, but not tonight. Tonight she had to deliver a message.

The wall was all that was left of whatever building had been here in ages past. Until recently it had been a part of the Everfree Forest, overgrown and forgotten, but now that ancient and wild growth had been burnt away, quite literally. The floor was glassy smooth, the wall itself bleached white but for a fine, black shadow of soot, barely visible in the moonlight.

Bright Eyes walked up to the wall and nuzzled it softly, the soot collecting on her muzzle. She took a letter from a bag around her neck - she was the mail mare of Ponyville but rarely wrote her own. This letter was different. No stamps, no address. She put it down on the floor, and then took out a muffin and put it beside it.

"I don't know why you were mad," said Bright Eyes, "but you could've come lived with us, with Papa and Mama and me and Dinky. You would have made a good sister. I always wanted a sister."

Bright Eyes nosed the muffin and the letter towards what was left of Bubbly Grime, "I brought these for you. I promised you a muffin, I'm sorry it's late. I wrote you a letter too, Dinky had to help because I don't write too well, but she says it is as neat and correct as she can make it. I wanted the best for my long-lost sister. I just...I just wanted to tell you I love you. Some pony loves you, and I forgive you."

Bright Eyes looked around at a rustle in the bushes, it was Spike, "Hi Derpy...I mean Bright Eyes...are you okay?"

Bright Eyes sniffled, "Yes, I...I just came to say goodbye to my sister. I always wanted a sister. I told her I loved her, do you think she knows?"

Spike looked at the shadow on the wall and breathed a deep sigh, "I think she'd be pleased to have some pony love her as much as you do. I think she'd like the muffin, too. Come on, let's get home."

It rained that night, a cleansing rain, washing the fields and watering the grass, bringing new life back to the devastated countryside. When the wall was found as the cleanup progressed, it was bleached white as snow as if there had never been a shadow. The muffin was gone, so was the letter.

Most said the rain had washed it away, and animals taken the muffin and the wind the letter, but a few wondered, when their hearts skipped a beat, whether the message had been delivered and if it had set a troubled soul free.

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In a faraway land beyond the veil of realities, Fluttershy was alone in a palace set deep into a mountain, it was cold in her cage and she hadn't had food or water in what seemed like days. It was so like the Canterlot she had seen in pictures, but still the *wrongness* pervaded the air. There were hoofsteps in the darkness, Fluttershy whimpered, "I'll sing for you, I'll sing, I promise, don't hurt me again..."

She was preparing to open her mouth and sing like the caged bird she was, when the low hissing voice of the approaching pony reached her ears, "if you value your life, stay quiet...I'll have this open in moments. Come with me if you want to live."

The gilded cage swung open, Fluttershy was *just* stepping out when the guards cried out, "HALT! Who goes there?" A swift blast of lightning later and there were two thumps as the unconscious guards dropped to the floor.

"Damn, I didn't want to alert anypony until long after we were gone. Come with me, *now!*"

Fluttershy, not wanting to stay in the cage a moment longer, did as she was bid. They slipped out of the throne-room into the darkness of the castle grounds and, hopefully, to safety.

# Chapter 8

Lyra woke up groggily, she ached all over from the previous day's exertions; cuts, bruises, possibly a broken rib - they had been healed with magic but it still *hurt*. She was cold in the tent; her and Bon-Bon's house had been one of those scheduled to be demolished and rebuilt. It would have hurt more thinking about it but for the fact that their family, such as it was, was whole. Rocky and Caramel's treehouse cafe was still standing, she could smell the coffee brewing, so she eased herself up onto her forelegs and then her backlegs, hearing joints pop and crack as she did so. Bon-Bon was still sleeping, Lyra looked down at her life-partner fondly and covered her up. They were sharing a blanket and with the extra body gone, the pale cream-coloured pony was starting to shiver. The sun wasn't yet up, but she couldn't sleep - and she wasn't the only one.

Lyra stepped out of the tent to a scene that was both tragic and heartwarming. Everywhere was destruction; broken houses, broken weapons, broken dreams - and yet Ponyville was alive with the bustling of hundreds of ponies as they set about rebuilding their lives and reclaiming their futures. She noticed with curiosity that amongst their number were former soldiers of the invading army, freely living and working with native-born Equestrians. She tried to hate them, she tried so very hard, but she couldn't. When they had bowed down to Celestia, they had become her kin. Who they *had been* was gone, what they were now remained to be seen, but the situation demanded their help. Maybe it counted as reparations.

Rocky at his cafe was brewing coffee at full-tilt, not charging anypony, just asking for donations when things returned to a semblance of normal. Caramel was nursing a broken leg and a vicious gash down one side, seeing to orders as best he could. There was another smell in the air, a strangely sweet aroma that permeated the town, like something was cooking. Her nose followed the scent in the wind until she spied smoke and flames far on the outskirts. It was the bodies, she realised, they were burning the bodies with wood from the Everfree Forest. The Nightmare Army's taint was fearful and the griffons, now mostly long gone with the dragons, weren't carrion eaters in any case - not even of pony-meat. She noted grimly the squadrons of pegasus ponies flitting to and fro pointing out bodies, the unicorn patrollers lifting them into carts, which were pulled by teams of earth-ponies. All of them had face-masks, something almost



unheard of in the usually quiet country-town. She tried not to think of the dams and sires lost in the previous days' battles, the foals who would come back to a broken home, or no home. Maybe she could help. Maybe, she thought, maybe she and Bon-Bon could adopt? A warmth settled in her stomach as she went to get two cups, many more tears would be shed, but perhaps some good could come of it.

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Pinkie Pie wasn't feeling very keenly pink this morning, but even a small smile seemed to help. She was delivering food from the Cakes and she was being extra-specially attentively careful with the food and not eating *any* of it. They'd taken the same route as her friend Rocky had, Rocky the bringer of caffeine - she still tingled thinking about it - and were giving away food to those in need, asking nothing but donations when possible. Sugar Cube Corner had been extensively damaged in the fighting, but their stock had mostly survived. It would be a while before they would have somewhere to live of their own, but they would make the best of it, and that included carrying on being cake-shop owners.

To the hungry and homeless, a warm pie or fresh apple tart made the world seem that little bit better. As she weaved her way through the town she passed the huge pyres, a sight enough to make even her sunny disposition fade. She had her head down in respect when a strange low keening caught her attention. As her head lifted she spied Zecora assisting with the work, she too had stopped and was listening.

"What's that noise? It's so sad yet so sweet and kinda..."

"Hush now listen to what the wind has brung, t'is a thousand years past 'ere this song was sung."

Applejack joined the pair as they listened, the lilting melody rose into the morning air, an aria so beautiful yet the words were alien, unrecognizable. It tore at their hearts but sent their spirits lifting. The sounds were coming from a purple winged unicorn, Luna the princess of the night was singing alone and yet she commanded the attention of all within earshot. It began to fade for a moment, and then a contralto counterpoint was sung as princess Celestia joined her little sister. The song was primal, stirring, it spoke of summers long gone, regrets to forgive, rain-soaked plains of freedom and movement and, finally, the march into night lit by the eternal celestial fires. As the last stars in the sky disappeared with the rising of the sun, the song became a memory with them, a promise to see the lost to their final resting place.

“That’s the blessings of the sun and moon,” said AJ with a whisper, watching as the two sisters tearfully embraced necks, “it hasn’t been heard for a thousand years because there are only two ponies in all of Equestria who can sing it, and it needs them both.”

“It’s beautiful.” said Pinkie, strangely subdued.

“It’s old magic, offering the dead safe passage to the Summer Lands. I wonder if they exist?”

Luna wandered over, “Truly I do not know, my realms are of the moon and stars, not what may or may not lie beyond, however it was fitting to honour the dead. Gather the other bearers, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, our next task begins anon.”

“Then I take leave, my own way to wend - I have to visit the house of a friend.” The zebra bowed her head once and turned around to depart.

“Where are you going, Zecora?”

“Fluttershy is absent but her friends remain, someone must be there to give feed, water and grain.”

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Zecora’s trip from the outskirts of Ponyville where the funeral pyres burned brightly to Fluttershy’s modest cottage didn’t take long - the sun was high by now and the morning’s chill was gone. The cottage was quiet, peaceful, it should be empty since poor Fluttershy was lost through the now-closed portals. The battle was over, Zecora told herself, so why did she step so carefully?

Zecora narrowed her eyes as she entered, “I know you are here, I tell you so - step out, show yourself, are you friend, or foe?”

There was a small gasp and pots and pans in the kitchen fell on the floor with a loud clatter. The zebra whirled and lowered her head, pawing the ground in the instinctual reaction of fight or flight.

There was a flash of pink and a quiet voice said, “Don’t hurt me...I, I surrender.”

“Come out, show yourself!” Zecora commanded, and watched sternly as a pink unicorn emerged from her hidey-hole. She was a bedraggled sight, magic-burned in places, her hide singed, but worse were the scars; they looked self-inflicted and fresh. She had been crying. Zecora found it hard to hate the creature although she knew full well what this unicorn had been doing, “tell me your name and follow me, I think our princess has someone new to see.”

"I...I'm Weepy-Cry, mistress, formerly of Celeste's glorious legions. I command, no I commanded, her magical squadrons but she left me here...I stayed here...I...I have no magic left. When she went she took it with her. Please don't hurt me."

Zecora looked long and hard at the unicorn before nodding her head, "then follow me and do as I say. Make no wrong moves and you may live out this day."

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Weepy-Cry was brought before Celestia and Luna, the twin princesses staring down at the subjugated unicorn, now muzzled with an iron band around the horn and surrounded by four pegasus guards. She looked up fearfully.

"You say she was skulking about in Fluttershy's cottage?"

"Indeed, your majesty, she claims she has no magic left." said one of the guards

"Speak up, Weepy-Cry, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Weepy-Cry was silent for a moment, then screwed up her eyes which were heavy with tears, "Kill me, princess, I have nothing left to live for." her speech was indistinct around the muzzle, but intelligible.

Celestia was taken aback, "You wish me to end your life?"

Weepy-Cry nodded, "You don't know what I've seen, you don't know what...what I've done."

"I can imagine."

"You can't," whispered the unicorn, sobbing quietly, "I want it to all go away. Please, take my life, I don't want it anymore."

Celestia stepped forward, with a single glance at her sister, who gave an inquisitive look back, "You wish for me to take your life?"

Weepy-Cry nodded, and broke down, crying. She rolled onto her side, "I'm ready, strike."

"Unmuzzle her. Remove her horn-brace. If I am to take her life it will be just her and me."

Celestia's bidding was done, and as the guards stepped back she stood proud and tall, "Stand, unicorn, and face me. I will only ask you this once more, do you wish for me to take your life?"

"I do." she stood on all fours, shaking, eyes closed tight.

"Then let it be done."

Celestia touched her horn to the unicorn's own, and then drew back. With it came a spidery, silvery light. As the princess weaved her head back

and forth more thread came and with it, the pink unicorn seemed to stand a little straighter, a little higher.

"What..?" asked Zecora, but Luna shushed her,

"My sister is ever the canny one. She is doing as she was bid, she is taking this unicorn's life. Those are memories, every one, she is taking them away. They burden Weepy-Cry down like stones attached to the ankles, she is taking every bad memory of this unicorn's life and throwing them away."

"Indeed, sister," said Celestia, weaving her magic with the lightest of touches, "this one has so much pain she thought she would rather die than live. I...instead I give her another chance, to begin again."

"How much are you taking?"

Celestia's brow grew troubled, "Almost everything, she will be naught but a foal, I wish to leave her with nothing but good memories, growing memories, useful memories...but so much is pain, she will have to start over. I wasn't lying when I said I would take her life away."

The unicorn slumped as the last of the spell finished and Celestia stepped back, blowing lightly on the ball of silvery, spidery threads so it dissipated like sparkling dust on the wind.

The pink, scar-covered unicorn dropped to the ground as the glow on the princess' horn faded away.

"It is done?" asked Luna hopefully, but Celestia shook her head,

"No, sister, something is wrong. I took away almost her entire life, but there is something...something she keeps locked inside and I cannot penetrate it without hurting her. See, even now she dreams her pain."

Luna watched and hung her head, "I am the princess of the night, Celestia, dreams are my domain, my realm. My power is absolute there, if her dreams are what troubles her, then I am the one to seek them out and set things right. Have her taken to somewhere close, somewhere safe. I shall retire to my quarters, my magic is ephemeral and works over great distances, as you well remember from my exile."

Celestia bowed her head, "even whilst you were Nightmare Moon, you and I could converse in our dreams, I always thought it was my flights of fancy."

Luna smiled, "They were. Even as I wished to see you brought low, my heart wasn't in it and I only brung you sweet dreams. The night hides many things, but true intentions aren't one of them. I shall deal with this at once, with luck she will awake tomorrow and we six shall be on our way."

Celestia smiled a secret smile, "I saved a few of her memories, useful to us perhaps, of our foes and their designs. Use them carefully and wisely."

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Stepping into the void between memories and dreams, everywhere Luna looked she saw broken things. All broken things. The normal waft and weave of the Dreaming, the warm cocoon every dreamer feels secure in, was fragmented and torn. It was as if the threads for this one had all been slashed in grief, yet still...here was something.

It was curious. Inside was a fully realized scene. It wasn't a flickering fragment or a half-thought, it was a fully-formed memory.

A dark room, the colors blended with the nothing-color of stars, of the Forever Dream. A tiny pink pony was weeping over the nearly prone form of an older brown colt, sobbing, "IamsorryIamsosososorry," grasping at the brown mane. Pleadingly a pink hoof tried to smooth away some stray hairs from a sweat-stained face.

Dread and guilt and anger and sadness rolled over her, emanating from the pink unicorn as Luna realized by degrees the young colt was barely breathing. Turning the image in her mind, she gasped. A very large knife lay just to the side of the sternum, gray and shining in a field of stabwounds. Crimson had begun to pool on the hardwood floor, dribbling gently off the side.

The precision of the image meant Weepy had thought of this many, many, many times. A keening dull *ache* formed a corona over every curve, underscored every hard line in the floor. Sadness magnified every detail.

The colt must have been terribly strong. Breathing through what was likely a punctured lung, he tried to sputter, "It's- it's alright. It'll be alright..." but his breath was almost gone and the words would not come.

There was rather more sputtering, a terrible rattling *wet* noise deep in his chest, a cough - the knife must have cut sideways. There was a strange tearing noise reverberating from the knife. It must have been a tiny sound, but it hung in Weepy's ears.

His eyes went wide, as did the pink pony's. His head lolled back and he became so very still. His wide frame - rippling muscles, large hooves, a wonderful brown coat of some 15 summers - seemed to collapse.

Luna felt the scene move on in time. Weepy cradled his head for so very long, brushing away errant hairs, letting the blood cake and flake on her hooves. She needed to remember.

*That's why she still had this deep in her heart, Luna realized. She needs to hear "It'll be alright" but she never will, not without my help.*

In the strange dark echoes of the little pony's mind, Luna had to think very hard on the proper course of action. Most dreamers found their own way of dealing with memories - simply they coped with *other* memories. The average pony could justify and re-cobble memories any way they needed to think themselves as good or brave or special - or that what they'd done was right. This little pony had none to less-than-none. The words she needed to hear were never said because...Luna tried very hard not to think about it.

She began Walking and Seeking, joining the greater cosmos of the unconscious. Distances - time, space - all were strange in the Dreaming. All worlds came together in a bright confusion of sounds and half-remembered visions but they followed their own logic. She knew what she sought had left Weepy far behind; she couldn't feel the strange sorrow of the foreigner anywhere close. It wasn't embedded around the singing diamonds in the Caves of Cansettle, or hugging close to the walls of the Griffon King's High Palace, though so many were; her ears always buzzed when Looking in those places.

Following simple dream-physics, she knew it had to be somewhere...else. *If the light of our souls, Luna remembered someone saying once ages and ages ago, is dreaming then dreams are light and follow laws like a particle or a wave - and can be stored as photonic energy.*

She spied Weepy's dream-self somewhere on the plains, furtively looking around the old abandoned rock farm for an errant memory, now long gone with the wind. Luna knew better then to bother there, so she looked up. There was an awfully bright full moon in the night sky, full and proud as it always was in the Dreaming. She was reluctant to go there; over her thousand years of exile she'd spent years in the Dreaming, puttering through the memories of others. Years and years, countless wishes and scattered hopes - was she ready to be there again, even in passing? Could she even find what she needed?

Unease and uncertainty weren't alien to her, but they clutched at her mind as Luna tried to Think her way to her totem, the Forever Moon of Night. In a moment she was there, somewhere on a bright lunar plain. About her feet flowed fragments of thought; love, hate, despair, joy, avarice...even murder.

Concentrating very closely on the colt's brown face and summoning her powers, she found threads. Following one lead to a coroner's dream of a strange set of injuries. It was all in writing, a simple document describing multiple stab wounds. Signed by a Princess Celeste, stating the investigation was Closed. No further comment. The coroner had dreamt fitfully. Too much coffee and too much blood to clean up in the morgue that day.

Luna held on to the memory, perhaps a little gingerly - it was not a happy one. The handwriting of Celeste was far too familiar. Holding it a bit tighter, she felt other memories swarm around it. Commanding elements on the Moon was so simple, she simply called for them across the deep. They answered; one of the colt fighting another, breaking a few teeth out in a school fight. The colt in passing, buying bread, looking rather shifty-eyed at the teller. Another, rather more ruby-colored, The colt *lying in blood very clearly depicted in a magic mirror-*

*The magic mirror was shining and glimmering, the magic was so very strong to grasp every detail. Warm trickling blood shining so sweet, the gasping moans felt so pleasant to her ears, yes, the sun would just be a bit warmer today-*

Luna felt the need to vomit. It was Celeste's memory. She could feel the grin, the cackle rising in their throat -- the sound of "Yes, yes, *that's it, stab him again,*" in an all-too-familiar voice. She had to put it away. Picking up again, she felt out more memories of the brown colt with the lightning and hammer ugly-mark. She found a bright one. A happy one, one of the very seldom few held by a pink pony in a different place. She knew that was the one. It was one with happy times and smiles and it would surely be what she wanted - but something sang. It was another memory, paired. She knew the sound, but it was so faint and warbling. She followed it. She walked between the stars, happy memory of the colt in hoof, and tried to seek out its mate. It was so very far away from Equestria. By dream logic she should have been able to simply find it, and call to it - but the happy memory knew just how far away it was. She had to travel the path.

There was eclipsing darkness, pure night. It was warm and inviting to Luna, but she kept going. The song grew stronger. At length she found the dream shadow of a blue-white dwarf star. Much to her surprise it felt cold, she knew the size was vast, and at least *most* suns were composed of pressurized gas and not magic. She expected to have felt some hint of

warmth. In the Dreaming, many things weren't as they seemed, but the sphere was definitely blanketed in cold shimmering *something*.

The song was very strong, but slow and sad. She called to the source through the happy memory piping warm in her hoof. Something moved, rippled in the shimmering vastness of the star's shadow and at length a very small slight memory slipped away from the rolling not-sea of *shimmer* and into her hoof. It was faint, like holding a whisp of fog.

She felt for its contents. *It was dark and half-there. There was the image of a pink filly's face, welling with tears. A cold wet rasping was felt more than heard. "It-it's okay--"*

It was a memory. *His* memory. It dawned on Luna the vast shimmering was half-living dreams. The dreams of the dying. She Walked back and entered Weepy's Dreaming. In one hoof, a bright sunny day shone and sparkled warm in the flesh of her hoof. In the other, the rasps of a dying colt felt like it was buzzing. Cold but alive.

The scene was playing once more. His eyes had grown dim again. She was pawing away hairs again. The blood that had spattered had - again - begun to dry and flake at Weepy's face.

Luna shifted nervously, catching a glimpse of a clock on the mantle. She had the uncomfortable knowledge that was where a certain magic mirror had looked over the scene from. At length, she ambled behind Weepy and very gently tapped her on the shoulder.

The memory faded to nothing as Weepy turned, eyes still watery with tears, shed blood boiling away to nothing from her face, warbling through a clenched throat, "Oh, h-hello Princess Luna. I thought I was in Ponyville asleep tonight."

Luna noted this was really rather cogent as Dreamers went. "Yes, you are. You're in a kind of dream."

"Wh-what is that? It's scary," she sniffed.

"It's ..." Luna trailed, trying to think of the proper words, "it's something you haven't let go."

"I want to let it go. It - it hurts," Weepy strangled the final word, note trilling into soprano. The pink pony pointed daintily with a hoof at a place between her shoulders, right over her heart. Luna nodded, thinking *Celestia was right - it's in her heart, not her mind*.

"You're a very good pony, I think, Weepy," Luna said, feeling strange to say this to an apparent murderer, conscionable or not, "You just weren't always treated well and made to do terrible things - and you felt terrible for



what you did. Celestia took away most of that pain. She wanted to give you a chance for a happy life.”

“Who...who was that?” Weepy managed, apparently ignoring Luna. Brushing away tears with the back of a hoof, “Th-the bleeding boy. On the floor.”

“Your brother.” said Luna, sadly.

“I have - I had a brother?” Weepy said, confused as a child being told how the sun moves about the sky.

The blue-black princess held the gaze with those bleary teary sapphire eyes for some time. At length she decided to extend her hoof and show the pink pony the shiver-cold memory gasping for life.

*The trickle of blood leaving his body felt queerly cold. The lung on one side wasn't working, torn muscles throughout his ribcage just didn't sit right. He knew this wasn't something anything barring magic could save him from. More to the point he didn't want it to. He was done fighting. His sister had been there, sparring and warring and...it was over. She'd won.*

*Just that day he'd made a rather showy display of not wearing his protective breastplate. Ever-so-accidentally he'd left the war-blade just lying around the house for her to find. He'd been as quarrelsome and vicious as usual, all the while wondering what would come next. His unfocusing eyes slid down the length of the knife hilt. He now had a very strong impression of what that would be.*

“I'msososososososorry,” sniffed Weepy.

*The duel had been demanded by Queen Celeste, pony against pony, for the right to join her elite forces. He was an earth pony, strong of body, quick of reflexes, and she was his sister, his dear little sister, pink unicorn of so few summers. She had very little fight in her, could barely wield a blade, but she knew more than basic telekinesis and was quick with an energy shield and powerful with her invisible hoof. The knife had turned of it's own accord as he had leapt at her across the ring, tearing itself out of his grip and sliding between his ribs with barely a whisper.*

*It was almost clinical really, when she'd matter-of-factly begun stabbing below the ribs, below the sternum. Her hooves had been shaking but her horn had glowed bright, her usually dun hide vibrant pink. If there's one thing he knew about dying now, he figured, it was noticing the details.*

*Things were starting to fade to black. “It's - s'okay. It'll be alright,” came a thin high wheezing whinny from his own mouth. The words rattled and sucked in his throat; so hard to breathe. There was a very tinny noise*

*he felt as much as heard, and something went from 'not right' to simply wrong.*

*His heart gave up its beating before he stopped breathing. It was the most unpleasant sensation of his life, but tempering that was knowing his sister would live, knowing he saved her through his own semi-sacrifice - it wasn't pleasant, maybe, but it was all he could hope for now. No matter what happened next, Weepy-Cry would be alright. That cold joy wrapped around the pain, around the rising ringing in his ears, in the sharp jolt of his head hitting the floor-*

*There was a passing flicker of light, and then nothing.*

Weepy was openly bawling by the memory's end, "I - I did have a brother and...and I did...I did that? I thought - I thought was a all a really bad dream."

Luna brought her face very close to Weepy, "Your life? It was a nightmare. That's *a bad dream*. A lot of very nasty ponies," she thought briefly of the rose-colored memory of Celeste's magic mirror, "made you do a lot of very bad things just so you could live. Ponies you don't have to think about any more"

"But- but what I did-"

"Was something he *wanted you to do*," Luna said firmly, folding the memory about to expose the *preparation*, the *planning*, the hope he'd felt for Pinkie toward the end, "So you could live. And maybe be happy one day, Weepy."

Weepy heaved sighs through her chest, gasping at air that didn't quite exist in dreams. She seemed to want it anyway, breathing deep, "b-but I don't know anymore, it's all so confused...who was he?"

Luna smiled, this was what she had been waiting for, taking out a bright yellow memory. It was rather larger and she could feel-taste-smell laughter and something like the smell of meadowgrass. "He was *this*."

Weepy reached out with a pink hoof and gasped.

*The day had been so very long. The famines were getting worse and weapons training was rougher than usual. Getting back to the rock farm was no great consolation; rocks would have been worth something or other a few months ago, but now they were being requisitioned by the crown and nopony else wanted plain old rocks when everyone was making weapons and gunshot and powder. Actual sales were nonexistent, the crown paid next to nothing and with little income and harder work came less food - his brown coat was starting to feel strangely baggy about the ribs.*

*Elsewhere on the farm a dainty pink filly was banging a smaller rock against a boulder. She seemed like a very strange piece of bubblegum stuck in that grassy field; her fighting stance wasn't much better. His sister was many things, but a rock-breaker wasn't one of them.*

*With his weapons jangling he eased up beside her, eyeing her ministrations a might derisively. It was the wrong kind of rock for the wrong kind of boulder, and nopony under the age of some 16 summers could hope to break a formation like that regardless. Seven was...certainly less than sixteen.*

*"So I see you're trying," he smoothed.*

*"I'm working like big big pony! I have to get tough and fight for the glory of the Sun!" she cheered, turning a rock the wrong way and slamming it down on her limb - there was a rather pronounced chipping noise. She yelped in pain.*

*The brown colt sighed, "Here, let's go get you some bandage and cuticle cream."*

*Weepy sniffed, "But we're supposed to favor the strong and the amen- ameniabl- the talents of the talon."*

*"No sense in having a dinged up hoof," he said, taking her hoof and walking a little awkwardly back to the farmhouse, "Even in the strong. Silly pony."*

*In the house it was kindness and wooden chairs and a low table. The bandage wrapped once, twice, over a liniment oil that helped soothe the ragged chapped feeling on her hooftip. He was so delicate with it, not chiding her for playing big pony, for not doing as well as her big brother. it was simple and clean and clear.*

*There was some rustling in the frightfully-bare kitchen-cabinet and he pulled out a jar. Twisting the cap carefully he extracted something smooth and long and striped white with red.*

*"Here, take it."*

*Taking it between her now-good front hooves, Weepy sucked on the end. It was so sweet - so very, very sweet. There was something spicy in the flavor, too. It was wonderful!*

*"What's this?" she piped.*

*"It's a peppermint stick, silly filly. We don't have much real food, but that might take the edge off," he stumbled, taking out one for his own. They sat at the table and made goofy faces. It was a long slow afternoon, one of the few they'd ever have. Soon the food would grow scarcer and they'd*

*need rather more than candy - but for that short time, it was all Weepy ever wanted and more.*

Weepy looked up at Luna with new eyes, to the princess it seemed as if life, light and colour flowed back into the small, pink frame, "He loved me?"

"With all his heart - and although what you did was terrible, he let you do it, he wanted you to be the one to go on. Can you do that? Can you go on?"

"I...I think I can. I can let him go now. Take it all, I want to remember him as he was, not...not this."

The grizzly scene resurfaced, but this time Weepy kissed her brother tenderly on the cheek and just for a moment a brief light returned to his eyes and he smiled, before his body, the blood, the room and everything in it boiled away to smoke and was gone forever.

Luna watched as the nightmare-scape disintegrated around her and the pink unicorn fell into the first peaceful sleep she had had in many years.

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Weepy opened her eyes, it was morning, she was in a bed. She didn't recognize the bed, but she felt...she felt happy. Like the ghost of a bad dream she remembered feeling *not so good*. Like probing a missing tooth she searched her memories, of which she didn't have many, but there was one memory, just one, that filled her with joy. Her brother. She knew he was gone, but...it didn't hurt any more. She sat up, struggled to life the bedclothes away with her magic and found it gone. It didn't hurt, she simply picked the covers up like she'd done many years ago.

At her stirring, a mare entered the room, "How are you feeling, sweetie?" asked the multi-coloured pony with three cakes as an ugly- no, no, they were called 'cutie-marks' here, weren't they? She wondered what hers would be, she seemed to have cut herself somehow and it wasn't showing.

"I don't know, Miss...Miss..."

"Misses Cake, but you can call me Mama if you wish dear, you've been through a lot."

"Mama," said Weepy, a small smile playing on her lips. It felt foreign somehow, but good, "what happened?"

"You...were in a kind of accident."

"Why can't I remember anything?"

“Oh don’t you worry about that, it’s...the accident. Something special happened to you so you’re going to live with us for a while, if you’d like, to be our special foal until you’re ready to move on?”

“I think I’d like that. I can’t work magic any more, it’s all so hard...”

“It’s the accident,” said Misses Cake smoothly, “don’t worry about it. We’ll teach you anything you need to know.”

“Can you...can you teach me about peppermint sticks?”

“Peppermint sticks?” repeated Misses Cake with surprise, “I don’t see why not. Come down when you’re ready, we’ll have some breakfast and then get right on it, we’re living with friends for a while but they have a kitchen and I’m sure there’s supplies enough for some peppermint sticks.”

“Miss Cake...Mama, what’s my name?”

“I...you were...”

“I’m your foal now...” said the pink pony, looking down at the floor, then up at the older mare, “I can’t remember anything much, but I can recall that I don’t want to be Weepy-Cry anymore.”

“I’ve always liked the name Willow,” said Misses Cake, after a moment’s thought, “it bends in the wind but doesn’t break.”

“Willow. I’m Willow.” she said happily, drying the last of the forgotten tears from her cheeks. She smiled. It looked like it would be a good day.

# Chapter 9

Dash woke up and groaned, stiff as a board. Somehow she'd survived the battle with barely a scratch on her, but it didn't mean she'd got away entirely scot free. She ached, her entire body ached, deep into her bones like never before. Even during that freak storm which had started all this, she hadn't ached as much. She'd even broken a wing-bone or two, although healing magic had set it right by the following morning.

"Oohhhh...feels just like that time I got a force four tornado up my tail in Junior Flightschool."

She lay there in bed, just blinking, allowing the world to come into focus. She'd heard singing earlier, beautiful singing quite unlike anything she'd ever heard before. She didn't know what the song was about - she didn't speak Old Equestrian - but from the tone she could guess. It had been that song which had woken her. It had left her floating in an oddly serene state. Now that was fading.

There was a knock at the door. She dragged herself out of her warm cloud-nest and meandered down the stairs, "I'm comin', I'm comin', hold your horsefeathers..."

Opening it, she gasped as a regal winged unicorn stood, rather nervously for all she was royalty, just outside.

"Princess Celestia! I...your majesty! Come in, please."

"Thank you, Lady Prism Radiance Windemere Silverhoof." said Celestia, inclining her head regally.

Dash stiffened for a moment, then stared up at the princess, "How did you find out? Did my family..."

Celestia smiled softly, "Oh no, no, no, dear Rainbow Dash - your secret is safe with me. It's hardly difficult to work out though, is it? I don't see many other cloud-castles of such ostentatious grandeur around such a lovely little town as Ponyville."

"Er, hehe, it is rather rad isn't it?" said Rainbow, leading the way in. Celestia looked up and around as if genuinely impressed.

"Oh my, this will do *perfectly*."

"For what?" asked Rainbow, suspiciously

"Well, *Lady Prism Radiance Windemere Silverhoof...*"

"Please stop calling me that!" begged Rainbow Dash, peering left and right as if she'd be spotted at any second.

"And just *why* do you hate that title so much?"

"I...it's not me, Celestia, I didn't earn it. They wanted me to live up to something I'm not. I have to be me, and that means being *Rainbow Dash*, not some title they want to brand me with." Rainbow stamped a hoof, looking sternly up at the princess, gaze unwavering.

"You first have to be loyal to yourself before you can be loyal to others, hmm?"

Rainbow nodded, "I can't lie to myself. My folks, they don't get it, they don't get *me*. I made myself who I am. I dropped out of their precious flight school. They got me this crummy castle anyway, but I pay the upkeep *myself*. So, what does it and my title have to do with anything?"

"Rainbow Dash, you must know that the gentry have certain...duties towards the common folk." Celestia had an impish expression on her muzzle.

"Oh yeah? And what sort of duties would that be?" asked Rainbow, suspiciously.

"In times of dire need, a Lord or Lady - such as yourself - must pledge their aid to the crown." Celestia leaned closer, and gave a conspiratorial wink, "That would be my sister and I."

Rainbow slumped, "You mean you want my home."

"Just the temporary use of your estate for the lodging of injured pegasi until such time as they can relocate themselves."

"And if I don't?" Rainbow's tone was weary, she looked up at the princess who was grinning like an ape from the royal zoological gardens.

"Oh think of the shame and the scandal. One such as yourself, Lady Prism Radi-"

"Skip the titles, *please*."

Celestia giggled behind a hoof, thoroughly enjoying herself, "A lady such as yourself failing in her solemn duty. Why, it would flash across Equestria like a bushfire!"

"If I don't give you my castle you'll tell on me?"

"Such accusations, dear Rainbow Dash!"

"You could've just asked you know. It's not like I'm using the whole place...just...try not to break everything? I don't exactly have the bank account my parents do and we don't exactly see eye to eye."

"Oh you'll be reimbursed for your services, don't worry about that. The crown sees fit to declare this a civil emergency, not a military one. We

don't go around *confiscating* property. We *rent*. I can do you a favour, perhaps?" Celestia's voice was dripping with honey.

"Oh no, please don't..." Rainbow didn't like the sound of that.

"There's a tricky...situation that has arisen due to the unpleasantness of these last few days. A certain princess was injured - not fatally - and is unable to fly herself home. She requires not only a private suite but ambassadorial privileges. I am prepared to offer you an interim commission in our foreign service, Lady *Ambassador* Prism Radiance Windemere Silverhoof." Celestia was leaning heavily on the ambassador word and didn't seem to be in any hurry to let up.

Rainbow Dash facehoofed, "Oh please don't...okay, okay, I give in. I'll do it. You win."

"We thought you might see it our way," Celestia chuckled and turned to look behind her, out the door, "you can bring her in now. The third floor private guestroom with en suite bathroom is the best, I hereby designate it a temporary embassy of the High Reaches Griffon Clan with all rights and privileges thereof. Lady Ambassador Silverhoof here is it's duly appointed liason. So let it be."

"High Reaches Clan?" said Rainbow Dash, looking up as two male and beady-looking griffon guards were shouldered out of the way by none other than Gilda, tied up with a splint and enough bandages to swamp half a herd of cattle.

"Heya butthead."

Dash smiled, "It's nice to see you again, Princess Wildfeather Longwing Strongbeak of the High Reaches Clan."

Celestia and Dash shared a look, smiling slyly at each other. Celestia winked. Dash could give as well as take.

"Oh don't you start. I've had enough of that already. I'm gonna give Pops a piece of my beak when I get back."

Celestia grinned, "I can see you two are already getting well acquainted. We'll start ferrying up the rest of the wounded soon. Good day."

Rainbow Dash nosed her way outside after settling Gilda in. She was well and truly awake now and couldn't get back to sleep...and besides, there was a commotion brewing.

"That's it, that's it...take the slack - there! Set it! Let it rise, let it rise...valves opening...NOW!"

Rainbow watched perplexed as a team of pegasus ponies flitted around helping several unicorns - obviously with cloud walking spells - as a



large and familiar-looking pink hot air balloon broke through the cloud cover. The pink balloon had something equally pink and far more hyperactive bouncing within the basket below it.

"Whee! Isn't this fun!" shouted Pinkie happily as she leapt out of the gondola and bounced around on the clouds outside Dash's home without the slightest acknowledgement that she was several hundred feet in the air and couldn't fly.

"Pinkie? what on earth are you doing up here?"

"That's *nurse* Pinkie to you! Oh and Luna wants to see you, and me! But I'm going to help here first."

"Luna wants to see me, us?"

"Uh huh! I think it's about Twilight and Fluttershy, they're still lost and that's so sad that..."

"Pinkie! You're getting carried away again, tell me what you know."

Pinkie took a deep breath, "I was delivering cakes to all the injured and needy but then I got told they couldn't all have cakes and I used the ones I had and was going to get more but then I found Luna and she was singing so beautifully that I just had to stop and listen, and after that she said to come find you! And so I did! She's just down there!" Pinkie pointed with a hoof to where Rainbow could see a dark blue shape amidst the fires.

Rainbow blinked, "Did she say what she wanted exactly?"

"Nu-uh, but she said to be ready for later tonight, and now I'm here, I'm going to help with all the poor pegasus ponies who've lost their pep because that makes me so sad and I can't bear to see sad ponies so I'm gonna make it all better with lots of love and laughter and streamers and candy and..."

Rainbow let her patter on and went to see the balloon. Twilight's contraption had been commandeered and heavily modified. It now included a little basket in which lay a very content looking Spike, chewing on something glassy.

"Hey, Rainbow! What's up?" said the dragon, with a cheeky wave.

"You are, sport. Heh, what're you doing in there?"

"I'm the official balloon altitude management technician." he pointed a clawed thumb at himself with pride.

"Which means?"

"I lie here and snack on gems, inflate the balloon to go up and when it gets there, a little bit more *whoosh* and the rope pulls the hatch open. Hot air goes out, we go down."

"They pay you for that?"

"Yeah, and all the gems I can eat, too. Rubypeppers and Chillidiamonds, want some?" the dragon offered a clawful to the pegasus, who shook her head.

"Er...no thanks champ, I'm trying to cut down."

"No problemo, *Lady Silverhoof*."

"Et tu, Spike?"

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Rainbow fluttered down, a little unsteadily. She'd been patched up by the doctors the previous day but it still felt awkward. Below her was Luna, directing the morbid yet solemn and necessary work of clearing the dead with as much dignity as could be mustered. The fighting was over, but it still felt strange to see ex-enemy soldiers working alongside their foes of the days before. If Celestia and Luna trusted them, she did too.

"Good morning, Rainbow Dash." said Luna quietly, inclining her head

"Greetings your majesty."

"Please, call me Luna, I don't like titles between friends."

"You heard about that, huh?"

Luna smiled, "I did. My sister has no secrets from me - and besides, I looked you all up after our...altercation last year."

"Luna, I'm-" Rainbow tried to say, but was silenced by the princess.

"No, Rainbow, I was in the wrong. I was...I was what I was. You freed me and I am forever grateful. As I was saying I looked you all up. You're all related to us - distantly. Very distantly."

"Really?"

Luna nodded, but leaned in, "Can I tell you a secret?"

Dash nodded, all ears.

"Almost every pony is!"

Rainbow blinked, and then thought, and then laughed, "Good one, Luna!"

"Took you down a peg or two, didn't it?" she said, softly, but her eyes were bright.

"Haha, yeah. Not that I needed it. My parents need it a bit more, that's why I'm here, rather than there."

"Walk with me, Rainbow Dash."

The pair walked towards where Applejack was helping to pull carts. A brief word later and the pair were a trio. They wandered back into town and collected Bright Eyes - she was loathe to leave her mailbags, but at the insistence of the princess she did as bid - and they went to find Rarity.

Rarity was distraught, her life's work was in ruins, set ablaze during the fighting, "Oh what am I to do? I've worked so very, very hard - the ball in Trottingham, the Grand Galloping Gala...Hoity Toity himself was endorsing my work! Now look at me!"

Luna thought for a moment, "Rarity...I know it hurts, but if you could...there are many, many ponies without homes, without clothing save what they wore on their backs..."

Rarity went whiter, "Oh I'm an awful pony! Simply awful! Crying over mere fabric when lives are in pieces!" she burst into tears, looking at the ruins of her shop and realising that she, at least, was able to rebuild.

Luna shook her head, "Dear Rarity, that wasn't my intention. I meant - you should lend a hoof with making tents, curtains, clothing, blankets. Surely you can train apprentices in next to no time! Go find those with talents like yours, teach them, show them. Draw up some designs. Frugal, simple, effective - and maybe the name of so noble a pony as to give up so much for so many others will aid you in rebuilding what you had."

Rarity sniffled, wiping a hoof across her nose in a very un-ladylike manner, "I will do it. Not for myself, but for those in need. Fashion need not be denied ponies merely because of their life's circumstances. Feeling fabulous will bring a little bit of warmth all on it's own."

Luna smiled, secretly to herself, "I know, Rarity, you couldn't be the bearer of generosity if it were any other way...but don't get too carried away! You're needed elsewhere so very, very soon. We are almost assembled, we are missing one..."

"Pinkie? She's...ugh, I left her at my place."

There was a *thump* and a large white winged unicorn caught up to the group with a very mellow-looking pink pony on her back.

"Pinkie?" gasped Rainbow Dash, running to her friend's side.

"Princess!" squeaked Applejack and Bright Eyes, both bowing swiftly.

"My friends!" said Celestia, motioning for them to stand up. She deposited the pink pony in front of Rainbow Dash, who - with the help of Applejack - tried to revive her.

"You're my friend?" asked Bright Eyes eagerly.

As a response, the princess gently kissed her forehead, "After we have done battle together, how could we not be? We all have a common cause now - we must save Fluttershy and my poor lost student, Twilight."

"What happened to Pinkie?" asked Dash, poking the pink pudgy pony.

"I fear she found your icecream and soda stash, Rainbow."

"Oh no...what's the damage?"

"I'm sorry to report, it was totally devastated."

"So much...soooo much soda...so much icecream...soooooo goooooodd..." groaned Pinkie, flopping to the ground, her distended stomach almost acting as a cushion. She burped, rolling over and giggling, her legs kicking randomly. Rainbow Dash facehoofed.

They all headed towards the square, Luna requesting that the group keep together. There was a commotion and the group saw Zecora leading a strange pink unicorn into the square.

"That...that's Pinkie's double!"

"Weepy Cry," said Celestia, nodding, "I fear I must deal with this. Luna, attend me."

"Yes, sister."

Rainbow watched spellbound and turned her head when there was talk of taking lives, but at the soft gasp of the crowd that had formed, she turned back. Spidery, gossamer threads of light were weaving around the head of the pink unicorn and she stood with her eyes closed swaying with the wind.

Suddenly Celestia drew back, drawing the strange glowing cloud with her, before breathing on it softly. The strange light dissipated into the air. the pink pony slumped and lolled unconscious on the ground.

As Luna and Celestia dispersed, the pony was taken away.

"What happened?" Rainbow asked Luna, "Is she dead?"

"Dead? Oh no," said Luna, "she is forgiven."

"What? But...but..." Rainbow was furious.

"Calm yourself, calm. My sister was requested to take a life, and my sister...is reluctant to do such a thing unless necessary. Instead we took her memories. All that she was, many years of sadness and tragedy, are gone. What you saw was...a foal. She's just a foal now, only a scant few summers of her life remain. Her life was a burden, now she has a chance to live again."

"But she..."

"Are foals born evil, Rainbow Dash?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Then grant her this."

Rainbow hung her head, "You are right. What's going to happen to her now?"

“She is still troubled, I must work my magic on her, but that will be later tonight during her true sleep when she dreams. After that, you must all meet my sister and I in the Everfree Forest. You will know where. Promise me. When the moon has risen.”

“We shall, Luna.”

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Later that night, five of the bearers of the Elements of Harmony stood their ground as the howling wind built to a crescendo. The storm which had ripped through Ponyville a little over a week ago was being replayed in miniature in the wrecked glade of the Everfree Forest. It's sheer proximity was frightful although few outside the forest knew it was even happening. Four of Celestia's top spellweavers were lending their talents to stabilizing the portal the sun-princess was forcing open, Luna was doing her best to shield herself and her friends and the rest of Ponyville from the raging maelstrom and Celestia herself, intent on a simple opening spell, was in the very centre, the eye.

With a burst of light the sealed portal sprung open and the storm vanished into thin air, like water down the drain. The four pegasus mages were sweating, their coats slick and shiny, yet Celestia and Luna seemed unfazed.

“Is this the right one?” asked AJ, “Y'all been tellin' me how we're just one Equestria amongst many.”

“It is,” said Celestia calmly, “the barrier between our two worlds was weakened by their coming, and we have their spore.”

“How do we know it's safe?” asked Dash, peering at it with dark eyes.

“Safe? *Safe*? It's another world ruled over by a powerful tyrant, under siege from a unicorn possessed by ancient spirits set on waging war on them and us!” said Rarity breathlessly, “Whatever made you think this could *possibly* be ‘safe’?”

“I mean,” said Dash, “how do we know this ‘Celeste’ hasn't set any traps?”

“With any luck, our Twi's been keepin' her real busy like.”

“I'm not sure she's our Twilight any longer,” said Rarity with an unreadable expression on her face.

“She's Twi' alright,” said AJ, “I can tell. Somewhere inside that gal is our Twilight, that's the honest truth.”

"And we have to do this for Fluttershy, we can't leave either of our friends there!" chimed in Pinkie, "they'd be missing Gummy's second birthday and Gummy would be so sad."

"Pinkie, it's a bit worse than that."

"Oh I know," said Pinkie, seriously, "they'd be missing *my* birthday too!"

"Girls, calm down," said Luna, "I've got this."

The princess concentrated, and a spark of light flickered into life on the tip of her horn as she stayed perfectly still with her eyes closed. It flickered through the air, disappeared through the portal and then a few moments later returned, "there is...something strange with the barrier but then I have never travelled between worlds quite like this before. I think it's safe, safe enough that is."

"I cannot change your minds?" asked Celestia, looking at each of the bearers in turn, who one by one shook their heads.

"No, sister, we have to do this. We cannot just leave Fluttershy, or Twilight, and we absolutely *cannot* rest until we know Celeste will not return."

Celestia was troubled, staring at the ground for a few moments before looking back up with steely resolve, "Then go! Go now! Go with my blessings, and just...please come home safe? I don't want another thousand years to pass before I see you again."

"Have no fear, big sister, we will return. *All* of us. Take care of Weepy-Cry, I have done my best and she will wake tomorrow."

With that, they stepped through.

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Travelling the bridge between worlds was not pleasant, the sensation was akin to being strained like spaghetti through a series of tubes each impossibly smaller than the last and yet emerging in one piece. There was a terrible feeling of crushing weight, vertigo, an odd feeling of being twisted inside out, and then they found themselves emerging into a clearing in a wood which looked frightfully similar to the one they had left.

"You *sure* this is the right place, sugarcube?"

Luna looked up and around at their point of entry, it was full night. They should have arrived in the afternoon, the worlds had been in sync, "I'm not sure. This is the right world, the right place...but the time..."

"Winter is coming," said Bright Eyes softly, a faraway look in her eyes, "I can tell. I have the weather in my bones, Mama always said and she says I'm never wrong."

"Winter?" complained Dash, "but it wasn't even *summer* back home!"

"I fear we've been tricked, led astray, or maybe...maybe it was just an accident. When travelling between worlds like this, things can get out of phase. We're in the right place, just...not the right time. I think some six months have passed, we're on the wrong side of the summer solstice!"

"Six months?" squeaked Dash, "Who knows what could've happened in that time!"

"I'll tell ya what *did* happen!" yelled Pinkie, "*You missed my birthday party!*"

The group walked as quietly as possible through the dark forest, even Pinkie's bounces were restrained and careful. It was eerily familiar but somehow different and it didn't help that there was an aching *wrongness* to everything, like an itch behind the eyes that they just couldn't scratch.

Bringing it up, Dash said, "I wonder if this was why they failed? If I have to fight with this damned place giving me the creeps I'd go crazy."

Luna shook her head keeping her eyes on the path, nothing had bothered them yet but it was likely only a matter of time, "They were unlucky. With a days less warning, and without Twilight and her nightmare army, they would have had the edge on us, even with the storm. It's just plain dumb luck we're alive to do something so utterly stupid as to walk into the griffon's den."

The forest thinned, the path was leading out into moon-touched farmland. Applejack recognized the lay of the land, it was Sweet Apple Acres, or it used to be. Now it seemed to be a training ground. There was a bonfire with a group of young ponies clustered around it. There was whooping and hollering and bucking, they seemed to be having a celebration. Applejack stepped out of the bushes to head towards the friendly gathering but Pinkie pulled her back, "AJ down!"

"What in tarnation..?"

"AJ, who's the party pony around here?"

Pinkie was serious. Applejack stopped and thought, "Why *you* are, sugarcube, but I don't..."

"That's right, you *don't*. I do! You don't want to join that party, trust me. Just watch."

Applejack watched as two little ponies brought out a third, she was clearly muzzled and from her body posture was scared out of her wits. She could just make out what they were saying...

"My little ponies!" said the leader, standing on a platform made from what appeared to be a felled appletree, "We are gathered here tonight to welcome our new sister, Tagalong, to the herd!"

There was a great stomping of hooves as the tiny party-going equines hammered their forelegs into the dirt with gusto, but finally the leader, she was a small yellow pony with a shock of red hair and mane that gleamed in the firelight, raised a forehoof for silence, "The time of the unmaking is here! Hold her down, girls, this is going to hurt."

The muzzled pony gave a squeal and kicked, but could not get free. The two ponies holding her down had done this before. The watching ponies starting chanting, "Mark! Mark! Mark!" in a droning staccato exultation that rose in fits and spurts. A knife gleamed in the firelight, held expertly in the yellow pony's mouth and it flashed as it rose into the air.

AJ gasped, but Dash pulled her back, "It's not Applebloom! It's not! Don't look!"

Applejack couldn't help it, she kept watching as the grizzly scene unfolded.

The muzzled pony let out a screeching wail as the knife sliced into her flank, near her tail. With a practiced sawing motion, a flap of hide was cut free, dripping red in the firelight. The sobs of the pony faded to choking noises and the pony just twitched. They had cut her cutie-mark off. As the not-Applebloom held it up, the throng cheered and hollered all the louder. she threw it into the fire, it evidently wasn't even worth keeping.

The chant changed now, "Brand! Brand! Brand!"

"Do you want her, sisters?" asked the leader, and the noise grew louder, apparently signifying consent. "Do you accept her, my co-alphas?"

The two ponies holding down the third, a unicorn and a pegasus foal, both nodded, "we accept her, as the new *omega*."

"So shall it be done! Fetch the brand!"

AJ watched horrified as, with renewed squealing and the smell of scorched flesh, the mutilated pony was branded in place of her cutie-mark. Sobbing, she was set free. The muzzle was removed and the two ponies



holding her down got off. She struggled to her feet, eyes on the ground, before whispering, "Thank you, herd leader."

"The dark herd grew tonight!" shouted the yellow earth-pony, and she stamped on the log-platform rhythmically, chanting, "Herd! Herd! Herd!"

Her voice was joined by the others, growing louder and more manic as the new pony picked up the beat and raised her weak, strained voice. Applejack looked away, finally, tears in her eyes.

The group had moved on, even more silently, skirting Sweet Apple Acres, *or whatever it's called in this world*, mused Applejack darkly. There would be no succour from that place.

"I don't like this world," said Bright Eyes, "they-they need more muffins and hugs."

"I don't think any of us do," said Luna, "but we must search for what allies we can and never lose hope. Our friends depend on us."

The group stopped at the outskirts of a dimly-lit town, the wan glow of lights visible in the gloom.

"Ponyberg," read Rarity, using her horn to light up the sign, "how startlingly original."

"That's prolly what they thought when they saw our place, sugarcube," said Applejack, with a sour smile.

"So much idle chatter from those who would seek to overthrow the sun tyrant." stated a cold contralto voice from a hooded figure who had seemingly materialized in the middle of the road. She stood brazen and tall in the moonlight.

"Stand and deliver!" added a second voice, another pony had leapt out into the road with a wicked-looking blade tied in it's tail, "I mean, if that's alright with you..."

Dash had tensed at the first intruder, but at the sound of her voice, "Fluttershy?" said Dash, one forehoof in the air from her aborted leap into action.

Fluttershy, for it was indeed the lost yellow pegasus, squeaked out in a very small voice, "H-how did you know it was me?"

Dash leaped instead to give her a hug, as did the rest of the gang. Bright Eyes gave her an extra-special hug. When it broke, Fluttershy held her at hoof's length for a moment, admiring the Element of Kindess, before hugging her even tighter again.

"I knew you were special," said Fluttershy quietly into Bright Eyes' mane.

"Papa always said so," whispered Bright Eyes back, sniffing happily.

"If you're quite finished," said the first strange pony in a frustrated voice, "you're late and we've got to get out of here before we're spotted."

"Late? Just a darn tootin' minute, how were you waitin' fer us and jest how long've you been waitin'?"

"I have been waiting for the last *six months* for you to show up, and every second you delayed has made things worse for us!"

"Who are you?" asked Dash, flaring her wings menacingly and striking an aggressive pose, "Just why should we go with you?"

Dash stared at the strange hooded pony critically - she seemed like nothing out of the ordinary at first glance; a simple blue earth-pony - the hue may have been something else but in the darkness it appeared washed out. Still, she held herself with a certain regal pose, thought the pegasus, that seemed instinctual, inbred.

"You should come with me because I am the only one who can give you what you seek, a chance at reuniting yourselves with your other friend, Twilight. What do you have to fear from me? If you don't want to believe me, believe your friend at least."

"Fluttershy, is she the real deal?" Applejack asked, narrowing her eyes when the yellow pegasus nodded, "well alright then. If Fluttershy believes in her, I do to. Come on girls, let's git whilst we can."

The blue earth-pony led the way through Ponyberg, wherever they passed remained in shadow and the few wary guards paid them no heed. She had motioned them to absolute silence and whilst the thumping of the blood in their ears seemed a clarion call, nopony was alerted to their presence. Their estimation of the seeming-earth pony went up several notches as she brazenly made way through the town to a familiar-looking tree.

"Come," she whispered, "around the back here is the entrance to the cellars. This is no time to balk, get in. I can only keep up this glamour for so long before it's use is detected."

Luna forged ahead, opening the doors with her magic as delicately as possible and trotting down the wide stairs. She was followed, reluctantly, by everypony. The doors were eased shut by the strange earth-pony and the group trotted onwards into a corridor lit by pale balefire lamps.

"Now, lady, I want to know who you are," said Rainbow Dash, turning "I want answers, and no tricks."

“As you wish, we’re safe now.”

The mare in front of them closed her eyes. without any visible outward sign, her simple pastel colouration changed to powerful midnight blues and purples, her hair began to shine with the fire of the milky way and, as if they’d always been there but had merely been overlooked, her horn and wings burst into view. She spread them, every inch exuding an aura of power and might. She breathed deeply and shook her mane loose.

“Ahh but it feels good to stretch these wings...even in these cramped quarters.”

“You...you’re Nightmare Moon!” yelled Dash as she spread her wings in shock and prepared to attack, but a dark shape moved quickly to calm the pegasus.

“Hush, child, this is no nightmare,” chided Luna, “this is what I will be when I am truly fully grown, not merely imbued with the power of the element of magic.”

Luna turned to the uneasily familiar-looking winged unicorn pony who stood now where an unassuming earth-pony had so recently been, “I know you. You’re me. My double. Lunaria.”

A curt nod from the magical mare confirmed things, “You are the younger sister, I take it, from your world? Here, I am the eldest. I have hidden myself and my compatriots from prying eyes for as long as I could, waiting for you six to venture this way.”

“Wait, I don’t understand...is this really your double?” Dash asked Luna, peering back at the mysterious mare.

Lunaria stretched, stood straight, and looked the Equestrian ponies in the eye, one at a time, “I am Queen Selene du Lunaria of the Starlit Reaches, Protector of the Great Deeps and Guardian of the Constellations. Mine is the night sky, dreams, the greater deeps, space, the constellations and every star within it.”

The enormity of that sunk in and they looked up at the goddess with new understanding. She nodded solemnly, “My sister, jealous of my domain, sought control of the Elements of Discord, but...” Lunaria tailed off for a moment before continuing, voice tight, “they *cannot* be controlled, they are chaos embodied. In my haste I cast them out into your world.”

“So it was *you!*” said Rarity, suddenly, angrily, “It was you and your damned foolish meddling that sent us those...those *things!* They created a monster from our sweet and gentle Twilight Sparkle and doomed *our* Luna to *our* moon for a thousand years!”

“That must have caused you great pain.” whispered Lunaria, the same pain echoed in her eyes as in her speech.

“They were weak, they sought a single bearer. They found me. I fashioned them into armour and took on my sister for dominion of the day.” Luna shivered for a moment before carrying on, “Recent history, it is passed. If you will aid us in restoring our friend and protecting our world from another invasion, then many things can be forgiven and forgotten.”

Lunaria looked at her opposite sagely for a moment, “You are wise beyond your apparent years, little one.”

“A thousand years on the moon taught me patience, my friends taught me love and forgiveness. Neither of which will aid us if we are caught.”

“Then behold, the New Lunar Republic. Long may it reign.” said Lunaria brightly, forcedly, as she threw open the doors.

Six collective hearts sunk.

# Chapter 10

The chambers under the library were fetid, cramped and dark. The firefly lamps glowed sickly and wan, barely illuminating the scores of malnourished bodies huddling for warmth and mutual protection.

"Isn't it glorious? See what my sister's reign has produced. Squalid suffering." Lunaria stood back, sarcastically spreading her wings and oh-so-proudly displaying the mundane horror of day to day life under a merciless tyrant.

"Woah Nelly, this is bad - how...why?"

"I fear it is partly my fault, Applejack," said Lunaria in a sad half-whisper, "I escaped from my prison of a thousand years. She thinks I will usurp her throne and banish her in likewise fashion."

"But you won't?" asked Luna, a confused expression on her muzzle.

"Oh I will, but it is not that simple. I do not know how it is for you and your sister, Luna, back in Equestria, but here for our poor abused land? Well look around you. Think back on the happy little hamlet of Ponyberg as you skulked through it's streets. Does it look like it prospers?"

"It looked simply *awful*!" declared Rarity

"That is what a goddess can do. The queen and her land are one, my friends. As my sister grows sick with paranoia, fear and despair, so too does the land itself - and the ponies within it's borders suffer in kind."

"But you can change all that? Can't you defeat her?" asked Rainbow Dash, stamping a hoof, pawing the ground, her wings half-extending as adrenaline ran through her lithe body.

Lunaria shook her head, "If your wing is sprained, little one, do you seek to fly a marathon to heal it? I tread softly upon this world for fear it would break. I must not face my sister directly, we are too similar."

"So you need *us* to do your dirty work, huh?" asked Rainbow, staring up at Lunaria with a hard expression on her muzzle.

"I do not ask you to do anything you would not attempt were I never to have shown myself. You may take Fluttershy and leave if you wish, now that you have found her," said Lunaria stiffly, pointing with a wing back out the way they had come, "or you may accept my help to save your friend Twilight also and thereby gain a slim chance over certain defeat.."

"If it weren't for Twilight, Sugar, I think we might just have taken you up on that. This ain't our world, and truth be told, I don't know if'n I can trust you." said Applejack, chewing her lower lip thoughtfully.

"My friends," said Luna, "for what it is worth, I believe her tale. You may leave, I will do my best to aid Lunaria and return to Equestria thereafter."

"What kind of filly would I be to run out on my princess?" asked Applejack rhetorically.

"Quite," said Rarity, "I for one could not abandon Twilight without at least attempting her rescue."

"And I couldn't let you girls do it alone!" cried Rainbow Dash.

"It wouldn't be much of an adventure party without the party pony, would it?" giggled Pinkie Pie, "Who else would sing rousing songs to keep your spirits up?"

"I will help. I will do it for everypony in Ponyberg...and Twilight." said Bright Eyes.

"I couldn't let you go home without Twilight," said Fluttershy, "and Lunaria really has been *very* kind."

"Then it is decided."

"Good," said Lunaria, "for I have a plan. Walk this way."

Lunaria led the way deeper in to the crypt-like underbelly of the library. The Equestrians idly wondered if Twilight's library back home was anything like this. If Luna knew, she showed no sign.

The way was led to a locked door; heavy, barred. Whatever was inside was meant to stay right where it was. Two guards - their armor mismatched and in disrepair - stood warily outside, scowling darkly at the approaching group.

"It's alright, my friends, your work here is done. Stand aside."

"Your will, milady." said one, bowing. They backed off as Lunaria worked her magic on the huge beam, lifting it into the air as if it were made of paper. It looked solid enough to have withstood a buck from Applejack. The locks were next, creaking and clunking fearfully loud in the murmuring restless silence under the library. The door swung outwards, to reveal a small, orange pony with a blonde shock of mane and tail, quite the worse for wear but uninjured. She had a trough of water and something that looked like food, and a pile of hay for sleeping. Her quarters were in need of mucking out - the sanitary options being nonexistent in such a gaol cell - but she was nonetheless hale and hearty.

"Ah see ye came back to finish me off, huh? Killin' mah brother weren't enuff fer ya?"

"Amanita," said Lunaria sadly, "I'm not here to kill you. I never was. I'm here to change your mind."

"Y'all cain't change mah mind."

"Watch this one, friends, her cutie-mark as you call it is not just for show. She has a quick mind, a quick body and strong hooves. My sister chooses her minions carefully. Unwisely perhaps, but carefully."

"What would you have us do?" asked Luna.

Applejack screwed up her muzzle, "I ain't gonna lay into no pony y'all got helpless like this, e'en if she been terrorizing my kinfolk."

"Oh no," said Lunaria, "I just want you to show her kindness. We are protected under here. The Elements of Harmony had a hoof in creating your world, but their power can be wielded like the most subtle of blades. Encircle her, search inside yourselves. Go now, I will talk you through it."

The ponies spread out, Amanita in the middle hissing and spitting, ears splayed back and eyes wild as she jacked to and fro, spinning in the air on the spot, "What're you doin'? Get back! Back I say!"

"Feel inside your hearts," said Lunaria, unfazed by threats, "she's a helpless foal, led astray by a power greater than any one pony can take. Led to evil by the miasma of a goddess fallen sick with her own imagination. All that she has done...it is terrible, great evil, but it is not of her own doing."

The room slowly lit up with six dancing lights - the pelts, manes, tails and even clothing of the six Bearers started to glow the colour of their necklaces, a rainbow of warmth.

Luna answered first, "A thousand years ago, I did a great wrong. I was forgiven. A thousand years for a goddess is but the blink of an eye. I can forgive. I do not forget, but I can forgive."

"Quite," said Rarity, "when we vanquished Nightmare Moon, when that facade was removed - dear Luna, you were so helpless. How could we hate? I forgive."

The cry went up, one by one, "forgive."

Lunaria nodded, "Such is the way of harmony and friendship."

She tapped a hoof, and the dancing lights exploded in a glittery wave of power that swept over the room. They converged, seemingly a solid wall of light, that broke heavily against the cowering form of Amanita. As the light faded, the six watched. The form of the turncoat earth-pony stayed shivering on the floor in the middle of the room. Presently they realized she

was sobbing. It was Bright Eyes who trotted up to her first, and bent down to nuzzle at the forlorn pony.

"Leave me alone," she wailed, looking up, "I'm not worth it."

"Everypony is worth friendship," said Bright Eyes softly, "my sister was. I couldn't bring her a muffin until it was too late. I can still bring you one."

"Why would you give me anything? I...I killed my ma' and pa'! I poisoned them!" Amanita's eyes were wet with tears, "How can it hurt now? I gloated! I laughed! I spat on their graves and danced! *Why does it hurt?*"

Bright Eyes bent down and enfolded the earth pony in her wings, "Because you finally know you did wrong."

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"So," asked Applejack, "what's the rest of the plan?"

"I cannot take this land by force, I fear for it's stability." repeated Lunaria.

"So..." asked Applejack again, "what's the plan?"

"I cannot take the land," continued Lunaria, glaring Applejack into silence, "but one of *you* can. A Bearer of an Element of Harmony – it's not just some fancy jewelry, it's something special, deep inside you. You don't carry it, you *are* it. I thought you would understand now that you had seen."

"Twilight said something similar. The night she freed me," said Luna thoughtfully, "I believe her."

"I was going to use Fluttershy here, but now one of you may take her place if it suits the rest of our plans better."

"I can...I can do it." said Fluttershy in a small voice, looking down at the ground.

"No!" said Bright Eyes, "I won't ask you to do that. *I* will do it. I'm...I'm just a mail-mare. You, Fluttershy, you faced down Nightmare Moon! You took on a dragon! You stared down a cockatrice! Take this necklace off me! I don't want it! Take it back!"

Bright Eyes fussed and jumped, prancing around until Rarity could pull off the necklace with her magic. She floated it over to Fluttershy who demurely lowered her head as it was clasped closed. When it did, a bright flash lit the room and just for a moment all the colours of the dishevelled ponies within the dark complex grew powerful and warm. The foals stopped whimpering, old mares and stallions huddling together stopped shivering. Just for a moment, their eyes grew bright and young again. It was like a



breath of summer, the exhilarating feeling after a cleansing thunderstorm. It was freedom.

Lunaria laughed triumphantly, "That will have got her attention. Come, Bright Eyes. This is our night!" The moon princess breathed deeply, inhaling the last glow from the glorious colourful flash, "My little ponies, rejoice! Come one, come all, follow me! We are done skulking about in this prison! Tonight we fight! Tonight we will be free!"

The cry went up as the masses got to their hooves. The murmuring became a flood of noise that quickly became a roar as the news passed through the throng. Lunaria stamped a hoof and the wan light flared up with a burning intensity that caused many a pony to avert their eyes. She turned around and reared up against the doors that had served as a barricade, keeping them safe, keeping them prisoners for so long. She slammed her hooves into them and they burst, exploding outwards. She led the way through the corridor with wings half outspread as the herd of bedraggled ponies all but stampeded behind her, streaming past the astonished bearers of the elements of harmony. When the complex was empty they were left blinking as one by one the lights were extinguished.

"I think that's our queue, sugar." said Applejack.

"What's she going to *do*?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"She's going to give Ponyberg to Bright Eyes." answered Luna, "She's going to call forth the full wrath of her sister and direct not at herself, but at *us*."

"She's going to *what*?" shouted Rarity, her head turning from her friends to look out through the shattered wrecked frame and pile of splinters that had recently been the doors, "How is that supposed to solve *anything*?"

"If her evilness is too busy fighting us, I guess Lunaria can sneak in and relieve her of her burdens." suggested Rainbow Dash.

"I...I don't think that's how it works," said Fluttershy quietly, "I think we have to...split up."

"I don't get it though," asked Rainbow, gaze shifting back and forth between Fluttershy and Bright Eyes, "how's making Bright Eyes the Mayor Mare gonna change anything?"

"She's...she's the queen. She can appoint anyone she so chooses as ruler of the land." said Luna, thoughtfully, "My sister and I...we don't go into things much but...the land, Equestria...it reflects our spirit, our hearts. When I...when Nightmare Moon spread her wings of darkness across the realm,

the hate in my heart was reflected in the spirits of my people. Celeste is...sick, the way I was sick when I was Nightmare Moon." Luna broke down, tears staining her cheeks.

Fluttershy turned to her and the pair embraced, "That time is past, Luna."

The princess nodded and took a deep breath, "If Bright Eyes, one of us, is made ruler of even a small part of Estrosia, it will become Equestria. I suppose that would get her sisters attention, bring her out into the open."

"Neat! Can you do that too?" asked Pinkie Pie, "I mean, to parts of Equestria? That'd be superly-duperly neat!"

"Why yes, I...I do it all the time!" said Luna, nodding her head and fluttering her wings nervously.

"When was the last time?" asked Rainbow.

Luna looked downcast for a moment, and then hurried outside, mumbling, "About a year ago..."

"What's she mean?" asked the pegasus, watching her go with a confused expression on her muzzle.

Rarity rolled her eyes, "Last summer solstice, I distinctly remember we had a little bit of a...situation with a recently-returned moon princess?."

"I think she means nightmare moon, silly Dashie!" said Pinkie, giggling as she followed Rarity.

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Outside was bedlam. Like ants swarming a damaged nest, the inhabitants of Ponyberg were out in force with a blank snarling look on their muzzles as they were driven by Celeste's anger against her older sister.

"For the Lunarian Republic!" was the common cry as young and old, stallion, filly and colt used whatever weapons they could to force their way to the town square. Lunaria strode through the mass like an equine battering ram, bolts of power from her horn throwing aggressors from her like silent meaty missiles. Where her horn and magic were not enough, her wings and hooves provided ample backup.

Finally she stood in the middle of the square and raised her head. She began to glow with a powerful ethereal light that formed a visible barrier around her. Bright Eyes, who had been following her closely, squeaked in surprise as she felt it slide across her flank.

"Equestrians! To me! Release your powers, drive Celeste's minions back and we can strike the first blow!"

The Bearers joined Lunaria in the circle of glowing moonlight, each shivering lightly as they passed through the barrier.

"So...how do we..?" asked Rainbow.

"Search deep inside, remember that feeling the last time you used the Element and bring it forth." said Luna, already glowing. One by one the ponies closed their eyes and searched deep within. Eyes opened to a new world as their Elements responded to the call and sent forth a wave of harmony and light that washed over the drab and dreary town like tidal swell. Lunaria herself, caught in the backwash, gasped at the gentle touch of the foreign magic and touched her horn to Bright Eyes' head.

"I dub thee Mare Mayor, rightful ruler of Ponyberg, with all rights, privileges and responsibilities thereof." were her simple words, but the effect was far greater. Like a silent, slow explosion, the strange barrier that had surrounded the eight ponies swelled and frothed, expanding outwards in a relentless spurt of growth that soon encapsulated the entire town. For the followers of Lunaria it was like a weight had been removed from their shoulders. For those still afflicted with their queens' madness it sent them into fitful slumber, their eyes rolled back in their heads and they fell to the ground, twitching and moaning. Slowly, ever so slowly, peace fell upon the town.

The citizens of Ponyberg, unused to such a thing, were awestruck.

"Is...is it over?" came the whispers, "Have we won?"

Lunaria visibly relaxed, her flaring aura dropping to a faint glow, "No, dear subjects, we have not won the war. We have won the battle. Rejoice, for your fallen brethren are once more amongst you. Watch now, watch what the goddess of the night can do for those returning to the fold. You are an army now, my friends - a small army, an untrained army, but an army nonetheless. And these ponies have joined you, or they would not be here. I give you, and them, my blessing. Arise, soldiers of the Lunarian Republic!"

Lunaria closed her eyes, and the shimmer roared into a balefire flame that enveloped the land in a bright green fireball of soft, blinding light. Where it passed, the flanks of those who stood with the Lunar goddess changed. Whatever their cutie-mark, or even if they had none, what adorned their hides now was the symbol of their new queen, a crescent moon where the tips caught a stylized diamond-like star in perpetual embrace, "Behold my new legion. We are one, the healing may begin."

Applejack looked up in the night sky, "If'n she went and poked the queen hornet, the healin' better be quick."

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Celeste shook with anger. Her sister was abroad, she should have seen it! She stormed upstairs to the second level of her throneroom, above the ballroom, her gaze casting across the design set in the marble that had lain dormant for so very, very long. She yelled in anger and raised her wings, slamming through the door in an explosion of splinters as she emerged into the night air.

"Where are you! WHERE ARE YOU!" she screamed, her mad voice stolen by the wind. As if a sudden flashbulb had gone off, her senses told her great magic was being woven in - of all places - that wretched hive of scum and villainy known as Ponyberg. She knew the spell, she had cast a version of it many years ago. The spell of ascension. Her sister was claiming the land for her own.

"NO!" she shouted, "I will not have it!"

She leaped off the parapet and with a single great downbeat of her wings soared into the night sky, spitting venom and shedding balefire as her barely-kept-in-check emotions ran amock.

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The bonfire had burnt lower now, with the ponies stomping and chanting around it. Tagalong hurt. Tagalong Tiara - it wasn't her name but it had stuck. At least now she belonged, like Lilly Ladle. She heard the three alpha ponies speaking, they were laughing cruelly and looking into the forest. They had something planned for somepony, she galloped away as fast as she was able before they decided it would be her.

"She's perfect. Always wanting in, always so hopeful..." the yellow earth-pony was all but rubbing her hooves together with glee.

"Callisto, you gonna make her do it?" asked the white unicorn filly

"Sure Sour Note, Creepabout, she's just right. Go get her."

Twister, a hopeful unicorn pony wannabe member of the dark herd was brought to the three in a muzzle - the usual attire for pledges.

"You know why you're here, Twister?"

The foal nodded, mutely.

"We want you to do something for us. We want you to sneak into the Everscream Forest and get us something from Zacora's house. Anything. A mask. She loves those masks. Bring it here and burn it, and you're in."

“Who knows,” laughed Sour Note, the proud young unicorn foal, “maybe you’ll find your mother in there.”

The raucous laughter stung Twister to the core - her mother had indeed gone missing in the Everscream Forest several days ago and had never returned. As she headed into the undergrowth she started shaking. Life in Ponyberg had never been fun but this...this was madness. Strange noises everywhere, the feeling of being watched...Twister couldn’t shake it off.

“Little one...” came a soft voice as she trudged as silently as possible through the dark forest. She stopped, heart pounding.

“Who’th there?” she said.

“Ahhh, nopony you need to worry about.”

“Wh-what do you want?” Twister was scared now, very scared. Her tail bolted itself to her hind quarters and her ears pinned back. Her eyes were white and rolling.

“Ohhhh no, come now, that’s no way to treat a friend.” there was a rustling in the undergrowth and a purple unicorn stepped into the clearing.

“A friend?” Twister was suspicious.

“Greetings, young Twister...you can call me Twilight.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Oh, I know many things, but your name...your mother told me your name.”

This was...this was too good to be true! “My mother? Mother is safe?”

“Oh, I know where your mother is. I can take you to her, in fact. Would you like that? Would you like to be with your mother?”

“Would I! I miss mommy...is she okay?”

“She’s nearby.” the purple unicorn seemed...somehow odd, thought Twister, but she knew where Mother was, so she had to be okay.

“Are you taking me to her?” asked the now-hopeful unicorn.

“Oh, it will be a while yet before you see your mother...I’m sorry to say, first I need a favour from you. One teensy little favour, and then you can be sent to be with your mother.”

“One favour?”

“Only one,” the purple unicorn, ‘Twilight’ she had said she was called, seemed to laugh, “just follow me, step up onto that tree stump.”

“And then you’ll take me to mother?”

“I promise, little one, that when you have finished doing me my favour I will release you to your mother, but first you must promise to do as I say, until I let you go.”

“But...”

“Say it.”

“I...I promise.”

“Good...” said Twilight Doom, her outward face not displaying a patch of the inner turmoil and screaming going on inside her head as Twilight Sparkle raged, trying to find a way to tell Twister to *Run! Run for your life! Don't stop! Don't look back! Don't get up there! No! No don't!*

It was too late. The screams of the dying foal that reverberated into the night air were cut off, mercifully, suddenly. Twilight Doom was laughing now, a great bubbling cackle, as streaks of lightning tore the bloody ash-laden stump apart, the ground bulging obscenely as if some great creature were beneath it. A furious roar sent wildlife scattering and a glowing claw dripping with lava tore itself free and dragged the form of a burning skeletal dragon out from the nether deeps. It snapped and snarled at Twilight who stood her ground and stamped a hoof, “WE HAVE A CONTRACT!” she bellowed, “You will do as I say until I release you! Your mother is dead and I'll send your soul to her when I'm finished with it!”

The beast raged but was impotent to do more than fell trees and belch flame into the night. When it was over, Twilight gestured with her horn, and the beast, snarling still, extended a claw for her to clamber onto.

“My dark herd is ready, and it's latest member, whilst a bit unorthodox, is perfect. We attack, Twister, and you shall be my fitting steed.”