

Chapter 1

Introductions; Preparing to Get Ready to Begin

Princess Celestia's flowing mane cast pastel shadows on the young filly. It was impressive just *standing* before the regent of the sun, as she was twice any pony's height. While Rarity had brought her sister first to Twilight, friend and expert in magic, during that conversation the princess herself sent word to bring young Sweetie Belle as soon as possible to this meeting place.

She tried to be as succinct as she could with the royal presence towering over her now. "She started screaming, your majesty." Rarity watched Princess Celestia eagerly examine Rarity's sister from a respectful distance but could not tell what the regent was looking for, only that since the destruction of Applejack's farm two days ago the young filly had gotten no sleep. "She was talking all funny which I just, you know, put to some bizarre form of post traumatic stress disorder. She was so calm though. Then she had no sooner fallen asleep than she jumped up and started screaming about monsters and seeing Applejack's granny ... Well, you know your majesty, about the incursion from that army. We're all glad my sister is alive but why. I mean." Sweat was making Rarity feel very warm.

Twilight was also present but politely waiting for Sweetie Belle who was strangely silent after all the fuss earlier in the evening. Now she felt the need to step up to explain to her teacher. "She sounded for a time like the old Sweetie Belle. Scared beyond her wits' end but Sweetie Belle."

The young lavender colored filly betrayed no emotion through her fatigue blurred her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know what they're talking about and I just woke up. I remember laying down in this lady's bed" At this Rarity pinned her ears in frustration. The disorder had

left her sister with amnesia and replaced it with pony that talked ... like she was from another planet altogether. "and then I was walking here."

Sweetie Belle, dear sweet young filly she was, tried to shake the shadows out of her eyes. Rarity had met the princess a number of times through her association with Twilight but her baby sister had, she believed, never seen the princess this close. Rarity watched as Sweetie Belle looked again, straining her eyes in the pale moonlight to see Celestia. Now the filly was twisting her ears in consternation, gears obviously grinding in her little head. "You're one of the god-kings, aren't you?"

Just like that. Blurted out as much accusation as question. *God king?* How could a mare, millenia old or not, be a king? Goddess maybe, Rarity thought but she felt warm again, worried her sister had offended the still silent princess-who-was-not-a-king.

With the kindness of millenia of practice, the regent of the sun (not so out of her element, being only a few short years since she gratefully relinquished dual regency of the moon) spoke to rarity's sister. "I'm sorry. The person you're speaking to is no longer available."

Rarity scrunched her brows; her own ears now dancing as she searched for meaning in Celestia's words. Her sister started to respond as though that was a perfectly normal greeting from royalty in the middle of the night during a war. "Oh! Then who is ..." Then stopped.

Her baby sister was obviously going into some trauma thing again. She had completely left this plane emotionally, and was staring blankly at the Princess' knees. Presently the strange Sweetie Belle was back. "What? Why did you say that?" The enunciation, Rarity noted, was subtly shifted. Her accent had changed; lack of memory of her friends was also a change she had seen recently. The other two CMCs thankfully had been spared all sight or smells of the bloodshed between giant two legged monsters and the royal guard. But Sweetie Belle...

For her own part Rarity felt much confusion for being forgotten, which was not aided when Celestia said "I was quoting you. You confronted an officer among the enemy, and he ... she, you explained, hailed you as a comrade and you said the one she was talking to wasn't there."

"A dead general" Sweetie Belle intoned. After a pause she nodded and continued. "That sergal was able to use magic but his body was eventually destroyed. I was about to be banished for lack of a body to sit in but." Rarity saw her baby sister stare at her small hooves but did not see Twilight step up beside her.

Aiming her words at Rarity's sister she explained "I think this happened before. When Stack" Twilight paused, gulped, then started again. "A sergal who was friendly to us stayed in the palace. He fell asleep then started screaming in their foreign language."

The princess added "And did horrible things to my guards. Lost two good ones to that alter ego. Do you know anything about that, small pony?"

Feeling left out and helpless Rarity could only stare up at her majesty's questions. What would her sister know of the invaders or of the palace and its guests? But Sweetie Belle was nodding as if this was all perfectly sensible. "Yes that was because he wasn't *really* dead. When I fell asleep he woke up and no one got any sleep. Except your guards who won't wake up but I thought he was dead and I'm sorry."

Quickly, Twilight who obviously knew where this was going, spoke again. "We all thought Sweetie Belle was dead, too."

And as Sweetie Belle, fatigue making her eyes look so old, turned her head to to purple unicorn, the white alicorn finished the thought. "That's what the screaming was about. Sweetie Belle woke up."

Realization slowly dawned on Rarity. Could it be this was actually not her sister at all? Sweetie Belle nodded at what to her should be a giant, intimidating alicorn and boldly asked "Well then do you have any dead bodies I could use instead? Long dead even but mostly uninjured, and magic-casting, perhaps?" Whatever else this thing was, it still had the frail, weak body of her sister. She wiped her weary eyes again and sighed. "I can tell you're a god-king but I don't remember hardly squat about me. I don't know if I can cause the magic....thing." Another sigh "To move. And no insult to this one's sister but I don't think a very small unicorn has the power to do this with local magic. I'll have to recover."

Rarity wanted to hug her sister tight and promise to find whatever thing would help her get better, but was also repulsed by the thought that something had eaten her sister like some sort of talking intestinal worm.

While she was frozen in inaction the princess turned her full attention, ears erect, at her prized student. "Twilight I hate to impose on you during such hard times, but he was an incredible fighter and I felt his heart was in the right place even if Fluttershy would never forgive him for raising rabbits to eat. I need to get back soon but can you make arrangements somehow? I'll send a guard with money and supplies in the morning."

Rarity wondered why she had even come, having not contributed squat to this meeting and surely experiencing aural hallucinations as evidenced by her baby sister blurting out to the ruler of Equestria, "Whiskey, perhaps a gallon, if you please. Other components this town will have but as small as it is I hate to impose on those few wanting to escape in that way. But I think I can use a more nearly dead-for-good body if I convert the oxygen out of such a catalyst as whiskey."

But apparently she wasn't really hallucinating, as her sister now wore the biggest grin as she continued with a promise not to let any pony drink the alchemical reagents thus brought. "One last thing, dear God King. Do you know my name? I still don't."

The princess sighed deeply, closing her eyes and drooping her head ever so slightly. A stray breeze shifted her unearthly mane to Celestia's left side as she spoke to the small mauve filly. "You warned me that the mouth you were using, was mangling it horribly. I tried to learn your name but the look in your eyes said I wasn't getting it right. I don't know if that is my mistake or yours, Nadsippley."

Rarity saw the princess' ears shift forward. Slowly, inexorably. Quickly Rarity shifted her eyes to what should have been Sweetie Belle. Nothing. No smile, no frown, no tipped head. All her baby sister said was "I'm sorry, that isn't it. But thank you for your help."

The princess nodded, bid them all good night. Then turned and launched herself into the air, giant wings unfurled and glowing as she slowly flapped them. Her speed so disproportionate to her effort compared to the pegasi she was used to watching.

Twilight, now her purple coat barely identifiable without the princess' ambient glow to add to the moonlight, invited everyone back to her library. "We'll try again to get some sleep. Rarity will you please bring Sweetie Belle who might wake up, to bed with you? She'll be very confused I think but Stack is right. If the symbiont and host don't either of them sleep, then the pair will be horribly sleep deprived, nonfunctional, eventually getting really sick." Twilight yawned. "I feel awfully nonfunctional already."

After a touching scene in which Sweetie Belle, the real one, woke up and clung tightly to her sister's neck, Twilight heard Rarity try to explain why she couldn't remember what happened, and eventually Sweetie Belle calmed down enough to fall asleep wrapped up in Rarity's hooves. She stayed asleep this time, and eventually Rarity's deep breathing could be heard.

Twilight had a harder time getting to sleep and eventually whispered to Owllicious to bring her some mint tea. Something had tried to eat her junior assistant but he could still fly albeit noisily for an owl. The flapping, three trips in all to bring tea leaves, a cup, and boiling water in a very small bucket seemed not to wake Rarity or Stack. Nad. Whatever the thing in Sweetie Belle was named.

The tea was good; it let her organize her thoughts. But it didn't help her sleep. Fatigue won out anyway and she awoke after the sun was well up to the sound of pegasus wings.

Twilight leapt out of bed and ran to the window, hoping to see the still missing Rainbow Dash. She saw instead, down on the path and well away from the library, a bright yellow

pegasus, and two gleaming white, armored pegasi. Fluttershy looked up at the squeaking window and called a greeting that could barely be heard at this distance.

A quick glance showed the fashion pair still asleep, so Twilight opted not to call in return though she knew she could muster the volume to be heard. She waved instead and pulled the window closed in a measured fashion so as not to squeak again, and then cantered as quietly as she could to the front door.

Spike had already let them in at the first knock from the royal guard. "Ordinarily I'm the careful type but Twilight says the monsters don't bother knocking. So if I could keep you out I don't need to try." Dragon logic aside Twilight offered a quick hug to her yellow friend. In these dark times you never knew if your parting with a friend was your last, until you saw them again.

Her voice barely above a whisper Fluttershy gave Twilight a report on Rainbow Dash. Namely, there was nothing to report. "I've covered ground as quick as I could but I'm not like Dash. Anyway Big Mac has made arrangements for Granny Smith's funeral and asked if I thought it was too soon to call Applejack gone but it is, isn't it? She's still in hiding or fighting her way back or... Oh Twilight do you think they're OK?"

Twilight momentarily ignored her honored guests who seemed to accept they were second fiddle to close friendships. "I don't know but I want to warn you of something you won't like. There's a problem with Sweetie Belle, but it's not as big as you might think. That's why these gentlecolts are here in fact."

Fluttershy blushed suddenly, glancing askance at the guards to either side of her, then stopped her hover-flight and dropped her head to look up at Twilight silently.

The guard on Twilight's left, who had a jingle in his saddlebags, took this opportunity to speak up. "Is Sweetie Belle the name of the filly we're to assist, then? We received rather cryptic instructions but there's. Well. Whiskey, and a hundred and fifty bits, and sidewalk chalk."

Twilight tried to smile. Friendliness started with the mare in the mirror, she reminded herself. "Yes but they're both asleep, as is Rarity who's had sort of a hard two days. I'm sure they'll be down soon but have you three haven't had breakfast yet I can start some oatmeal cooking. Spike? Water for oatmeal please."

As the baby dragon ran off to the kitchen, Fluttershy who had not yet raised her head, looked pleadingly to Twilight. One big breath, but no words. Another try, and she spoke. "Who? Who is with Rarity, Twilight?"

That made Twilight drop her head as low as Fluttershy's. "You remember that ... uh, friendly monster thing? That used claws instead of a horn to cast spells?"

Fluttershy squinted her eyes tightly shut as she responded. "Jack something. The one that ate rabbits and said he couldn't eat anything else." Now her eyes were open, and she raised her head and shook the pink forelock away from her eyes. Steel lined her face as she spoke, now. "I used to feel mad about the rabbits. Really mad but I heard that the other monsters, sergal Jack called them, were eating ponies. Not even killing them just eating ponies and I thought maybe Jack was doing us a kindness. A small kindness to be sure but he would never eat any of us and I don't even think he would eat a pony he never met." Here her voice dropped almost out of audible range. "Although I'm not as sure of that." Twilight saw her friend's normal, worried face come back. "Is Jack up there then? With Sweetie Belle?"

But Twilight couldn't explain because neurons had fired in order and it all made sense now. Not Stack, not Nad, but "Jack! Jack Something! Yes he's" and now her volume came back down as she realized the rest of the story made no sense. "Jack died, fighting on Apple Acres. Only instead of dying he grabbed on to Sweetie Belle who Celestia only knows why she was there. So Sweetie Belle is Jack and that means she won't need rabbits, just oatmeal today."

At that, there was a clop-clopping of hooves, small and large as Sweetie Belle and Rarity came down. Rarity called a greeting to the guards first, and Twilight saw the distress on her face as they said their good mornings to each other.

Sweetie Belle said, before she had finished descending the stairs, "Jack. Chipple. Thank you very, very much Twilight for another important memory. I'm Jack Chipple." Sweetie Belle approached the guards then, though she stole several quick glances at the yellow pony, no recognition but perhaps a look of frustration. The guard she approached had the whiskey in his packs, and hesitantly asked if the little miss needed it now.

"No, thank you. We need a body first. To which I should add." Here she turned smartly to Twilight and spoke with that accent that unnerved the three mares, Fluttershy most of all because she had never heard this before. Jack's voice had been a bed of gravel shaken by rock tumbler; never easy to understand. But Sweetie Belle would surely grow up to be a singer, or some destiny that would be made better by that clear voice. "Twilight, if we find nothing and you grow impatient of a form, I should say there is a way out. I can take you. You're a strong unicorn, and I could move on far more easily than if I, say, took one of these guards." Here she, Jack, whatever it was, finally noticed the guards' wings and stared briefly before returning to Twilight. "Just as Sweetie Belle will awake, you would fall into a coma and wake when I had a proper body. Keep this in mind and now." She turned to Fluttershy.

"What are you?" No malice, no accusation. Just the confusion of an amnesiac foreigner.

Twilight watched the yellow ears go round and around as Fluttershy searched for a response. "Don't you remember me? I was the one that called you a monster over the rabbits. I'm Fluttershy."

And now it was Sweetie Belle whose ears rotated. "I'm sorry I don't remember and that name doesn't help. But what is right on the tip of my brain's tongue is what you are. Do they call you a pony, miss Fluttershy?"

She muttered an affirmative but it was Rarity now, who spoke up. "Little ... well, maybe Jack isn't little anything but you know the word unicorn – you just used it. Unicorns are ponies; and pegasi, a pegasus being what each of these three ponies are, are flying ponies."

Twilight pointed a question at the back of the still-staring filly's head. "Is it Jack that has amnesia, or Sweetie Belle?"

At that the filly turned her head, frustration momentarily forgotten. "I don't know, Twilight Sparkle. If I remembered it all I might know, but I've forgotten, so I don't." but the little filly turned resolutely, the steps measured like rolling of a wagon wheel being pulled by a working pony. Facing the guards now, she spoke to both of them, with a gentle if unflinching voice. "I needs must eat, and I suspect you're invited though it's not my house to say. Then we can be off; I have a notion of an idea but no more. Where I battled last, there should be dead of the enemy, and perhaps not all of them were consumed by hungry living enemies. There is the body most easily found that will need the use of your ingredients." Turning to trudge into the kitchen she spoke over her shoulder with hardly a turn to her head. "A small body will need many small meals, and that is how I would like to use the money directed to my use."

Sweetie Belle disappeared behind the swinging double doors, having pushed them with her nose and not even trying to levitate them. Twilight tried to be as gracious as possible, offering breakfast to the guards, who instead dropped their packs and begged for pardon to shop for lunches, in case the trip to Sweet Apple acres was only the start of the trek, and not their true destination. "Wouldn't want the little miss to grow overtired. When she's just herself again she'll need the strength I'd wager."

Chapter 2

That Body is Yours, and I Want It Back. Now.

2.1 Spark Impulse: magic sensing pegasus royal guard

As the younger of the two guardsponies, Spark Impulse had always tried valiantly to put up with how his youth garnered him unwanted attention. Like being called sparky, which he hated, and being given dumb assignments because, really how could a small, young pegasus handle anything real?

Spark wasn't sure how real this assignment was either. Escort a very young filly who according to his assignment, was possessed by an aged spellcaster of unknown power to a dead body. His cutie mark of a shield, representing his loyalty to duty and the kingdom, was surrounded by seven stars. He was no unicorn but he knew magic. Could almost taste it in the air; knew what spells had just been unleashed, although he could never sense them ahead of time like the unicorns could.

But there was no magic here. Not that he could tell, and he didn't know what spells would call for chalk and whiskey anyway. The invaders didn't use magic either so far as ever he had heard.

Sprintpoint bought various edibles from the massive collection of cold hard cash the treasurer had thrown at them. They were supposed to be on sabbatical from the war but apparently the little filly wanted to find a dead body. Of an invader. Who could cast magic.

They returned, and the party started toward the farm of the unicorn's missing friend. Just the purple mare and the mauve filly, in fact; the offwhite unicorn seemed too upset to stay,

even for a little while.

His partner this tour, Sprintpoint, looked at the small light on the small unicorn as he too walked alongside them. Then he looked up at the clouds. "Fighting must have moved close, eh Sparky?" After this proclamation he leapt into the air and from a height of perhaps forty feet, performed a very small reconnaissance mission. Very small.

Once his hooves were on the ground again Spark Impluse spoke a response. "Looks clear tho, Pointy?" which at least earned a very harsh stare, his partner nearly giving himself whiplash from turning so quick to glare.

The cute one, a deeper purple and a mare worth asking out for coffee, seemed oblivious to the repartee. "I'd heard from the unicorn division that the small band of scouts had been driven back. So magically lacking or not Sweetie ... Jack" She stopped mid-sentence, and Spark looked away from the brush to see why.

The filly, whose name was Jack for some unfathomable crisis of parentage, had deep red sclera. The eyes were still green but it looked like some Christmas ornament had been shoved into her head.

The filly started with her voice. She obviously came from a horribly dysfunctional family to talk like that. It gave him the creeps honestly, and the sudden eye change didn't help him keep his skin from crawling out from under his saddlebags any.

"I will watch the undergrowth. I can see body heat now." They were all trotting, but Spark wanted to stash his suddenly cold hide under some bush until this thing went away. Duty called however, and he just kept pace. At least that motherly type of yellow pony had stayed back with the dragon. She would probably be retching with fear about now, or so he thought to himself.

Sprintpoint didn't seem fazed in the slightest. "Sparky did you catch that spell with that nose of yours?" his blue eyes never left the creepy mauve filly. The mare hadn't exactly straightened her neck either.

"No Pointy. No spell. None." But he tested the air again. There was a small levitation spell, and illumination spell, well ahead of them. Somewhere in the orchard. Probably farm workers he guessed. Nothing from the grown or ungrown fillies between them. Spark Impulse could think of no reason for the eye-change.

Fortunately the filly didn't say anything about her vision showing her anything in the bushes. Didn't say anything at all which was fine with him. They arrived at the barn, and found no bodies. Blood, torn wood, and other signs of recent struggle. The mare's horn

glowed. It was a form of searching spell but didn't taste right for looking for inanimate things.

Twilight Sparkle explained to the group "I can't find any bidepals by magic and I think I can reach 80 meters with that spell." She looked around for the filly.

The little one was making a quick once around, like she was the scout. "I see them but they are at least a quarter mile off. Four, I think. That means they've eaten their own unless something changed their mind." She nosed in a direction. Then blinked.

Her white sclera back, she excused herself and went into the barn. Spark could smell small location spells, and a few levitation spells. He obediently took up guard position to one side of the door. "Creepy as hay." Logic notwithstanding of that concept Sprintpoint took up the other side of the door. He didn't want to go in either though he didn't look as rattled as Spark felt.

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation. Too bad though all the whiskey is for her spell. You know?"

Normally any reference to liquor would catch his attention. But in about the direction the creepy filly had pointed to, he smelled a small teleport spell. Bringing a sphere of ponies to a MUCH closer distance. "Miss Twilight? You should hide. I think it's just farmworkers but if it's not you better not be in mêlée range."

The purple mare put a shield spell on herself as Sprint, not having heard this before since it had just happened, quickly drew a shortsword from his saddle bag. Spark drew his own, and smelled another spell from in front of them.

Then they exited the orchard. Seemingly coming from thin air there were no fewer than nine of the monstrous things. Like some unwanted mixup between an angry griffin and an ugly diamond dog. Pointy faces and tall ears erect they strode slowly, but not any air of hesitation in their movements. The lead started growling at them. Most, he'd learned, couldn't speak anything anypony knew.

But he could spell. A rock floated up to his waiting claws. Spark could feel cold sweat dripping down his neck already. This would be his last battle. Twilight was hiding in the barn hopefully with that filly. Poor little girl would hopefully never know why she died.

From within the barn came a loud barking. Light, airy like a summer breeze but the tones themselves were harsh like razorwire through a colt's throat. The lead griffondog stopped, its tail swishing quickly, then stilled. Three behind him drew their crude stone axes. At least they didn't have enough double-swords to equip their whole army. Most of the pegasi losses

had been to double swords thrown like oversized boomerangs as these monsters were crazy-strong and simply too stupid to feel pain.

The leader barked back, and it was Sprintpoint who figured it out first. "That thing inside the filly can speak their language!" And this time when an answer came, he could tell that was indeed what he'd heard. The creepy filly was giving them orders or something. She was coming out now, standing in the doorway. No magic yet but her horn was glowing, a spell readied. Spark wouldn't know until it was cast but had a few hopes. Mostly he hoped she would go back inside and wait.

No luck. Standing as tall as her small form allowed she called in Ponish. "Who will stand up to me? I take your form, your tongue, and your weapons." She reared up, and dropped. Nothing fancy and no magic he could smell. The horn was still readied but the axes fell apart. Not that they were that unmenacing with bare claws and teeth. But how?

The weaponless bipeds mumbled, and their leader tipped his head, just enough to acknowledge but not enough to lose two-eyed distance vision of his next snack. More words in their tongue, and now the filly reared high, staring at the sky. When her hooves clashed with the soil beneath, a lightning bolt came of of those thin, forgotten clouds above them all. A big bolt, and by all rights it should have knocked them all flying.

But the invaders just dropped, held their ground. One still upright, solid black, and smoking. As dead as if he'd been turned to stone. As the invaders tensed to run at them, she cast a levitation spell. Nothing more, just some sandy parts of the soil. Spark could smell that each grain of sand was held in a separate spell. One by one the spells were forgotten, and at that instant one of the attackers lost his head.

The whole head. Blown off faster and farther than if they'd been kicked by the heaviest, strongest soldier who had a running start and solid-plate shoes. This was not magic of the pony kind.

But they were too ... something, to slow down. Three left, and the filly called "Twilight Sparkle pick the lead one up! He can cast I want him!"

The shield spell dropped, he could tell. Now a big levitation spell as the leader was helplessly held in the air. He screamed and thrashed while the filly charged. All Spark Impulse could shout in consternation was "What the HAY?!?" but she was past, running to her slow death at their claws.

The guards ran after her, but it turned out they weren't needed after all. Now three left, and as the creepy filly stared at each one, their nose oozed blood, and they dropped, never to move again.

Whatever non-pony magic the filly wielded, it had winded her something fierce. She looked now like she was going to pass out, and the casting creature ... was throwing small fireballs now, and while the mare was shaking him to keep his aim off this wouldn't last for long. Sword in mouth he charged but the first slash hit almost hurtlessly across it's elbow.

Something knocked him off his hooves completely. The filly was screaming "No! You fool!" but Spark couldn't hear as he impacted the barn, knocking the wind out of him. He had just enough presence of mind to deploy his wings so he didn't land on his own blade, which was somewhere below him. He didn't have presence of mind to adapt to the extra weight in his packs which he'd never had a chance to drop, however. He landed practically on his head, and knew no more for some time to come.

2.2 Twilight, mid-then-post battle

Twilight Sparkle was getting worried. She had enough magical energy in her to hold this thing aloft for another ten minutes if there was need but this was in effect an evil unicorn, and shaking it to keep it off balance was not going to last forever. Already he'd thought of lobbing a few offensive spells to (fortunately) little effect though AJ would have been terrified of a forest fire just here.

Sweetie Belle violently protected her prize, hopefully not injuring the brash young guard but Spark Impulse wasn't getting up, either.

About the time the impetuous guard pony landed with a thump, there was a blast of the most powerful magic ... it seemed to stop the spell caster's magic, a nullification spell, but did not cause her own levitation to falter.

Cautiously she hazarded a glance, and found a formation of four unicorns. White, and in guard armor, but every one had orange eyes.

Blood orange. Feydaykin; known as death-ponies.

Still panting, no longer standing, she heard Sweetie Belle try to greet them. "It's safe, your majesty as that one above me is the last that will walk." Majesty? Twilight looked again but saw only the four guardsponies who looked ready to dish out the death of their namesake. But no others.

The other guard, who had figured out what was going on, sheathed his blade and announced to apparently no one in particular, "I concur your highness there is only the one opponent left in the air, just there.

The feydaykin all looked very briefly at each other, the one in the front right nodded with just an ear tip, and all four cast a spell. There had been an invisibility spell and no one less than the princess herself was in the center!

Twilight tried desperately to bow but decided concentrating on holding the prisoner aloft was more pressing at the moment. Thus it was not until Spike came running to her she realized that Spike and Rarity were inside the invisibility spell too.

Rarity ran to her little sister, who huffed and puffed a warning of sorts. "It's not done, dear Rarity. I'm not your sister." And standing, she re-cast her holding spell on the prisoner but it wasn't to keep him from flailing. A little confused Twilight watched as suddenly the thing's tail began to flail like a swarm of bees, his arms struggling aimlessly for any purchase, his whole manner losing any kind of focus.

Also, he stopped shouting obscenities in his foreign language.

Presently Jack/Sweetie Belle asked Twilight how much longer she could hold this one. But it was Rarity that, having swept up her sister's body in a tight embrace regardless of the occupant, demanded the right to help.

"It'll get a bit ugly. You just need to hold him so he can't grab anything. And that's it." Little Jack was concentrating, burning through the small filly's magical supply with whatever was holding the sergal silent.

Seemingly amused at the choice of violence, Princess Celestia asked "And, you're going to just strangle this one to death? That's." a pause as she searched for a word. "Cruel, don't you think?"

Jack had to mumble, losing physical as well as magical energy as this progressed. "Need him very dead, need the body very good. Rarity? Into the barn with him but if you can hold him afloat you needn't look. Probably shouldn't."

Looking very uncomfortable, she nevertheless positioned herself beside the still unconscious pegasus, and levitated the sergal behind her, into the barn somewhere. Sweetie Belle followed quietly, still hanging on to the skin, preventing any air flow from happening.

The spell transferred, Twilight's emotions caught up with her and she ran to her teacher heedless of the deathponies that might misconstrue her actions and burn her in an instant. Too much violence, too close to home. Just too much.

The feydaykin must have known this mare had permission to approach the royal presence, even on an unsecured battle scene. Teacher and student embraced, and Celestia apologized for putting Twilight through such experiences. "It doesn't even help that they started

it, does it? Young ponies like you aren't supposed to know about death. But Nadsipply can be a great power to stem the tide and I guess you just get to go along."

Twilight just cried, and talked about her missing friends, and never noticed the feydaykin started to look ever so slightly nervous.

There was a loud thump inside the barn, and Twilight looked up to see Rarity listening to the barn, then calling out to ask who had the chalk, and could they bring it to her baby sister?

Twilight followed her teacher, who was following the now recovered guard pegasus and everyone else, inside the barn where Sweetie Belle was levitating a piece of chalk, drawing a perfect circle around the unmoving sergal. When she set the chalk down, her horn was still glowing. She, Jack, must have been maintaining the airlock spell, just to be extra careful.

"Your highness Princess Celestia, I have regained the greater majority of my memories. I am named Jack Chipple, and I can soon cast the needed magic to transfer myself into this about to become deceased Sergal caster." Sweetie Belle didn't bow, but at least she seemed appropriately reverent in tone. "And Rarity did you bring the other things on my list?"

The well groomed unicorn nodded grimly, and without ever letting her eyes fall on the body in the center of that circle pulled from her bag various herbs, vegetables, and spices, placing them all just inside the circle. Twilight heard disgust color the fashion designer's voice. "Are you planning on cooking a stew for the enemy? Honestly I just don't get this." But there was a tear in her eye when she looked at what was supposed to be her baby sister.

Royal presence apparently forgotten, Sweetie Belle just started walking carefully around her chalk circle. After one full pass she started chanting. Or at least Twilight thought that's what she was hearing but it sounded more like if Fluttershy's poison-joke deep voice was occupied in tuneless humming. On the third pass, she began to raise her head, high up then drop it down, always maintaining the same pace. Up for two strides, down for either two or three strides, then back up, and down. Then the ingredients all seemed to turn to steam, or more nearly they grew an unearthly mane like the regents had – flowing, opaque, almost living as they grew and swirled, converging on the dead sergal.

A fourth pass, and now Sweetie Belle stopped. She faced the sergal, and rising high on her hind legs she shouted her deep, tuneless humming. The barn thrummed with the power of her voice and the sergal began to levitate although Twilight couldn't see any glow of pony magic.

She dropped down, and seemed to be injured by the impact of hooves on dirt. She walked stiffly now, uncoordinated. At the center she touched her horn, now glowing brightly, to the belly of the intended host.

Several things happened at once, and it would be some time later before Twilight could piece them all together. The wisps of living ingredients leapt into the host, the former soldier. Sweetie Belle collapsed, and the sergal fell on top of her. Also, it went dark. As if this spell sucked down not just the mane of the carrots and parsley, but the light itself.

There was a scream, and the light came back to reveal a sergal, struggling to rise, and a small, terrified young filly striving for all her worth to free herself from the considerable bulk holding her down.

The princess whispered something Twilight didn't catch to a nearby body guard, who leapt forward to levitate the sergal. Sweetie Belle cried out for Rarity, who replied with an "Over here!" and Twilight didn't follow that any farther.

The sergal was dropped, and the feydaykin crowded to the circle's edge, horns glowing as their spells were readied. The Princes called out to him, "If you can say your name, I'll be happy to accept that as my answer."

The Sergal rose up, elbows straight now but legs tangled and ignored. Drawing in a ragged breath he tried to bring his head up, looking the Princess in the eye before letting his head drop again. One more ragged breath and he spoke, although aimed at the floor in that gravel voice that could barely enunciate, that Twilight had heard some time before. "Princess Celestia, I." And here he brought his right hand to touch claw to eyebrow in a mock salute. Several short breaths later and he continued "Am out of breath, milady." And promptly collapsed into a heap, flat and breathing loudly.

The lead feydaykin, now middle-right, said over his shoulder "It was at least Ponish, your highness."

The princess sighed, and replied "Best to wait a time. We need to be correct at this delicate junction."

When the sergal's claws glowed with pony magic Twilight almost blasted him but she would have needed to move, to get around the feydaykin. Who were unmoving, their same spells still readied. She decided to let them take the first blow.

The unearthly mane grew again from the two bottles of liquor which, oddly, did not seem to be going down in volume but they seemed more watered down, less amber in color now. The mane again sucked quickly into the sergal, but no further effect was seen.

And the sergal blinked repeatedly, and breathed carefully, fully. And just as deliberately he sat up, tried to sit cross legged but seemed angry at his tail's interference. Turning now to the alicorn he asked "I'm sorry milady. What was your question?" She graciously repeated

herself and the fatigued sergal tried to bow with just his head. "I am known as Jack Chipple, milady." Or possibly he said Nadsipply. Smiling, he revealed sharp, blood stained teeth.

Or maybe he was just clearing his throat. A part of Twilight could never really be convinced she wasn't hallucinating the words. It still sounded like Stack Pimple to her, personally. If a rock crushing machine could talk, that is.

But the feydaykin stood down, and the princess explained the reason for her personal travel into such dangerous territory. "There's a permanent door nearby. Like a teleportation spell but lets anypony walk through. Do you understand? I can make these but they're not so solid feeling, and I can't for the life of me see where the other end of the door is. I want you to help me close it."

Jack nodded. "I will help." He stood up, and looked like he was going to fall again. "But I may wish to wait a time. My pardon for incongruity, but these sergal can only digest fresh meat. May I steal one of the fallen?"

Sweetie Belle, bless her two-toned mane, speaking now with her customary speech patterns, blurted out "You're going to cannibalize your own people?"

The grin widened as he turned to his former body and carrier, who wrapped up in her big sisters hooves. "You would have me eat fallen ponies to avoid that conundrum? I am too weak to hunt for simple animals."

Celestia asked for tactical advice of her body guards with the word "Well?" The feydaykin looked briefly to the pegasi, who both shrugged. The feydaykin passed that shrug up the line until Celestia had her answer. "Yes, but please consider your audience. Namely, that you find the distance so as not to have one."

Now Jack's mouth hung open in a loll, the biggest grin he could hold as his tongue, dog-like, rolled and lolled in silent laughter. He let himself out, stumbling as he went, and Twilight shifted her focus to the other unicorns to make sure they were as OK as they could be.

Chapter 3

The Secret Word is: RUN!

He ran. Swift as a wolf, grasses and low tree limbs brushed his feathered haunches, his tail helping him make sharp turns as he dodged animal dens, his thick hair relaying the air currents as his nose told him of their portent.

The door was perhaps a way for the small armies to travel back home for supplies, or maybe the sergal would only pass through to other, more meat filled lands. There were ponies, and the ponies put up a fight but between the taboo breaking pegasi and the general lack of population density, it was not, he didn't believe, ideal hunting grounds for them.

But they hunted here, and now he hunted them under thickening clouds and thicker forest canopies. Despite the brush of air, the whoosh of underbrush, he could hear their camp. Forty strong; they might not have scouts this far out. Or those unfortunate nine might have been the brash cadre of scouts for this half of their encampment. That would likely put them at forty one precisely and there was a bigger army farther along.

He ran swiftly to the outskirts, and walked through the cages.

3.1 Rainbow Dash: why did all early 'fics contain this trope?

3.1.1 -I'm getting tired of regluing them.

Rainbow Dash's hooves were cracked from striking at the cage. The wires were stronger than steel as near as she could tell since as thin as they were, she should have at least been able to bend them when she stood on one edge and bucked her other end, putting all her weight on one tiny wire.

Instead she had bruised her hooves, and she'd seen a desperate pony try to run through the wire and lost his front leg entirely. The smell of blood seemed to trigger a feeding frenzy in her captors as if they were land sharks of some form.

And not a one of them spoke Ponish! She kicked again with a back hoof out of pure frustration, immediately regretting it. She'd been trying this for at least two days though her memory of it was starting to get hazy.

From across the aisle came a tired out voice. "Sugar stop yer strugglin' it ain't worked in all this time and I want to sleep a spell. Before they's eat me, I mean." An orange mare limped out of her makeshift bedroll, her bedraggled tail missing it's scrunchie. She walked to her watering troff and sipped on the slime the captors put there.

"I'm not gonna BE eaten Applejack. The next time they open my cage to feed me. Well I assume if they're keeping us for amusement they'll feed us and then I'll" Her voice trailed off, as she instinctively flapped her wings, and remembered for the thousandth time she was no longer the fastest flier in Equestria. Or any flier at all, no offense towards her friend the Earth pony.

Applejack sighed and wished her friend the best of luck with that course of action, then winced as she tried to turn around to tuck back into the forgotten pile of fabrics that had been dumped in her cage. There was enough to cover most of the mare but it looked to Dash like a crime-scene blanket to cover the body before the coroner could OK it's removal.

But no time for vain imaginings now as she needed a real plan. There was a guard coming her way now. Gray hairs from the waist up, every last one faded from black roots to white tips, leaving it unclear whether to call it dark, or light gray. The feathers were a pale blue aquamarine and she couldn't see how much any of it darkened on his back. Or her, they didn't seem to look much different to Rainbow Dash.

His white face was agitatedly casting about for something to look at. Something distant, not in this aisle of diversionaries. But he had come from the center of the camp and if he kept going at his brisk pace he'd just be out of camp, nothing to look at or kill or anything for a long ways. Even the wild animals of the forest shunned this crowd, and no wonder considering what they did here.

Dash tried to gauge her muscle readiness. How hard could she kick, how high? She'd have to buck something fierce to reach his 'nads but there couldn't be any other way. He was alone, no worries about a repeat of last night's party. Her legs were still sore from the forced dancing but she hadn't lost a hoof like Applejack. Not yet.

The monster stopped, to tower over her. Excellent! Now to guess if he wanted fear or bravado. Subtlety was not her strong suit so she just blurted out "Make a painting out of your own blood and excrement you malformed griffin." but said it with as much reverence as she could muster. They didn't have a clue what she said anyway so what did it matter?

It's facial expression was unchanged, but it replied with that scratchy voice they all had. "You are blue."

Smooth move, ex-lax she thought to herself. "Thank you captain obvious. Or is it lieutenant? You don't wear any insignia so I can't tell. Were you going to feed your exotic dancers or am I supposed to eat my own hooves here?" Too late she thought of Applejack, and realized how wrong a suggestion that was.

"You should know that is not un-asked for, of prisoners. To extend their life by consuming their own body for the crowd." He lifted those flat, angular ears up off his skull and pointed his nose to one side, not quite to the center of camp. "Tonight they are with the diamond dogs, poor things." Looking back at her battered form he started to say "You should be a pegasus" Then saw her back. The stumps where here beautiful wings no longer sat.

He frowned. She had never seen pity or compassion or anything like it but this one frowned before speaking again. "That is what I saw. That is why you still live, Rainbow Dash. You amuse their leader."

There was a rapid wrinkling of fabrics across the aisle as Applejack leapt up as well as she was able. "How in the HAY do you know her name? Who are you mister fancy pants?"

A grin. Slightly malicious Dash thought; this was the monster she was expected. Maybe he just thought pants were funny. But his words were not filled with malice. "Jack Chipple. I was at your farm two days ago. I wore a shorter form, with pale orange feathers and deep blue fur." Here the thing ... she couldn't make out the name, exactly. Stack? Stack Simple looked back at her injured back with pity.

It made planning to kill him a lot harder. "Applejack you know this creep?"

She about dropped to her belly before replying. "I know the creep he described. Never met this one before. Nad, I think that one's name is. Good hearted fellow if a little strange." She tried to make eye contact but he was still looking at Dash. Purple eyes looked deep into yellow eyes as the orange mare asked "Can you spring us outta here? Cain't offer ya much but I guess we got learned how to do a strip tease, whatever'n hay that is."

Having not yet looked away, Stack spoke. "Your wings are yet on the fetish wall of the chief, or general or whatever she is. I have now the magic to reattach them but I need a few

things, time and your wings primarily."

He straightened now, turning to Applejack, his tail swishing slowly as he spoke again. "I will take you, but you must needs wait. At sundown, or if I am truly lucky, earlier." His claws glowed a pale white, not unlike the purple of Twilight's magic usage. Dash had never heard of one of these things casting, let alone with claws instead of a horn.

Their water dishes overflowed, fresh water pushing most of the slime out, getting everything ... well, slimy. But there was water now. Again he looked at Rainbow Dash, and said "Wait and live. If your captors come, be what they want, and live. Rainbow Dash, I want to return your wings. But it will not be as soon as you wish. Wait and trust that I mean well. Do nothing until I return."

I want to return your wings The words reverberated in her tiny pony skull like the sunlight when Celestia was freed from Nightmare Moon's curse. She could be the fastest flier in Equestria again.

There was a flash of blue and gray, and too late to call out she realized he was running the wrong way. Out of camp, not back the way he came. She tried to call out but realized she was too weak.

Applejack had just finished slurping down the drinkable water when she called to her friend. "Ah said he's good folk. Might strange in the head but you can see what his brothers is like. Reckon I'd be a right mess if I had them for my cousins at picnic time." She pointed to the center of camp with her head.

Feeling defeated she sipped carefully at the less-slimy trough, then curled up for a nap. Naps, she could do. *I want to return your wings* She slept in fits & starts, though.

And they never did feed her.

It was a long time of napping. She could hear the squeals of diamond dogs, the raucous laughter of the captors. She tried not to think of what it meant. About sundown a pack of blue furred wolves with sky blue feathers wandered down their aisle, staggering like they were drunk. They pointed, and they shook each other, but they didn't take the prisoners out of their cages.

Dash nearly succumbed to dry heaves when she realized their normally pale off-white faces were red, turning brown from a messy meal recently eaten. Unbidden, images came to her of the three other ponies already on this aisle when AJ and herself were brought here. There had been what for those ponies was a last party of debauchery and inappropriateness. It had devolved into eating the ponies out, and not in a sexual way.

Wait, and live. I want to return your wings

Steeling herself, she said silently that if Nightmare Moon could bide her time a thousand years, Rainbow Dash would be no weaker. She would bide a thousand seconds.

Of course, Nightmare Moon was sort of destroyed to make way for Luna, but that didn't seem very relevant right now.

Either the three were due back, or just got bored, but they wandered outside the camp ... about twenty feet further, and took a leak right in the middle of the pathway. Definitely drunk, as they were comparing streams and distances as near as she could make out.

Applejack grunted, and looked away. "Buncha low life cretins with too much cider in 'em. Don't even look 'em in the eye sugar they don't want nothing but to cause trouble."

Dash thought to herself that pretty much described the whole camp but once these three finished they meandered back in to camp without seeing the ponies any further.

About two minutes passed, and just as she was thinking the moon was started to seem a mite late, another of the sergals strode confidently down the aisle. He was carrying a flat, blue bundle and now had a belt, with what for them was a shortsword, flopping loose from his left hip.

He held his hand up, and the claws glowed with a sickly light. The two cages fell open, and he laid the bundle on the ground where Dash could examine it. Tied together were her wings, looking a little the worse for wear. In fact they were already missing enough feathers she expected that had they been attached at that very second she would not fly again for two or three weeks, perhaps more.

Tears in her eyes she suddenly thought maybe it was another of their cruel jokes. She looked into those yellow eyes as hard as she could, and asked "You know I can't just grab one in each hoof and flap them, right? You're going to attach them to the stupid stumps these idiots made of the fastest"

She couldn't finish. Tears overwhelmed her, and Applejack jumped and hobbled to bury her face in Dash's mane, and they cried together.

"Rainbow Dash, I have the magic to reattach them. You will recover and fly, but it will not be here, and I will not tell you it will be tonight. I will not joke about your wings, Rainbow Dash."

It was kind of hard to understand him through the combined sobbing of two abused mares but she was pretty sure he said he wasn't joking about the wings part. Applejack leaned

up enough to whisper hoarsely through Dash's bright mane "Did y'all find a spare hoof lyin' around? Don't rightly have to be orange tho that'd make it mine. Sorta missing one these past days."

The tall misborn griffin leaned over, and examined Applejack's left hind, and where it ended a few inches too early. Sitting back to a squatting position he sighed. "I can repair this in time. But for sure will not walk normally for months, or perhaps a year."

Now his head snapped towards the center of town. The light was failing but she could swear his eyes turned black, just for a few blinks. He held up his right paw, hand, whatever, and as the claws glowed, he grabbed at the air towards camp. There was a distant thump, just out of sight from where he had pointed.

Turning again to the ponies he said "Rainbow Dash, I must ask an uncomfortable thing. Will you do this for me?"

It's possible he was going to specify in a timely manner what the request was but having no one else to unload on, she lost it. Trying to keep her voice down she screamed in a whisper, "Uncomfortable is watching a pony be eaten alive. Uncomfortable is having your defining bodily feature ripped off and made into a macabre bedroom accessory. I've had it up to my ears in uncomfortable and I'd lose my lunch over the un-comfort I've had if only some lame misborn would give me a **freaking lunch** to lose. What in the *hay* are you going to ask **NOW** that qualifies for uncomfortable after watching them stick a lit cigarette into applejack's mouth and making her extinguish it on her own, still wet hoof like it was a fancy ashtray?"

Unperturbed at her outburst, his claws again glowed, and she felt Applejack give a start as the spell grabbed hold of her. Not a full levitation spell but he hefted the orange mare over his narrow shoulders, and seemed in control of his baggage. "I would ask you, Rainbow Dash, to carry your wings to Ponyville, where I may seek the spells to reattach them. Can you canter at full speed for an hour? That we may camp out of smell this night."

Oh. Sheepishly, she picked up the flat, blue parcel in her mouth. Not uncomfortable so much as awkward to carry. And embarrassing as all get out but bearable after a fashion. His words still echoed like an avalanche, cascading through her thoughts. *I want to return your wings* "Thay the wud." she said around her parcel.

Standing now, he spared a little extra magic to light the ground in front of him. Only a little ways, but she should be able to avoid tripping on what she saw appear in that light. "Then, Rainbow Dash. Run."

Chapter 4

A Moment's Respite

Twilight levitated the tea out to her esteemed guests. The CMCs had been reunited at the library since Fluttershy's place was still too close to the last known site of the largest invasion force, and Applejack's house needed to be rebuilt from scratch before it would be safe, liveable, or even a house.

Princess Luna, having taken her position as regent of the moon was once again nearly as tall as Celestia but had normal pupils, and her color was the comforting blue of a well light night sky. But her mane seemed made of stars, and her eyes ... were almost crying.

Celestia had gone back to direct the war effort and taken her feydaykin with her. Luna had placed spells at the barn to alert her if someone stepped into it, and they'd also left some pony-class hay, and a note. Jack would just have to go back out and hunt. Meanwhile, Twilight felt powerless to comfort the princess, who wanted all this violence to end.

Luna breathed deeply, let it out slowly as she looked down at the dainty cup of black tea placed before her, and the sugar cubes, and their utensils for a long moment before levitating a single cube into her tea, and she thanked Twilight for it. "You know, a small part of me wants to scream. To call down thunder and set fire to the whole forest to expose them." She lifted the steaming cup to her lips, sipped daintily. "Even poor Fluttershy shooing her small friends inland to reduce their risk. This has all been just horrible and I don't know how Celly does it. Court by day and war council by night."

Twilight had always sort of wondered if alicorns needed sleep, or only chose it for the pleasure, or perhaps to reduce concerns among the masses that they weren't equine. So perhaps she revealed some of her curiosity in the intensity of her gaze, ears perked and pointed at the sudden reference to her teacher.

Luna turned those midnight blue eyes to the smaller unicorn and explained "Not the

never-sleeping we can, well you know because we're alicorns but I guess not much is said about that. But just to keep going as if this was business as usual. I want to tear things apart, to sleep until winter wrap up ... several years hence. I want to." She sighed again, closing her eyes.

Twilight levitated her own cup of tea, wishing she'd had a longer nap, being no alicorn at all. She looked out the window, where Luna had been watching the edge of the Everfree forest and spoke comfortingly "We all feel like that your highness. I'm sorry you haven't had much chance before this to meet my friends, even as much as Celestia has known them. Wonderful bunch of mares and I hope we get through this."

The forgotten clouds drifted from the Everfree into the edge of Ponyville, not to be addressed by a weather patrol until at a much safer distance from the front. So the stars winked in but mostly out as the two concerned mares waited for word of their friends.

Luna put her tea down, stood upright and shook her whole body, hair and feathers drifting off her. She sat back down and still looking without hardly even blinking out that window, explained "When I was ... on the moon, I could spend time worrying, or planning. Some other things. But I got to where I shut out the memories of Celly and me, and how much I liked hearing the crickets, and the wind through the trees. Hurt so much to lose all that. I started trying to convince myself Equestria was the moon and I had always been alone on a dust covered wasteland called Equestria.

Twilight saw another tear form, and mentally searched what she knew of Fluttershy's somewhat crowded abode for where a tissue or hanky could be found. But Luna used her prehensile mane to wipe her eyes, and sniffled.

"I hope I'm not being too sappy or overbearing dearest Twilight but I know you and Celly are close and I need a friend too. If that can't be you and Celly knows you're just a talented unicorn, just ignore me, ok?" Now Luna looked away from the window for a moment of eye contact, and Twilight was going to say something encouraging for friend.

A window to their left squeaked, slid open, and a neon pink blob rapidly oozed through the window. Pinkie Pie apparently had been ease-dropping and wanted to quickly add her thoughts. But Twilight's first thought was *that window was awfully high for an Earth pony to just crawl though.*

"Hey! There's a thing they teach fillies about stuff being there when you can't see it. When you play peekabo you teach it. Haven't picked out the music yet but here's a poem about that concept I've been working on all week:

"So long since I've known: Seen, touched, smelled; all cold. what of these memories I own? Are you a lie, to myself I've sold

Forgotten only or vain delusion? I'd extinguish every star! to forget the pain from that illusion"

She still held her head in that neutral stance, implying she was reciting but she was silent now. Luna pointed her ears at the brightly colored party pony, and still no response came.

Twilight thought she knew the answer since the rhyme wasn't finished, but started to ask anyway. "Is that al"

Pinkie whipped her head towards the front door "Oh, hi! There you are!" And slid back out, closing and locking the window as she did so.

Luna chuckled and it was about that time they both looked out the window and saw forms rapidly approaching. A single sergal, carrying a very large load on his shoulders and a pony, running for all she was worth carrying an awkward looking sheaf of something in her mouth. Luna whipped the door open before Twilight could make any further questions.

And Spark Impulse and Sprintpoint, on either side of the door, jerked awake. "Eh?" was all Spark could say.

Rainbow Dash was panting and sweating like she'd single hoofedly dropped every leaf in the autumn race. The sergal's claws suddenly became dim, revealing that wasn't moonlight a moment ago but a magical aura. He dropped to his knees, and panting tried to speak.

"Would. One. Unicorn. Heft. This. I can't. Now."

Twilight, technically the only unicorn present, realized mid breathless tirade that was Applejack. Her head was up – she was alive! And before the more powerful pony could offer, Twilight levitated her friend of Jack's shoulders, and set her down as carefully as she could.

Applejack hobbled around to face her friend with an exhausted smile. "Thanks a heap Twi I caint begin to tell you. And I hate to add to the burden but ain't nopony eaten in forever. Ah'm so hungry I could eat a sergal! But Ah don't know what to suggest fer Stack here but maybe he cain eat somethin' besides rabbits?"

"Dirt, apparently." Luna expressed, noting the know unconscious sergal had faceplanted once his burden was removed. Mouth slightly open, he was even snoring, sort of. Princess Luna carefully levitated him over onto his back and the snoring stopped.

Next outburst was from Sprintpoint. "Dear sweet Celestia why are you **carrying** those?" Both guards stared open mouthed at Rainbow Dash, who was just now setting down the sheaf

of blue ... feathers. Twilight did a double take, and then triple took just to be sure the first two times weren't total misreads of the situation.

Twilight's heart was pounding and she could scarcely imagine the emotional pain the guards, pegasi both, must be going through. "Dash, I... I don't. I mean. I wouldn't know how at all." Turning around to Princess Luna she pled her friends case. "Luna, your majesty, can you ... You're stronger and better learned than me can you? Have any chance, I mean?"

Princess Luna had exited Fluttershy's cottage with pity in her face for the fallen, but the longer she looked at the two wings, tied together sitting on the ground in front of Rainbow Dash, the closer to blind rage her facial expression drifted. Even her wings floated aloft, shaking slightly before being firmly set again against the regent's sides. Finally she looked away, up to examine her moon. Hidden behind some clouds and currently only three quarters full it could still be found. Could still, Twilight thought, remind the princess not to lose control.

The princess looked back to Rainbow Dash, and spoke to Twilight. "Not well enough that she could fly. They would bend, and flap but I dare not say they'd be strong enough to fly." Extending her head to emphasize her sincerity, she spoke now to Dash. "I apologize on behalf of the alicorn race, that I am neither skilled nor strong enough to give you your wings back."

Still panting, still dripping with sweat, Rainbow Dash had held a neutral expression, reminding Twilight of a filly biding her time 'til the parents finished their little rant before letting her stay with a friend for the night. Or perhaps like a mare waiting for a simple filly to finish expressing how many colors she could count in her rainbow'd mane.

"S'okay, I think. He said he could do it. Said I should carry them because he'd reattach them." she pointed her muzzle at the furry bundle now starting to pant again as he woke. "And if he screws up to where I can't fly, well ... at least it's nothing on the alicorn race. So let him glue the suckers on."

And with that, Dash bowed briefly before meandering past the princess into Fluttershy's home, wings still on the ground, mute testimony to the level of cruelty common to the invading army.

4.1 Breakfast Arrangements

Fluttershy stopped back in long enough the next morning to eat breakfast, and thank Luna for fighting this horrible fight. Jack was asleep but had been up in the night and about cleared out her stash sunflowers but hadn't found anything else his bipedal body could safely consume.

Fluttershy said to pass along her thanks for not hunting on her property, and where some other nut types were in case he could eat those too.

Twilight had Owlicious carry a note to Spike explaining new developments, but left out the specifics of her friends injuries, in case they really were healed by the time her friends could all meet at once.

Twilight tiptoed past Dash's wings that had been brought in, then past the sleeping guards who were arranged so as to make a sudden assault assured of losing surprise as they tripped over the sleeping forms.

Jack was nearly three times as tall as Fluttershy, and would have to crawl in places to clear the things hanging from the ceiling. But he had done so without waking any one in his search for water.

Absently she noted that his mug was actually a large pitcher, but it seemed sized well for him. She tried to feel even a moment's pity as she watched him slurp from his mug. His face was so ill suited to civilized life that he spilled nearly a third of his drink onto his chest.

"Is your Luna still present? I wish to ask a question of your god-kings."

Again Twilight took a long moment to rethink what she just heard. God-king? "My what? The princess isn't in the house no." She tipped her head to the side, pointing her ears at the friendly monster. "What do you need? I have some simple answers since I'm Celestia's protege and study directly under her."

He rotated his bulk around to face her with his pale gray triangle of a face, yellow eyes finally moving to indicate the front door, to which he pointed with his 'mug' of water, still dripping.

He was nearly whispering "When I examined the spells on the barn, I found where their caster lay, but I also felt how that magic, well. It tried to intrude on my tracking spell. My own magic is not like yours but I can use yours too. But it was hampered by the moonlight. Not so much in this case but I will need freer flow to fulfill my promises.

"This morning I have stepped outside, and tried again to examine random things, and what spells that might be on it, and found the sunshine interfered with me again." He waved his mug to indicate Fluttershy's cottage. "I will need more height than that to heal your friends, but for strong spells, exposure to the realm of a god-king" he hefted his mug skyward. "may prevent me from finishing. So I need to perform this away from both sun, and moon. A cave, or perhaps a barn again, or perhaps there is scheduled a lull when they might not either of them look upon my work."

This made Twilight wonder about the other casters that still intended harm. She asked "Would shade be enough? We're not far from the forest they're hiding in." And as she spoke she felt a breeze, smelled the free range fungus and wild unkempt growth blow through the air from that forest. She knew it could get very dark under the Everfree canopy.

Pitcher now empty, and a small puddle at his feet he handed the mug to Twilight, who levitated it behind her, and watched as the griffin-dog excused himself, then ran off to find the nearest shady patch to perform experiments.

She went in to wake her friends, Applejack first. The orange mare tried to stretch before getting up, but a cramp in her injured leg made her cry out. "Tweren't a nightmare then. Kinda hoping, you know. How're you holding up sugarcube?" But she was too busy moaning from attempts to stand to hear any answer.

Rainbow dash was still out cold. Twilight walked around to the other side of the bed they were sharing, and shook her shoulder gently. "Dash? Jack wants to fulfill his promise this morning. So come get some breakfast."

Her brilliant violet eyes opened, focused, and found Twilight's eyes. One deep sigh, and the injured mare made some motions to get up.

A call to attention, 'ten-hup!' came from downstairs from one of the guards. In case the other didn't notice presumably. Thinking Luna was back Twilight ran down the stairs heedless of scurrying mice that had opted to stay, and found the guards at attention for none other than Celestia, who was carefully squeezing through the small doorway. "Princess! Good morning but who's holding court I thought you couldn't get away!"

Practically throwing herself at her mentor's legs she suddenly saw the horrible state of housekeeping and gasped for the faux pas. It was one thing when Luna stayed at a friend's house who explained there simply was no place to put things but when the ruler of Equestria and her own teacher arrived ... quickly she tried to levitate things into piles so it would look less crowded.

A chuckle came from above her. "Overzealous as always, Twilight. This house is a bit of a tight fit for one my height anyway so why don't I lower your stress level and invite you outside?"

Twilight agreed, and told Celestia about Jack needing to not be in open ground when he reattached Rainbow Dash's wings. A look of surprise crossed the royal visage, closely followed by a hint of terror. Finally settling on serenity and love she replied to Twilight with "Well that certainly makes my worst fears all come together, doesn't it?" Leaning down to hug her pupil

tight and added "Don't worry about it but thank you very much for telling me. I'm going to fling coherent light at that encampment so you'll likely have a grand battle tonight. Tell Jack to be as ready as he can. To rest once he's offered his help."

And with that she excused herself, and flew off with her small entourage. Four pegasi pulling her chariot, and four one-pony chariots around her each with blood-orange eyed guard-unicorns, those who had chosen service even if it meant they died: the fedaykin, or death commandos. This whole entourage, veritable army in itself, floated away.

"Well, if that don't beat all. Solar flare orbital bombardment, hay?" Applejack had meandered out, and was now watching the princess leave. Behind her, Rainbow Dash was carrying her wings, looking around presumably for their sergal rescuer.

"Where is that wingless excuse for a gryphon anyway?" But Twilight could see the movement. Running towards them was a single sergal, gray of many shades, pale blue feathers catching in the sunlight.

"I think your ride is here girls. Let's see what he can offer you." And with that, the three of them walked toward the approaching figure.

Chapter 5

Fight Missing-Wing Disease Like a Mare

She was ready for this. However it turned out, she would buck and kick these invaders to a flat mushy pulp whether she could fly or not. And if this Stack Simple couldn't return her wings, he could be the first to taste her hooves.

Rainbow Dash thought maybe she should get Big Mac to do some farrier work for her first, if it turned out she wouldn't need to save the weight that shoes represented. She also promised to take baths more often; the dust she was eating while carrying her wings was really starting to annoy her.

More than having to carry her wings, that is.

The blue and gray sergal waved the ponies forward, and explained "I have found cover not but a few minutes into the forest. Chalk will not write on the ground, so I will make a ring with pebbles. Please, come help me find and lay pebbles."

Weird guy, this Stack. Rainbow hadn't seen the chalk used before but heard Twilight say his magic needed 'components.' More time wasted but Dash was determined. She had napped in Hell, she would collect pretty pebbles for the wingless gryphon.

She noted the guards were not hovering. They were carrying almost nothing in their slim saddlebags so they must be trying not to show off their lack of injury in front of her. If she wasn't busy carrying a load in her mouth she would have told them it was no insult. She felt bad but that was no reason for *them* to walk.

She didn't know why it needed to be in the forest any more than why he needed pebbles. But a giant circle was made on ground that had been magically cleared of vegetation. The

forest canopy made shadows disappear; everything was in shadow already.

"Please, Rainbow Dash, set your wings down, and lay yourself inside the circle where those two branches will point to you." Stack indicated the cut limbs, at noon and three if it were a clock. She would be the thing connecting them, he explained.

As she complied, he whipped his head around and up, at the sun. Or where the sun should have been. He must be able to tell Celestia was starting the laser therapy. "Gotta hurry, huh? Survivors will want revenge on us soon. S'okay I want some of that myself." She said as she laid her belly to the ground to wait.

He focused on her, those yellow eyes boring a hole into her back, then softening as he began to walk around the circle, on foot on either side of the pebble line. She heard a noise that could have been distant chanting, or his belly growl at the nuts he ate, or maybe he was humming a tune. Dash didn't know, didn't care. *I WANT TO RETURN YOUR WINGS* This was it, then. The monster would prove his faithfulness, or his uselessness.

He held his left – paw? out, towards her back, and the right paw glowed with magic as he levitated her wings and carefully untied them. They floated over her back now, and her weather-patrol trained senses could feel the static charge. Find yourself in the wrong place now, and lightning would course through a pony's tiny body, in search of Earth.

"Rainbow Dash. How do your wings belong?" huh?

She glanced up at her limbs. "Well, not like that. See those feathers? The ones sticking out above my ears? They need to be above my tail." The wings rotated but in the wrong axis. Clearly something was taking all his concentration because it wasn't that hard to see. "No the part that attached to ME goes down. Twist to your left. Or right I don't care just don't attach them backwards." She looked more closely. "Which they are, now. See the one over my left shoulder? That's my right wing." They obediently changed position. Straight down, and she'd be a pegasus again.

"Rainbow Dash, I need you to do a thing. Straighten your wings. They must be attached straight on." The hay? Her wings were being levitated she couldn't ... oh.

Slightly annoyed at how often he called her by her full name when *hay you!* would've been fine, she commanded her shoulder muscles to lift, and told her wings, as if she had any, to point to the sky. "OK Stack Simple I'm telling my feathers to point straight up. Those are the ones that are actually over my tail right now."

The wings didn't actually straighten as they came down, but her stubs were tingling something awful from the static charge as it got closer. Phantom pains began to shoot through her;

every nerve in her nonexistent wings screamed in agony and she had to grit her teeth to command them to stay straight.

Suddenly the lightning hit, and without her wings she couldn't dodge. Out of pure instinct she flapped her wings furiously – and they smacked together in front of her! *ouch* she thought. Regaining control of her faculties she again straightened her wings, and they obeyed this time. Now pain, true pain of her own wings, flooded her with weariness.

so cold...

She didn't see when the bipedal thing lowered his arms, but she heard him call out to the guard ponies, although she thought she was losing consciousness. "She is in shock, but it is done. Help her and keep her warm she will need time to recover." Turning back to her, he again used her full name. Dash gritted her teeth. "Rainbow Dash, you may fold your wings; they are yours to fold now."

She stumbled out of the circle, and since nopony knew to bring a blanket the two guards threw their wings over her back. Panting now, she watched Applejack limp hopefully to the edge of the circle. Stack was just stretching, as if nothing was going on but that he had gotten out of bed too early.

Finally he noticed her, and waved her into the circle. "Yes, now is a good time. There will be battle soon." Almost through a haze she saw the sergal suddenly pounce on Applejack's good leg, lifting her onto her front feet without warning. "Excuse me." was his only explanation, his yellow eyes now burning a hole into Applejack's remaining rear hoof.

"Ya do know that's the good leg, right? Yer gonna make me a copy right leg for mah left?" There was no response, but that he set her down gently, and pointed to the center of the circle.

Stack repeated the process, walking & humming, and the orange mare's missing hoof began to regrow, then stopped. When his arms lowered, Applejack brought her still-injured leg up to examine. "Shucks. Ah've seen this before. Farm accident pert near took a cousin's hoof off. Was a year I reckon before he had a right hoof again." She tried to rotate the leg, so she could see around the edges of the tiny, wet-looking hoof at the end of her bad leg. "Well, it's all there alright. Should grow back in full in a years time."

She hobbled around to face her rescuer, and thanked him. For his part, Dash thought he looked winded. Her mental faculties were returning but now she was shivering. She heard Applejack apologize to Twilight for having to sit out the coming finale.

Rainbow couldn't hack it anymore. "That's all cute and stuff but can we get back to Celestia's sweet Sunshine? I'm freezing."

The edge of the forest had positive surprises, however. Rarity, Fluttershy, and Big Mac wandering up to them. "Sis!" Big Mac came at a gallop, running a quick circle around Applejack before almost knocking her over with a hug as he came up beside her. They stopped for a moment while he examined the newly formed hoof. "That looks just like when..."

Dash giggled at AJ's higher pitched "eyup." Rarity and Fluttershy ran to see under the guards' wings, still trying to offer warmth to the shivering blue pony. "Hey gimme a minute they need to see this." The guards folded their wings, and Dash painfully unfurled her own. Unlike poor Applejack she would be fully recovered in a week or two. Mostly. And she could probably fly now so long as she didn't need to do it well.

Fluttershy was gushing about something but she couldn't bring herself to concentrate, though she did return the yellow pony's bear hug that could've crushed an ursa minor.

Rarity excused herself and ran over to examine Applejack. "Don't put any weight on that dear. I've got some extra cloth we can jury rig a bandage until you get something sturdier."

And out of the sky came night.

Rainbow corrected herself, it was just a darkly colored alicorn diving straight for them. Everypony bowed, and she deliberately flared her wings in some attempt at pseudo finery that was just to impress the princess.

"You've done very well, Jack. I'll add my thanks to whatever she's said." The deep silken tones of the regent of the moon flowed over everyone. About the time Rarity had made an end of something that Applejack might put weight on, the possessed sergal, who apparently was Jack instead of Stack, unless the princess had it wrong – his voice was horrible to listen to – pointed to the sky. "She's discharged another flare, yes." Luna looked at the sky, not quite as high as the sun. Looking back at the sergal she asked "You will be joining us? You nearly stopped them last time"

He nodded, the earthquake voice rolling his reply. "It was a raiding party not truly an invasion force. To stop this camp's forty some I will need much more magic. But with the two god-kings I may stem the tide. We all will fight."

Rainbow hoped the travel would warm her again. She was still cold.

So they all traveled as fast as they could except fluttershy who predicted she'd be a poor fighter, and Big Mac who couldn't be budged from his sister's side. They stayed to help Applejack hobble someplace safer. The rest headed to the site of the last battle, Sweet Apple Acres' largest barn.

Rainbow Dash could see tiny lightning bolts coming from the smaller chariots, and sometimes the trees would erupt in fire though she couldn't see the coherent light. "Duh." Twilight would have said. "That's what makes it coherent – none of it is escaping the beam!"

Now that Luna had arrived she was blanketing the treetops with darkness. The strikes through it would be blind but right now that eased the benefit of cover to the pony's side.

Rarity was putting on a cape. Dash had never seen her wear unadorned clothing, nor don anything of denim. This was unadorned denim that attached at the neck, chest and belly, and draped to the ground. "What's that, your armor? It's gonna get bloodstained, girl!"

Rarity didn't even look over her shoulder to reply. "Oh don't remind me I can't stand the thought of throwing this away after a single use." She drew a sizable knife from a pack that was now under her cape. Dash suddenly felt naked with no knife, cape, or even enough feathers to take to the air like her escort was doing now.

Spark Impulse was shouting to the charioteers "You may know this but there's two casters under there. So far I can only smell shield spells but keep your eyes open."

Jack levitated a tiny rock, and with his left hand waved with a flourish to the trees. The rock disappeared but Dash didn't see anything else happen. Another rock levitated and now she realized she could see eyes glistening in the light, just inside Luna's darkness that was now protecting the enemy too. When Jack's second rock disappeared Rainbow Dash saw a pair of eyes roll up and away, until they weren't pointing at the light, or them, anymore.

And suddenly they were upon them. Dash couldn't remember which side charged first but the forays and findings had run out and everybody was running, screaming. Twilight would levitate one high enough that their guards could kick it in the head until it stopped moving. Rarity levitated her knife about five feet from herself but when one got closer a lightning bolt escaped her horn. Dash had heard zapping an attacker that way hurt the caster, nearly as much as the castee. But the sergal would scream, and jerk outside Rarity's personal safety zone again only to get cut by a disembodied knife.

For her own part she kicked one low, then as acrobatically as she could manage she turned, jumped, and flapped to land behind it. She kicked again at the back of the knees. Wouldn't really take one down but Jack bit him in the back of the neck, then with claws glowing slapped his on the back. As the glow died there was a sickening crunch and the assailant stopped moving.

Lotta good I'm doing, here. Yay, revenge.

Twilight seemed to be holding her own with 'push' spells that didn't really damage anyone

but it made them land on their rump. One even had a broken tail he was pushed so fast.

So she eased towards Rarity to see if she could be useful there. This one coming at them now was big. His claws were glowing with darkness – the same deep brown as his eyes actually. Suddenly Rarity's knife shot past Dash, and Dash made a lunge for the dropped weapon.

There was a clash of light as the casters' magic impacted but Rarity was no fighter either. Dash had the knife in her mouth and was charging, hoping to slice open a leg but this was an experienced fighter. The leg closest to Dash came up, toeclaws digging into her muzzle then reaching for her throat. The knife went flying one way, and dash flew back another way.

Energies still clashing the foot came around, aiming for Rarity's head next. Then suddenly there was a pair of high pitched screams. One from the bushes to the pony's right, another from the attacking sergal, whose claws suddenly dropped their flow of magic as his hand went to his face.

Rarity's spell burned the sergal's face and hand, just as Scootaloo dropped out of a low branch, wings buzzing as she turned mid-air to land as solid a kick as the little pip squeak could, also to the injured side of his face. Dash watched as Scootaloo wisely retreated back to her bushes, where Sweetie Belle could be seen wielding a slingshot.

Rarity said a bad word. Several, in fact.

"What are you [...] doing out here missy?!? I won't lose you to these things consarnit* Just run your hide back home before I seperate you from your hide for them and run you home in two seperate apple* carts!" *Dash politely overlooked and translated her words to something slightly more ladylike, but distressed Sweetie Belle didn't feel quite such a need just then.

"Just saving your pretty* horn Sis you're welcome I'm not letting them eat your Celestia Blessed* face; just go back to zapping these dogs* in the head!!"

Mentally Rainbow Dash filed some notes. Don't expect Rarity's family to maintain their genteel facade under death threats, and also to scold Scootaloo for exposing herself to this much danger. But for now, "Thanks you little cloud-rat now stay outta our way!" Scootaloo spat a raspberry at Dash just in keeping the current feeling around the cozy family campfire.

Speaking of fire, the next one running at them had a sword, and it was on fire. Enchanted...? Dash had never heard of enchanting swords with fire, and apparently neither had the sergal whose hand was now catching fire, and he was busily trying to drop it. As his right arm came off, fire sealing the wound a giant white alicorn swooped low enough to ask "How's it going, girls?" before hastily swooping back towards the center of the region Luna was keeping as dark as starless night.

Not so well, as it turned out. The dismembered sergal was injured but furious and still running, mouth agape and looked wide enough to swallow one of them whole. Even a tiny rock from Sweetie Belle's slingshot didn't slow the beast.

The boulder did.

A quick look revealed that Jack was floating. Kind of like when the elements were channeled through her except she could float anyway. And there weren't any elements. He was just floating, looking extremely pissed off. Wherever he pointed, a boulder two meters across would leap from the ground and fly towards his target. There was no screaming; the mountain called Jack had spoken. Splat, then nothing.

Both the princesses came to land behind him about twenty feet, and the remaining sergal were just inside the trees, now twenty or so feet in front of him, and he was floating higher, glowing ... not just his claws but all of him bathed in a pony-magic aura.

There was a small earthquake. It kept going however so Rainbow decided *screw this earth-pony stuff* missing feathers be cursed. Floating two feet above the ground she didn't feel the earthquake but saw her friends drop, trying to stay stabilized.

There was a caster sergal, who threw a lightning bolt at Jack. No effect. He didn't even blink. He did start screaming, however.

"I am Prince Jack, King-Under-the-Mountain, regent of the Rocks! I deny you passage, and decree the rocks shall henceforth no longer stay beneath your feet, but **COVER YOUR GRAVE**"

Rainbow saw the earthquake become more focused, concentrating on the dozen remaining sergal. Two trees, all the sergals, and various shrubs and small woodland creatures not smart enough to run screaming at the first smell of blood, dropped. Like a rock, in fact. An amalgam of soil and boulders were all that was left of the army now.

Dash looked to the princesses, and saw something she had never seen before. Celestia, facehoofing. Luna just seemed to have smelled something rotten, or maybe somebody made a fart joke. By farting.

Not floating now, Jack was panting, but turned around to express an apology. "I'm sorry your highness. That was not planned. Nor expected. I did not intend it to be so."

Celestia, face still in hoof, accepted his apology with the one eye she could see him with. "Yes prince, I believe you. Nothing to be done for it now, really. Welcome to the family I guess."

Rainbow stopped hovering, as her wings were starting to hurt already. And she'd lost two feathers just with that workout. She looked again at Jack Chipple. Gray upper half, with lighter gray more visible in front and dark prominent in back but still everything everywhere. Blue feathers, skinny little tail, giant claws. No pony. No prince, thought Rainbow, although Blueblood was nearly a monster so who was she to say.

"Uhm, what just happened? He looks like a sergal to me." Twilight, ever the investigator, Dash thought to herself. Meanwhile she scanned the treeline for more movement, but didn't see anything.

Luna, eyes never leaving Jack, explained "The greater portions of pony magic are only available to royalty. It's been done that one alicorn would steal regency from another, not unlike what I" She faltered, bit her lip. Dash looked back to see her continue. "What Nightmare Moon did. Steal regency of the sun so Celestia couldn't do anything about it."

Jack added, somewhat sheepishly, "When I reached for a greater flow of pony-magic, forcing it to come to me with my own imported magic, I somehow created a new position of royalty. As Prince Jack, I am the regent of the rocks. Fortunately, rocks aren't asked to do much." He stood as tall as his could, and stared into the forest. "Duties or no, I am king under the mountain. I can feel their footsteps upon my ground. There are" he paused dramatically, held his breath and lowered his chin to his chest, then spoke again. "three hundred more. They are almost to the ocean. Moving this way, so they must have come primarily across the ocean."

Dash didn't see the sudden change of expression, as the fearsome toothy maw gained an impish grin. She only half heard as he said "I have new spells granted my new status!"

She did however hear when Celestia started to say "Oh good g" and turned, blocking both her eyes with her hoof. Luna had summoned a darkness about her. All Dash did, was close her eyes. She was blinded.

When the pain of standing next to the sun itself (or so it seemed to her) had passed she looked again. Now Luna was facehoofing, as Jack was missing, of a sort.

There stood before the assembled crowd, an alicorn. Tall as the princesses he was a slate gray, with obsidian hooves and sandy colored mane & tail but his wings were the white of polished marble. His cutie mark was probably a mountain, tho it looked from here like a few pebbles, and surrounded by a golden ring. His voice no longer the washboard gravelly sound but clear as a yodeller's and resonant with a joy of life, Jack spoke.

"We pony now."

Chapter 6

In Which We Learn More About the Prince's Mental Makeup

Luna tried to be as discreet and unobtrusive with her shifting from hoof to hoof as she could. But there were three of them, now.

The "greater pony magic" that was only available to royalty – it wasn't crowded at the top per se but the sisters could feel each other. Like being in a narrow, short corridor. Any fast movement shifted the air so much the other could feel it. It had made that fateful fight rather more stale a mate than would have been if they'd been just unicorns, a thousand years ago.

Now that narrow corridor had accepted an uncultured and inexperienced oaf shove in with them. It already felt crowded at the top of the magical chain.

Jack flapped his brilliant white wings. They left her with the impression of translucence, but as Luna watched she realized it was just an odd form of off-white, perhaps multiple colors of white as his wolf-hairs had been multiple colors of gray.

She was snapped out of annoyed reverie when the pegasus Rainbow Dash blurted out "So, what, you think you can fly now? Just because you have your own set of wings?" She flapped her own wings, and Luna was impressed anew with Jack's non-pony magic, whatever its source, but the wings had been without blood for nearly three days. As a flier herself she felt pity for Dash's inability to leave the ground yet. "It's not fair, you big griffon dog pony ... thing!"

A little orange pegasus came out of the bushes. Luna was thankful the Filly had not tried to participate in the fighting but obviously she and Rainbow Dash knew each other. "What, Dash? What'd they do to you after they stole you from me? I mean us!"

Rainbow Dash just flapped her wings slowly, mournfully, while glaring white-hot disdain at the little filly.

Jack turned to the orange and purple filly to explain. "No you two, there is no unfairness, because I was not born with wings. I can feel them, I know how to bend and shape them as any part of my body but I know nothing of flight."

Dash turned her glare on Jack "I'm not teaching you how to fly. I sorta promised Scoots, here and just one student is cramping my style."

Jack had a broad, easy grin on his muzzle, and as the guards landed from their patrol he answered her. "Very well, Rainbow Dash. I shall seek instruction elsewhere. Twilight Sparkle, can a unicorn levitate himself?"

Startled, her sister's pupil shook her multihued purple mane as she shook her sudden look of confusion off her face. "You have to push against something, just like if you lifted it with your hooves. You can't lift yourself with magic anymore than with hooves."

Luna felt the magic move, knew where he was going with it. Celly could probably be more forgiving of his oafish grasping but it was already pushing her buttons.

Jack hadn't physically moved, but he answered Twilight's explanation. "But you push against the ground when you lift yourself to stand. If your legs are suddenly longer, you are suddenly taller, is it not so?"

Luna snuck a glance at Celly who was smirking. No trolling gag here other than to keep her mouth shut. So be it, Luna thought. I'll go along but he needs to know it's impolite to jostle in this corridor of magic.

Twilight said "Well, but since your horn is the focus of your magic, that's where you push from. To levitate yourself you'd have to ... well, do a horn-stand."

Jack dove his dust colored horn into the ground and bucked high, magic aura already bright as he floated up. "Just so, Twilight. Thank you for your instruction." Straight up, tail first and legs all akimbo he rotated to he could sort of see the crowd.

Princess Celestia, no longer hiding her impish grin, turned to Luna and said "I think we've just been ... **shown up.**"

"Put a sock in it, sister."

6.1 Thou Hast an Crush Upon Thy Princess?

As the ocean was some distance away, all the ponies were instructed to wait. To eat, make camp, to restore their strength. While Spike was not present to receive a letter apparently one of the feydaykin could accept magical fire sendings. Celestia promised to keep her body guards well informed if they were needed. They didn't like waiting when their charge was charging off unarmed but none of them were pegasi, and the guards that were, were tired enough they couldn't make a speed run to the ocean only to begin a massive battle there.

So the sisters flew up alone. High up, a quarter mile by levitation magic alone, they found Prince Jack, drifting very slowly as he balanced on his horn and pushed the earth behind him, thus floating forward.

They hovered, massive wings beating slowly.

Celly started with "Since we know how to fly, prince, we can get there in an hour of hard flight. Do you have any suggestions that don't involve us towing you, as we need to hurry."

It was a little hard to read the newborn alicorn's expression, as he was upside down and drifting away from the pair, who had to drift with him as they tread on air. But Luna thought his face was screwed up in deep thought, more than magic expenditures.

"I think I can cast a propulsion spell. Magically extend my spine with the release of force, not unlike how I'm pushing down now. Hafta make my back hooves push too. Then just lock my wings and try not to steer myself into a mess." His eyes focused on the ground, and he was silent for a moment. "No sense you two waiting I guess. If you're not going to tow me I need to get there myself." He adjusted his rotation a little and held a forehoof straight out. "At the ocean in that direction. They're carrying a tarpaulin over their main encampment so you won't see them, I think but I can still feel them grinding rocks together beneath their feet."

As the moon was not in a phase to be above the horizon during daylight hours, she couldn't look to confirm through her moon's line of sight, but the fact that Celly didn't comment suggested they did indeed know to hide from the glare of the celestial bodies.

They really would need his help, but it still rankled that an untrained commoner had been elevated – no, elevated himself out of ignorance – into this confined space. She gathered her power to herself, and beat her wings more forcefully. Celly, bless her, shot a concerned look at Luna, feeling the sudden power draw that was totally unnecessary. Jack would too, of course; that was the point. "We will speak about your magic, after we have won the war. I'm not angry but we must speak soon. So win soon, king under the mountain."

She released her energy to pull and push the wind, to drive herself forward, and to keep the airflow across her delicate eyes to a minimum. No goggles needed when you were the regent of the moon. As she powered off so quickly, she missed Celestia's kinder words to Jack. "She's self conscious about what she fears is a net loss of power. We'll work it out without heated words, prince Jack. See you at the beach!"

As Celly wisely conserved her power, and flew with only her wings, the 250 meter lead that Luna had created stayed the same now that she was likewise just flapping hard. A tiny bit of power to see where Celly's sun had heated the air – thermals would speed her, and she wouldn't just have to draw as much power to replenish her strength later.

She looked behind her, and saw Jack fold his wings, rotate so he could be right-side up once he was flying. Luna felt the draw of power – far more than that spell would need. His wings locked straight out she felt the flow of all Equestria's magic divert itself into Jack's backside. He made a few tests of his wings to see how to steer, already going faster than either sister but easily a third of a mile behind them now.

Suddenly he shot upward, a 30 degree climb and still accelerating. Suddenly Luna felt the spell double. *that foal. He's going to cross the sound barrier right as*

She didn't get to finish the thought as Jack created a rainboom whose expanding rings of light and turbulence passed not 10 feet in front of her nose. She drew power again, forcing air under her wings, forcing the her body to stay upright.

6.2 **Rainbow Dash: nonplussed right now.**

Dash saw the rainboom, eventually heard's its crack of distressed air. Straight up and down, that foal had somehow powered across the invisible barrier while traveling in a straight, flat line.

can't fly, my tailbones. Out loud, she shouted "Colt crudder!" It was not really a word, she knew. But couldn't come up with anything better. It rolled off her tongue though, as if she had said it before. Perhaps in another life she had dealt with so annoying a ... a ...

Colt crudder. That's what..

6.3 Upon the dismembering, parting out, and gobbling up of thy backside

By dint of sheer practice, intimate knowledge, and long millenia of experience, the sisters could draw power, could shift in that small corridor, so as to speak to one another. It was far from precise but they could call for each other, and give an idea of their intentions.

Luna caught her breath for a moment. The last time she had received a magical sending this way from Celly had been a polite – no, pleading – request to back down. To stop the fight before, well before what had happened had needed to.

But this time was not that. The image sent could be summed up in the word unexpected. By response she drew power as if to call up vast amounts of water as she set fire to the ground around the well, all while calling an avalanche to up the site of failed conflagration. sloppy

Luna had lost some ground to dealing with the worst of the rainboom. Celly now was close enough that her peal of laughter, open and free as the sky, could reach Luna's ears. *The oaf doesn't bother her, it seems.* While Luna wanted to be upset for almost dumping her into the forest below, that laughter reached too deep into her soul. She chuckled. Perhaps she could teach him about magic, and normal pegasus-style flying without the magic. *Raise the once-dead sergal into a proper member of royalty.*

But now there was a battle before them. As the sisters approached the edge of the forest, where a short stretch of grasslands separated it from the ocean, they found prince Jack, 'regent of the rocks beneath your feet' floating horn-down again. His back was turned to them and his wings were folded tight, and he was using just enough magic to fold the light around him; to be almost invisible to those on the ground.

Upon realizing that he thought there was aught to hide from, the sisters quickly copied his spell. They could see each other with their magesight, and of course the rainboom's rainbow, ended a mile distant now, had pointed straight at Jack. So he was not trying to hide from Luna, but on the ground was naught to hide from either.

Treading air again, it was Celestia who spoke first. "Why are you up here hiding? I don't see, physically or magically, anything down there." Luna looked again, and saw Celly doing the same.

Prince Jack pointed to a place halfway between tree and seashore, and said "I feel them there. Two hundred, still. Easily fifty who can cast but I have felt spells from only eleven."

Luna concentrated her sense of power at the place indicated, and gasped. What looked

like open grasslands had two places where a thing, probably a dinner plate, being levitated. And just there, was a candle lit. "That tarp of theirs is magically augmented!"

Jack turned his dusty, dusky head towards her, still keeping his horn, not unlike his mane, pointed down. "More devious still. They have received word that spells can be seen. Perhaps by their casters calling out what spell the other used. So they have devised a false image whose power is craftily diverted in many places. All eleven who know they have magic have agreed to take a corner and they actively, in their own way and place and speed, keep a part of the spell up."

Luna saw out the corner of her eye, Celly nodding. "Many small spells are harder to see at a distance, compared to one big spell. But it's strong – even knowing that's what's there I can't pierce it."

Jack looked out over the ocean now, adding gravely, "There is more bad news. This magic pressure, that you feel when each of us moves in higher realms. Do you not feel it? The flow is diverted again." He pointed to a distant spot of the vast surface of water. "They have a god-king."

Luna was still too upset to tell where precisely the pressure was pulling, but she thought she could feel a strong magical presence out to sea. Given the apparent distance, it would have to be another regent like themselves, but whoever it was didn't seem to be doing much of anything. Still, "That's going to complicate things alright. Orbital bombardment again Celly?"

Her sister shook her head. "Too broad a target. Solar flares are good for cutting a pony in half but a whole town?"

"Does it not take nearly nine minutes of preparation to enact a solar flare into light upon Equestria?" That, from the newly ponified. Part of Luna wanted to be shocked, but her analytical side was racing.

With another corner of her mind she heard Celly try to explain pony magic. "No, prince. The sun is right there" She helpfully pointed a hoof in its direction. "And while it has to be kept out of the atmosphere so it won't burn everything up, it's only outside by about twenty meters. And as regent, as you know it follows my commands pretty closely."

Luna needed more clues. "Why nine minutes, prince Jack?" This should tell her something about his non-pony magic, perhaps. Or something unfathomable.

"That is. Are you serious princess Celestia? That is how far the sun is. Where I am from, the sun is eight and a half light-minutes distant." Below a single sergal could be seen dragging

a pair of diamond dogs out of the forest towards the invisible encampment.

"What's a light minute, prince?" But as Celestia spoke Luna had already guessed, and it fascinated her.

"Light travels at a speed. If it were to be convinced to travel in a curve, then by the time you said, one thousand and one, the beam would have traveled all around the whole world five times. That is one second, there are sixty seconds in a minute, the sun, a billion times the size of the land, is eight and a half minutes distant. Is it truly not so here?"

This suggested to Luna that where Jack was from, they may not even need Regents to control such unfathomably massive celestial bodies. And his math was off a bit too. "This land is not that big, Jack. I think I know how fast light travels and it would travel closer to seven times around. And the sun, here at least, is smaller than my moon. About half the size as most of what you see is just a continuous fire's flames. The moon is held inside the air by a quarter mile or so."

She spoke truth, but Jack seemed dumbfounded and even bordering on mistrusting. Celly responded by extending a lot more trust that Luna would have thought to offer given the circumstances. "Prince, I trust you know not to move it, but ... reach for the sun. Find it, I won't stop you."

Luna felt the draw of power, and inwardly cringed. It was the same spell she ... *Nightmare Moon* she reminded herself ... had used to usurp control of the day/night cycle.

But once his hooves were upon the sun, the spell held, and he asked no more of pony's magic. Luna saw his yellow eyes turn to saucers, and suddenly he was falling, all magic forgotten. Clearly this pulled a big rug out from under him. At least he had a quarter mile to find a rug again, she thought with a touch of cynicism. *eight and a half light minutes!*

He did recover, although seeing his rump as he floated back up towards them felt awkward to Luna. Celly too was pointedly looking out to the ocean until he was back to his original height. "My apologies." said the prince, sounding to Luna like he was pleading for a deep offense. She wasn't really sure if he meant his rump showing or thinking the sun was a billion times the size of the earth.

Luna decided it didn't matter. "Lightning bolts? What, then?"

Again with an uneducated blurting from the newcomer. "Can you create a second, smaller sun, right in their camp? Destroy a few unsplittable pieces of matter and unleash a fire that will consume them faster than they could blink?"

split the unsplittable. Luna shuddered.

Celestia quickly quelled the notion, trying to sound encouraging, Luna thought, probably to make sure Jack didn't try it on his own. "That would poison more ponies than anyone here wants. The forest might not recover for a century or two. Better to chase them down and cut them individually and miss a few than to doom ponies hundreds of miles downwind to a mysterious and painful death."

Luna watched Jack. No surprise, so he seemed to know the consequences of what he'd suggested. Just didn't think it was that far out of the risk/reward scale. Best weigh in, then. "We're a peaceful lot. I don't know where you came from, but it's very deep in our psyche not to injure by accident. Not by intent either but sometimes ... So we will have to do this by hoof and mouth."

Just to illustrate, she summoned a sword of pure force, and folded her wings. Calling up a shield spell she would simply have to cut each attacker down, one by one. They didn't like flying things as much for their own psyche as the tactical reasons. So she would agree to wade in hock deep into their blood. *split the unsplittable* And hopefully not drop her force-sword in fear and shock, although she already knew what kinds of things she would see under that tarp. She steeled herself as she dove. Her ponies would be preserved, whether they forever feared the night or not. They deserved that freedom.

6.4 Here Comes The Sun (and the pain)

Celestia watched her younger, slightly impetuous sister dive into the unknown. Of course the regent of the moon, and of nighttime, would feel more comfort with what she couldn't see. This was her realm. Until she saw the horrors under the tarp, and no pony should be forced to own that realm.

"I think we've been shown up, prince. Earthquakes could be useful here you know." She winked, and folded her wings to follow her sister, force sword already in her mouth. She heard the unfurling of the prince's wings but couldn't see if he tried to summon a sword. It didn't matter, so long as he kept it a *mêlée* thing.

Chapter 7

They ... Have a God-King?

Mêlée, Luna reflected, is a relative thing. Ball lightning formed around her and bounded away, burning holes through the augmented tarp. She called up an aura of fear, hoping these things, these sergals, could feel fear. As she dove blindly through the tarp, startling the tall, brown specimen who hadn't known she was coming, she began to wonder if they could.

The brown sergal was two halves now, and she saw the ground was the bright brown of forgotten blood. There had been infighting of the most serious nature, as just to her right there was a disemboweled pale brown sergal, blank eyes staring upward, accompanied by bare, gnawed-on ribs also pointing up. *Cannibals!*

Two sergals pointed and tried to zap her. Having no experience with magic they just slammed away with raw power; tiring and ineffective. The lesser casters' bolts fizzled on her shield as she kicked one way and slashed another.

Feeling an oafish draw of the regent's power, she flared her wings and hovered as Jack created a localized earthquake, knocking about half the crowd off their feet. The quake continued to rumble as Celestia's shield, made as much of heat energy as force burned through the simple cloth that carried their spell. Where she landed there was only burlap bags, so she had to leap forward to find someone to slash.

The nearest caster gave himself away by trying to levitate Luna's force sword to the ground. He made a guess about a shield spell, but it was too little too late as her sword impaled him. She threw another ball of lightning and then changed directions to help Celly. A thrown double sword clattered as it was diverted by her shield. She heard the twang of bowstring, and while she had never heard such before she poured energy into the physical protections of her shield, which was suddenly under strain from forty tiny wooden spears impacting all at once. *Clever cannibals.*

The quake finally settled and was replaced by a shockwave a hundred feet in front of them. Jack had substituted magic for experience, casting an incredibly broad 'push' spell, slowing his heedless drop from space and crushing the skulls of several attackers.

For a moment Luna feared Jack had gone against their pleas, as there was a brilliant flare of fire and heat, but then she realized what happened. It was the awakening of magic within one of the latent casters. His anger had taken physical form but had started deep within himself, killing him and catching several more on fire.

Jack summoned for the cold of space to descend. The fire was instantly quelled as was the breath of four attackers. Also a broken and dismembered diamond dog. Probably just as well but just the same she looked around for more captives. None within fifteen feet of her at least, and as hectic as this battle was she dared divert no more attention than that.

Celly had been casting small fireball spells, using her sword for any that ran past their dying friends to get a stab at her. By the pile of bodies, it was a popular technique.

Luna's somewhat scattered thoughts were stopped by sudden shouting. It was Jack, augmenting his voice using magic, but he was speaking in their tongue. With his voice as clear now as it was, she could almost pick out individual words. He was interspersing it with Polish "I am the prince of this land! I demand you stand down!" followed a time later by "This land only has a place for nonviolent sergals!" The crowd was still running at him, as they were at the princesses. He seemed to be using a push spell to ... rather messily remove their organs by breaking their ribs and shoving their organs out the holes.

She hoped becoming a prince of Equestria wasn't already going to his head. *Prince of this land is he, now?*

A shorter specimen, nearly red in color, had leapt high and fallen slowly through her shield. Having not screamed its intent to attack she had missed it until the thing's teeth bit hard into her right wing. She summoned lightning to arc across her wing, but that didn't dislodge the determined beast.

Smoke began to erupt from its lower back, quickly turning into a fire a foot across that was already burning through to the ground. Celly had called down an orbital strike. But still it would not let go, even paralyzed and dying the thing managed to break her wing before a precision 'push' spell tore its head apart.

Trying to ignore the gore that covered her rump she quickly made thankful eye contact with the two who had finished this attacker, then went back to throwing ball lightning to bounce among the longbowmen.

Luna had to guess that some of those arrows had stone tips, as perhaps a third of the second volley redirected themselves, seemingly of their own accord, landing in one of the bowsergals. Those with steel tips needn't heed the call of the regent of the rocks; instead they were slowed by Celly's and her own shield spell.

Luna felt the new regent try his hoof at sending. He was making as if to illuminate four places, all under this tent whose magic was quickly fading. Jack shouted "There are four non-combatants. I think they'll surrender."

With that he turned to the thickest of the remaining army and Luna saw the arrows leap out of the fallen bowsergal and spread, faster than she could see, to impale many attackers who seemed not a one of them to honor her fear aura spell. As it was getting late into the afternoon Celly's solar flares were a little weaker, and the next one she tried to burn was a caster who knew he was now a target of magic.

Jumping didn't save him, as Luna watched in awe as Jack grabbed the potential for a small lightning bolt out of a sergal beneath him, and violently threw it into the leaping caster. A double bolt, first by Jack's spell then a reverse bolt as the energized mage ground out into normalcy.

More fire, more lighting, two more surrenders, and more gore than Luna had seen during the war leading to her – *Nightmare Moon* she reminded herself – *that mare's* banishment. Jack looked unscathed but Luna had three claw marks across her left shoulder, and Celly's right hock was bleeding where some suicidal foal had latched on with a deathbite, not unlike how her own right wing had been broken.

Facing Celly but making sure Jack would hear, she asked "where do we put the new one? It's proper for you to draw power to heal first but would you have me wait for the prince of the land, my Princess Celestia?" Hopefully her needless formality wouldn't completely escape the dusty alicorn prince.

With only a hint of a smirk, and only because Luna knew her sister so well as to see it, Celestia responded. "No Princess Luna you have been my sister and a co-ruler of Equestria far too long to wait on such a formality, needful as it may be. Only a moment sister."

And with that, she drew power.

Her wounds weren't great, and indeed it was only a few seconds until her body was whole although she was still covered in sweat and blood, and not a few gibbets of sergal flesh.

Luna politely bowed, and not even glancing to watch the prince, drew power. It took longer, as the broken wing was already surrounded by inflammation, and an infection had

started at the deepest points of the attacker's tooth marks.

Now she turned, to find the prince had used his 'imported magic' to heal a few scratches, and minor unicorn level levitation to remove the gore from his coat. "Hopefully no one will be mortally wounded, as that process looked complicated." With that he pointed his wingtips to the six still living sergal, and shouted something as he pointed towards the ocean. "Many have fled, princesses. We must find a way to close the door they hold open."

It was the time of the half moon, and she was supposed to raise the moon in the next half hour. A filly's moon, so the young ones could see it, sort of. She actually felt a little bad about the half-moons, like they were half a job. But the fillies across Equestria knew nothing of war, nor should they. Walking through the deepening sand, seeing the fleeing attackers climb aboard the flimsiest raft Luna could envision, she made some guesses about where she would be when it was precisely time.

"I want to raise the moon a little early, Celly. Rather than a little late." Looking back at the horrors of the collapsing tent behind them, she added "Or never."

Celestia sighed, then nodded. "It will make some think that this war is going badly indeed, but others will rejoice in your handiwork. For the fillies, then, Lunadeer. Catch up when you can."

Luna smiled at Celly's contraction of Luna Dear. She had changed in the millenia they'd missed together, but the sisters' love still showed through, and it warmed Luna's heart that in the midst of an invasion Celly could still feel compassion.

A half hour earlier than the schedules of any pony astronomer said should happen, Luna stood, and felt for the extension of herself. That which she was regent of, the moon. Hundreds of miles across, at the very edge of the atmosphere, was a ball of dirt and rock. Far over the ocean, where no one could see it, the moon had slid from one end of the endless waters to the other.

Sometimes she wondered if there was a non-pony regent of the moon. Perhaps there was a continent on the far side of the planet. It would explain why the moon followed a circuit so straight and timely with so few exceptions over the millenia. But she had flown out and looked, and found nothing.

Luna flared her wings out straight, reared up onto hind-legs, and pulled with all her might, setting the great moon on its path through the night sky. The rearing wasn't really necessary but it helped her concentrate. With her eyes closed she never knew if her horn glowed or not, though she assumed it did as hot as it got when she did this.

Momentum imparted, the moon would rise above the horizon within minutes. Luna allowed herself a moment to rest. She couldn't see the six sergal anymore, and those fleeing on rafts were only specks now. She gave herself a good shimmy-shake to loosen her muscles, and launched into the air.

Celestia was circling high overhead. Perhaps hoping they would flee without further ado, there was no solar flares cast upon them. She could see small columns of steam, and realized that Celly was deliberately missing, so they felt pursued without ever being in true danger.

Expending a little magic to catch up, she circled now with her sister. She watched the specks below as the rafts fled quickly, without oar or sail she noted, deeper into the endless water. "They're in a pretty big hurry to go nowhere Celly. What do you think is going on?"

"I see, but I also see a larger raft a little farther out. Something else occurs to me but I don't know what precisely it will mean. A pony can't simply proclaim himself regent. I think a pony could steal regency but not create a new position of power. I'm going to assume these sergals, using pony magic as some of them do, can't either."

Her large wings beat slowly, finding and grabbing currents of still warm air rising from the ocean as the air around and above her cooled in the late afternoon. "What, Celly? I don't see yet. Jack created ... Oh."

Celly nodded, watching the rafts float themselves to the larger raft. "Whatever Jack is, that sergal is too. Luna I'm going to stay up here as backup. Please consider the diplomatic angle if we can't close whatever door their using but mostly, mostly dear sister I want you to observe closely how the two regents fight."

"In case we need to kill Jack, you mean." He was a violent oaf, but by calling for surrender, even getting a few to stand down, he'd shown he was no lover of needless violence. Luna didn't want to know how to kill him. It might translate too easily into a way to kill her sister, if she ever fell prey to the darkness within herself again.

"Knowledge is power." Celly said flatly. "Lunadeer I won't ever ask you to cast a spell like that. I won't even ask how the spell could be formed. I'll trust your judgment, even if it means I run a small risk that Nightmare Moon"

Luna squeezed her eyes shut, turning sharply away from her elder sister. "Don't say that name." Luna gave a shuddering gasp before finishing her interruption. "As much because she isn't dead, as because she is dead to me."

Luna didn't see the tear fall from Celestia's face. "I'm willing to risk my life to protect the rest of Equestria. And there'll be a little less jealousy if you have a spell like that, that I don't

even know if you have. So please, Lunadeer."

Luna steeled herself, and looked back into Celly's pleading face. It had only been one millenia they were separated, and many more they had known each other. Jack was ... an unknown. He meant well today, but as Luna could attest, that could change one day.

"For my Equestria. For the foal's moon. For that feathered oaf below. Watch them and learn, Lunadeer."

Luna nodded, and folded her wings to drop. It wasn't until her head had cleared, now a third of the way down, flaring her wings to slow and circle into a more controlled drop, that Luna realized the tone Celly had used. She'd said "feathered oaf" but ... her voice had said "your coltfriend".

sisters! Sometimes ... Luna sent a quiet message that could be heard as the negation of physical love "Not my coltfriend, you goof." Celly sent back the word HAPPINESS. Laugh at me, will she? Luna sighed, and slowed further.

Seeing that half the escapees had dove headfirst into a whirlpool just off one end of the giant raft, she landed on an abandoned smaller raft, which immediately began rocking far in excess of what her weight should have done.

When the raft began to crumble under her hooves she realized there was magic involved. The larger raft, more than sixty feet on a side was just a small jump to reach. While the sergal, a deep orange across her back fading to blood orange feathers, turned sharply and glared at her, nothing happened to the giant raft.

Jack landed, having been herding the fleeing sergal. One saw her and diverted, leaping from fifteen feet away. She brought her shields up but Jack had already done the lightning throwing thing, grabbing energy from one corner of water, arcing it across the raft, through the sergal, into the water not fifteen feet from herself, and back. Repeatedly, fast enough that the lightning arc sounded like a couple of words in the sergal tongue. probably "keep moving"

Luna hadn't planned on actually fighting, so she could concentrate on watching how these two equals, but the last of the non fried sergal had left, and the sergal regent was coming straight for ... either her, or the smoking remains of her compatriot. She kept her shield spell engaged and felt for movement of the higher orders of pony magic. Almost nothing.

Jack was now between Luna and the sergal, who had a pair of designs just above either hip. Three blue wavy lines, and a pale brown line above them. Luna almost choked at the ridiculous image.

Jack laughed when he realized what he was seeing. "You're the regent of small rafts?"

Truly?" He repeated himself in Sergal, whatever their tongue might be called, but it wasn't necessary.

She responded with her deep, gravelly voice in Ponish. "And of all things that float upon the water. My chieftess asked that I be specific in reaching for this place's magic. On high tide it drowns our land and she feared I would damage it worse by becoming a lord of **this** land." Her eyes, a deeper yellow than Jack's, narrowed. "Prince of this land."

Jack chuckled, but stopped. "I can see now. You're not a sergal, are you? Why bother having a chieftess. A sergal chieftess of all things. You're here to run from your past, aren't you? You weren't born a sergal."

"Nor was I born hayooman, hayooman." Was that what Jack was, underneath all the body switching? The sergal witch talking again. "You can not kill me. I may not be the greatest mage in all Vilious but I am happy to stay." She tilted her head slightly, looking at Jack with only her right eye.

Luna, shields still up, tried to reason with her. Can monsters be reasoned with? I should know... "You're the one holding the underwater door open! Let go of your will to expand your field of control and your homeland will stop being flooded at all!"

The sergal whipped her head to the other side now, glaring death with her left eye. "You mean nothing to me horse. When you are killed you will die. I will kill you if you speak again."

Jack had a minimal shield up, Luna saw. The sergal had blasted with untrained power, much as the two casters in the tent fight had done. But this was a regent, however small her regency, and she felt her own shield pressed down by the great psychic blast.

As seemed normal, Jack looked unperturbed by the violence. He was casually sauntering over to her. To whisper, right eye turned just enough that he could watch the foreign "god-king" and fortunately for Luna's state of might, she could see her too.

The sergal stood on tiptoe, tail twitching but she stood her ground. Jack began whispering. "My lady? I can take her, but it worries me. For purely private reasons, you understand. May I ask, have I found favor with the Princesses of Equestria?"

Startled, she lost direct eye contact with the sergal witch as she looked at the dust and stone colored alicorn pony before her. *mustn't answer too hastily ... that was a formal question after all.* She thought of his ability to stop six sergal albeit out of two hundred plus. He had not killed, when it would have been simpler to keep killing.

He had reattached Rainbow Dash's wings, and regrown Applejack's hoof at noticeable discomfort and fatigue to himself. All that, after returning from an entirely unrelated trip to

the woods, finding ponies he had met briefly, in another body so they wouldn't have thought he owed them aught.

He was, for an Equestrian, very hard, and very cold, but not without compassion. "Yes, my prince. My sister has said as much as I dropped down to assist you directly. May I ask, my prince, why this concerns you now?"

A quick look showed the sergal had stepped to the side, trying to see them both better but not gotten any closer. Yet. She looked about ready to pounce, though Luna knew truthfully very little of their actual body language.

"She may not be hayooman, but she is not here. That is why we both might hop bodies. If I separate her, and I can, I reveal how I could be dislodged, perhaps never to find Equestria again. And I would miss this land, the more so once war is gone from it."

He turned back to the sergal, and drew power. Horn glowing, and she expected the rhythmic wing beats were designed to draw his imported magic. He walked towards the regent of that which floats upon the oceans, and she screamed and leapt, her meager control of power flailing at Prince Jack, regent of the rocks beneath your feet, king under the mountain and immortal god king of the ponies.

Prince of this land, are you then?

Luna cast her own magic, holding the sergal still, midair. She used as little magic as it seemed to take to hold this uncharacteristically weak princess in place. The rest of her concentration was on his spell, though she knew she could see almost nothing of his imported magic.

It was part levitation, part wormhole, in large part a finding spell ... Luna thought he was building to find a wormhole and levitate it here. *that won't help at all, dear prince.*

Sparks were flying, setting the wooden raft on fire and lighting up the afternoon like summer afternoon. Still Jack had only minimal shields, the sparks visibly singing his feathers, causing his ritualistic wing motions to leave open flames as markers of their passage, living sparklers. *Doesn't that hurt?*

And still the sergal screamed wordlessly in rage and frustration. Luna was forced to walk closer to the center as the edges were beginning to loosen and separate, their master's concentration focused wholly on staying here, where she could commit further violence.

The spell's finale. As it was cast, Jack's wingtips pointed straight at the princess' chest, Luna could see it was aimed at the hinges of a wormhole. Not the one under the sea, as her

moon was holding the water level nearly two feet above it's opening. His imported magic seemed to be redirecting the force of his spell ... straight into the sergal's soul.

Can't see a wormhole there, so it's hard to unhook the latch holding it open. Still, this is the knowledge Celly wanted me to have.

The bipedal princess must have known what the spell was doing as now her untrained blast was completely focused, a veritable sun igniting as the two regents battled for enough power to finish.

Looks way too familiar, actually. Will this one return from banishment in a thousand years? Luna's breath caught in her throat, as the sergal's spells dissipated. *she's lost.* The flare, the draw of power, it was done. Quiet now, Jack had closed the wormhole by disconnecting the princess, wherever she was, and the sergal host, who now fell lifelessly to the rapidly disintegrating raft.

The whirlpool stopped whirling too. Luna had been right; this hole was held open by the princess' eager desire to be master of two worlds. Now she was master of none.

Jack was trying to levitate himself but with the boards and assorted flotsam breaking up, water by itself was hard to levitate – making his self levitation against water difficult. "Oh for starry night sky would you just ..." Luna grabbed onto his back legs, as they were the highest point right now, and magically augmented the flow of air under her wings. "First flying lesson as soon as I get you above dropping distance."

As she raised him, she tried to explain how to move his wings so he would be able to keep himself aloft. It wouldn't really do, this one lesson, but combined with her dropping him from, say, half a mile up ...

Celly had the biggest grin on her face, as she came around to watch. "Put a sock in it, sister. Jack? We're gonna talk more once we're on the land again. For now I'm gonna drop you. Fly well, prince!"

And with that, she let go.

Chapter 8

for the NLR!

8.1 wait, what?

Spark Impulse carefully brought the wagon to the ground just before the sand turned to scorched feed bags and rotting bodies. Three demigods against zealous terrorists, and it had been a slaughter like he had never imagined.

The feydaykin with a cutie mark of a burning quill climbed off the flight wagon and quickly scanned the devastation before them. Milky red-orange eyes, slightly darker than his orange tinted offwhite coat panned across the devastation again. Spark watched his ears twist. He smelled a detection spell fade a moment after the orange pony's horn glowed a faintly.

"She's not here." he accused. "Why'd you stop if you didn't see her majesty here?" The slightly insane caster's eyes never left the broad swath of carnage just to impugn Impulse's honor.

"I'm tired, and we're clearly pretty close. Also, if there are survivors, you know they get freaky about fliers. I don't want to get shot down and pardon me for not trusting your shield spells, seeing as I'm not the love of your life."

"It's not like that." Still in that demanding and accusatory tone; still not looking away from where her majesty had been sometime in the last hour.

Spark Impulse couldn't smell any spells coming from what used to be a veritable enemy city, but he'd also figured their caster rate was way lower than a third, as a random sampling of ponies might be. Uncertainty called for grounded travel.

Spark Impulse set about dragging the wagon back to the edge of the forest. "Still not get-

ting shot down for you. Said that when you talked me into this. Summon us some rations and we'll look by foot." Of course he didn't really expect whatshisname to create wholly from thought a bag of oats, but was pleasantly surprised when he felt a rapid fire series of teleportation spells dissipate. It meant he'd won the argument.

Spark turned back from securing the wagon to find a goodly pile of dried, forgotten sand-dune grass next to the feydaykin. As a soldier he was accustomed to such hardships as mediocre rations. This was wartime, after all. He expressed his gratitude to the insistent caster and tried to tactfully imply he'd forgotten his fellow soldier's name.

"You're useless" the unicorn said around a mouthful of 'hay' "Shadow Orange. Family all orange growers except momma messed around with a unicorn. Disowned me youngish but I'm an Orange." He never looked far away from the smoking ruin. Obviously hadn't looked up, as Spark had already found a speck that was almost assuredly one of their majesties. Spark wanted to needle this zealot just a little longer, to see how long it took to find his liege floating up there in space.

"I remember you saying you tested seventh strongest in your first year at the academy." The name Shadow floated back now. Unfortunate as it implied wickedness, but was meant to imply dilution. A mere shadow of his purer parents.

Many soldiers in her royal guard had stories about rejection, Spark mused. Maybe Celestia had a soft spot, made when she rejected her sister all those years ago.

The faintest whiff of strong, strange magic came to him. While Shadow was reciting his honors rolls classes from before he was knighted as a royal deathpony of Celestia's elite, Spark watched as the specks that were clearly full sized alicorns accumulate in one spot, off in the distance.

The darkest, that would be Luna, dropped a gray mass that could be assumed to be the new guy with the un-pony name. The gray mass flared his wings and tried to fly. His wings appeared to be on fire. Smoke trailed him, and now Spark could see tiny embers spread across his wingspan.

Spark almost buckled at the sight. A pegasus' wings were incredibly sensitive; to fly with coals tied to them though...

As the coals ignited into open flames, Shadow finally looked up. Utter confusion contorted his never very comely features. Spark, for his part, lifted his muzzle and sniffed carefully for magic. There was flight magic wafting by but it was old now; probably Luna dragging the unlearned demigod into the air for his first lesson.

"I think that sight means they've won." He said hopefully. Flight lessons would have been put off, until there were no combatants, he reasoned.

Shadow had only eyes for the alicorn he'd already died for. "She's coming in too! Oh Celestia why have you not written of being set on fire?!?"

Spark watched the single mindedness of his companion and wondered if it would be unsafe to travel the intervening devastation with his companion, but worried more what would happen if he tried to stop Shadow. "It's because her wings aren't on fire. Just the new colt-god-thing." Taking a last mouthful of grass, he added. "Either teleport or we walk to water's edge."

Shadow Orange leapt out at a very brisk trot into the enemy camp-city. Spark Impulse inwardly groaned, having hoped they could avoid this. He could not abandon his fellow soldier. Not here. No matter how insane the orange pony might be.

8.2 Bad Landing

Celestia angled down, and immediately saw the problem. Some of Prince Jack's feathers had been set on fire by the pyrotechnic display from a moment ago, and the glowing embers were flaring into new candescence by the bellows-like action of his wings. She assumed he could feel it but his flight, unsteady as a new flier was wont on his first trip under his own power, was still straight and true. She felt Luna send to them both an apology, and Jack sent back a spell that would flatten the ground and then plow it up a little. LAND SOON Celestia interpreted. Indeed his flight path would barely reach the sand before intersecting bodily with the horizon.

The young stallion alicorn didn't make it. Celestia saw him flatten his wings when he was still forty feet in the air and easily sixty feet from the shore. He plummeted and splashed into the sea with no more grace than a newborn foal.

She and her sister glided gently to the shore and waited. Trying to appease the sense of guilt she saw on Luna's face, she spoke. "At least the water will put the fire out. He'll be able to reach the ground after only swimming ten or twenty feet anyway."

Not looking away from her flight-student, the deep blue alicorn replied "I should have checked his wings as I had seen the fires started during that fight, Celly." Luna squinted, her lips pursed tighter. "And he's not using any magic at all, right now. He could raise the sand, or levitate himself, or even teleport this far." Luna struck a forehoof against the beach, the strain evident in her voice.

"He's never seen a teleport spell, Lunadeer. Probably doesn't know what they look like." But just as she said that, she felt a teleport end as a pony appeared behind her not fifteen feet away.

Both sisters whirled at the intrusion, still on high alert despite the fact the war appeared to be won, and over.

Behind them now, Prince Jack, Regent of the Rocks Beneath Your Feet, called out wearily, fatigue nearly driving his voice to sergal-levels of scratchy depths. "Feydaykin! They live, and there is now no fight. You may stand down." His splashing footfalls had the rhythm of the end of a 10-day forced march; still plodding but very short, and very slow.

"Shadow! I didn't send for you. Yes as Prince Jack says my sister and I are untouched. How did you get here? Is another guard..." She looked up, and saw her magic sensitive pegasus guard watching the six conquered sergals who were drawing in the sand, presumably trying to indicate they were not at war with the Celestial Guard any longer. "Just the two of you here?"

Looking at the lone pegasus surrounded by pony eating monsters, Luna blurted out "Your over-zealous-ness could get you both killed, you know."

Shadow Orange snorted his disbelief and proudly declared his loyalty. "I go where I am needed and useful. That is ever at my Princess' side. It is so, and your lack of faith shall not sway me, your highness."

Celestia was about to interject something to lighten the tension between her sworn body-guard and her sister, when Prince Jack, who had finally arrived at the shore's edge, did it for her.

"Then feydaykin, with you standing guard now, I may sleep." And with that, he collapsed to the sand, very gingerly folding his charred and cindered wings. He tried to fold his head too but failed; his nose just smacked into the sand. He didn't draw power to heal himself as he surely had seen the princesses do, he did not use his imported magic either, he simply slept.

Again, as when the sergal Jack had accidentally elevated himself to Regent, Luna had a face that put Tia in mind of how she'd expect her to look if someone came to a formal party, drinking longface island iced tea, out of an undecorated beer stein, and was starting to get tipsy for it.

"I'm sure he's got a reason. Maybe he has actual limits or something. Wouldn't be the first time an alicorn ran out of steam." Actually it would, and Luna's sidelong look askance at Tia said as much. Remembering what the Prince said at the farm, she added "He pony, now."

Luna raised one eyebrow.

Shadow carefully interjected "If he's not moved he'll drown, your Highnesses." And indeed the stronger waves were still covering his nostrils for seconds at a time, and the tide had only just turned.

Tia knew Shadow Orange was strong but wasn't sure if a unicorn could actually levitate an alicorn, even unconscious. Especially one connected to the rocks, and thus the ground. Tia guessed Luna still felt guilty, as it was her that began trying to levitate the sleeping prince. As soon as his body was free of the ground however he snapped to wakefulness. His struggling broke the admittedly very underpowered spell, and Jack splashed back into the rising waters.

"Luna" the prince said, then stood carefully, shaking the sand out of his mane. "You have a fan club of some renown."

Shadow Orange interjected "My liege Celestia is also not without loyal subjects. Of what concern is this, now?"

Tia felt Shadow tighten just a little bit, stiffen his stance in her peripheral vision, as Jack looked only to Luna and explained. "I have felt, and where they passed stone cliffs, heard echoes. They march on Canterlot now, these ponies of the New Lunar Republic. They say that the early rise of your moon is the sign they long sought; that the stars have aided your escape and now come to aid your ascent."

Tia quickly looked at Luna for her reaction. Thankfully all Tia could see was confusion and disbelief. *Stone cliffs, hmm?* She felt out for her sun, and followed its gaze to Canterlot. The foothills blocked the lower reaches of the path ponies would ascend. "Lunadeer can your moon see the start of that road? I can't see it this late in the day."

Tia felt the deeper reaches of Equestria, the magic that was as vast as the ocean and slow to shift its path as cold molasses, reach out and touch the moon. She felt the ebb and flow of waves of magic as Luna asked the magic around her, and it bumped into the massive ball of dirt that was her namesake, and the wave of magic roll back faster than a single piece of anything physical could reach it. The propagation of these waves would reveal to the one who controlled the moon ... "No Celly. Much too soon all the mountains are in my way."

Shadow was too quick to fight, having fought so hard these past few days. "Then we must to Canterlot, to stop this rebellion now. I shall not allow the royal sisters to be separated again so long as I walk Equestria's soil!"

All of which was politely interrupted by Jack. "They are your subjects, Luna. If you have not intended to incite a war for the New Lunar Republic, than you have but to tell them, I

would assume."

Then Jack looked at her, and his ears flicked and twisted as he considered the strategic ramifications. Tia politely awaited his opinions before choosing her actions. Which would she was already sure of, mostly. To fly home by as circuitous a route as need be so these poor ponies who seemed to hate her rule would not be incited to further emotional distress. Let them plan their silly war; Lunadeer would just tell them to wait longer. She hoped.

Heaving a deep sigh, Prince Jack continued finally, the ocean waves beginning to get her own gold plated shoes wet as they lapped past his hooves. "If you two are indeed no longer at odds with each other, I would truly believe the best and longest way to quell this uprising is to go together. Luna" He turned his head towards Tia's sister, who still held an air of skepticism about the whole affair. "you must do most of the talking as they're your followers. But if you" He turned to Tia now, ears erect and yellow eyes piercing her with his determination. "if you are supportive of your sister, these ponies will see there is no tension to exploit. I hear, occasionally, that they believe." he closed his eyes, looking like he was going to collapse again. Speaking with his eyes still closed, his head drifting to a neutral position, "that you two still fight, still hate each other."

He opened his eyes, and looked up at the darkening sky. "Can you duplicate my jet flight spell? My native magic trickles in like a tiny leak in a thin pipe. And without that I don't seem to be able to direct even the unicorn magic that some sergals wield. I must sleep to heal now, and wait to cast any magic."

Celestia regretted the place in her mind she filed this tidbit, but it was one more weakness in case he needed to be defeated one day. Either princess alone, or both together for sure, could simply outlast him. She tried to look concerned while gauging whether, right now, she could successfully kill him with a single strike, whether magical or physical.

Shadow, bless his hard and bitter heart, was way ahead of her. "He is still immortal, is he not my liege?" Meaning, Tia heard, 'I could take him myself, but he'd just be banished and no more'

Briefly Tia tried to imagine where a unicorn would banish to, especially to banish a regent. To your bedroom ... for 1000 seconds!

Lunadeer seemed to know ... her look of self righteous disbelief told Tia as much. "Are you as helpless as a foal then, Prince Jack?"

In answer, the regent walked slowly past them all; silent, head down, eyes closed, and did not stop until he was at the other gathering some distance off.

Whereupon he collapsed again, and laying flat on the sand, slept as his new-found subjects protected him.

Tia tried to mentally recreate the unending power she'd seen as they flew here hours ago. "Lunadeer why did he need to use three spells? The prince had said he would need to extend his hooves"

"Balance, Celly. He started by attaching a continuous push-spell to his spine. But that is well above a pony's center of gravity thus he needed two smaller spells, down very low, to have the resultant force push as against the ribcage height."

On the subject of magic, Shadow Orange was very quick to make suggestions about how to ephemerally attach a push spell to a whole pony's body. Spell modified, the princesses prepared to leave.

"See everyone to Canterlot, Shadow. I hope there will be no fighting but I dare not make more assumptions." Tia also suggested he leave Jack, with some basic instructions. No telling how long he'd need to sleep. "In fact, once Spark has taken you back to camp tell him to walk in with Jack. He'll be too worn out carrying you all day to be in fighting form anyway."

Shadow looked properly abashed. She hadn't said anything about it but she could have given instructions directly if he'd stayed at camp. Shadow was the only guard with her today that could fire-write. His impetuosity should be addressed Tia thought to herself. "Shadow if the situation changes I'll write you a letter via fire teleportation. You're the only one here who can do that; do you understand?" Her sycophant nodded. Hopefully that would do it.

Her zealous vassal turned to run back as the regents discussed whose idea had more merit; go together, or leave Luna to do this solo?

8.3 Outside help

Twilight was whining. She knew that, actually, but she couldn't stop herself. "Celestia's going to confront a bunch of ponies that hate her. As strange as that statement sounds it's true and I need to be there for her."

"You said that, milady." Sprintpoint's wide, musclebound form was pulling the chariot as fast as he could, treetops of the Everfree forest whipping by far below. Indeed what sparked Twilight's comment was the observation that her chariot was ahead of all the rest ... by too small an amount to satisfy her anxiety.

A part of her brain knew she was not only being unreasonable, but annoying and foolish. "I know she's the princess but I'm worried about a fight amongst ponies I mean what will she do? I need to help defend her honor, Sprintpoint. Please."

"You're only worried because you didn't see the swath of death and devastation she and her sister just left." Twilight drew breath but by now Sprintpoint knew her pattern, and had adapted to counter. "And they'll be there together again." Twilight paced once around in the tight quarters, barely able to turn in the small, light craft. Drawing breath again, she was interrupted again. "Probably no bloodshed at all, milady. But I tell you a thing, you're magical, right? A student at the academy?"

"Directly under Celestia herself, in fact. Which is why I'm so"

"So why don't you find a way to speed me up? Here's some basics about flying. The air is slowing me down, right? What I need is for there to be a lot of dense, cold air immediately beneath my wings, and essentially no air, and especially no wind, everywhere else."

Taking a deep breath, Twilight forced herself to notice that her charioteer was not slowed by the explanation; had taken no hiatus in good flying to ask for this help. But still anxiety clouded her critical thinking. "You want me to put you in a vacuum?"

Sprintpoint laughed, not even turning his head to explain her mistake. "And wind up suffocated like that magic-throwing sergal at the apple farm? No thank you, my lady." Still his wings beat a fast staccato rhythm.

"So you need air to fly, but you need to air to not be in your way. That seems sort of an awkward engineering problem, doesn't it?" Still, she started thinking about how to maneuver air. There must be something she could focus on to stop her incessant whining. And pacing.

Sprintpoint nodded. "Regular conundrum, flight is. So, not a vacuum, but how about still air, that merges smoothly with the moving air? Grab the air way out and split it up. Everything that's turbulent squash down, so I can flap my wing over it, and everything that's hitting me should sort of sit there."

When Twilight was a filly she had almost drowned herself making a bubble like she thought Sprintpoint was describing. She'd tried to descend a deep lake, and swam by moving the bubble. But the bubble of air had slowly shifted its oxygen for carbon dioxide, courtesy her lungs. "You're thinking of the air as if it was a giant ocean? As if we were fish inside water made of air?" But that couldn't be right. Oceans of air made her rather strained head hurt, just now.

Sprintpoint seemed enthusiastic, however. "Yes, just so, Twilight! An ocean of air and I'm trying to swim in it. Can you do something like that?" Still his wings beat their rhythm. Twi-

light wasn't sure if he was talking just to quiet her or if he actually saw himself as a airbreathing fish. I'm not a pegasus. Maybe flight does that to you.

She crafted and cast her spell, careful this time to allow continuous flow of the air inside her 'bubble' with outside air. As with her diving experiment she visualized a teardrop ... a bubble rising only here it was traveling parallel to the ground.

But as soon as it was cast, she could feel the cart speed up. It almost knocked her out of the chariot at first. "Attagirl! My goodness that's quite a spell."

Sprintpoint was only beating his wings half as fast now, but sweating and breathing every bit as hard ... and they were pulling away from the feydaykin, who apparently never thought to discuss flight mechanics with his winged brothers-in-legs.

Thus it was that she landed just behind the angry herd, signs hanging from their backs like "for the new lunar republic!" and "the stars will aid her escape" She saw the princess in question, unless these ponies meant Nightmare Moon, along with her older sister, overshoot the herd at incredible speeds. As she was jumping out and profusely, if quickly, thanking her flight escort, she saw them drop and turn, now approaching the herd at speeds rarely seen outside of a wonderbolts show.

Wings flared, wind blowing dust everywhere, the two princesses just barely stopped in front of the crowd, and landed. Luna was immediately in front of the slowing crowd, and Celestia was well to her right. Thinking suddenly of how alone she was, Twilight realized no pony had seen her land; they were too busy watching the princesses.

"Sprint!" Twilight hissed. "Stow the cart. Stow yourself somewhere I think I can blend in and play devil's advocate. Get them to hear the princesses out."

It was a known fact that mob psychology broke down quickly if dissenting opinions were freely voiced. Even if they were also unbelievable, the mere fact that the mob sanctity was broken allowed other dissenters to say their piece. Pieces like "oatmeal are you crazy" granted, but that kind of argument would be better than what she saw in nearly one pony if four. They wanted a fight, even against alicorn regents. Twilight shuddered, even without knowing what precisely had happened at the ocean.

Sprintpoint harrumphed, but started looking at the edges of the rocky path for a place to put the cart which thank Celestia did not have squeaky wheels. Trying as deliberately as possible to not make eye contact with her beloved teacher, she trotted to her far right, to catch up with some straggling ponies there.

"Get a load of this." Said the deep blue stallion, as she caught up to him. "How're we

supposed to believe she's doing this of her own free will, hmm?"

Twilight racked her brain for the best reply, but intrigue had never been a strong suit. She had retreated to her books ... and not very many of them history books, at that, when some of her classmates were gossiping ... practicing the very heart of intrigue. Still ... "Actually Tia there is taking a big risk. Banishing is a time consuming process. All Princess Luna has to say is she doesn't want to be here, and we'll all know before the big cheese can stop her."

She hoped she had balanced her emphasis and respect correctly. Call the disliked pony by an overly familiar name, and maintain utmost respect for the preferred underdog. Simple, right? Twilight reminded herself to breathe, almost hoping she'd started a fire already.

The blue pony harrumphed, and did not respond further.

Ahead of them, Luna looked briefly to her sister, who nodded, and gently waved her on. Celestia then stepped farther to Twilight's left, and was no longer facing the crowd. Her body language clearly meant to imply she was not trying to influence Luna's words but the apparent weakness a moment before may have ruined it. *Be strong, Princess Luna!*

Celestia must have guessed Twilight's intent, for the sisters could hardly have failed to see the cart land in front of them. But while her teacher had yet to look her way, Luna made only the briefest eye contact with Twilight, then scanned the crowd making it look like she was just making it all more personal.

Twilight crowded forward, between a wine colored unicorn mare with bricks as her cutie mark, and she didn't make out the deep gray pegasus' cutie mark, to her right. "She doesn't seem the slightest bit afraid to have big ol' Tia thirty feet behind her." Twilight tried to sound surprised, to help imply the danger Luna would be in if she were being coerced.

Which she was, Twilight suddenly realized. Luna hated large crowds. Nightmare Moon had made some public addresses a few times but relied on a psychic shield of pure contempt to avoid the unreasoning fear Luna, inside her, had felt.. Twilight hoped Luna, being in her right mind, would have better luck, as she started whatever spiel she had planned. "Good evening ladies and gentlecolts." *Or hadn't planned.* Twilight groaned inwardly, and moved forward to her left slightly.

"I see that a mutual friend of my sister and myself was correct, that you're all my loyal subjects. And hello, but I think there's something of a misunderstanding." Luna swept her eyes across the herd again, and pointed to a sandwich board sitting over a pony. It was one of the stars-will-aid signs. "That sign, and the predictions it's quoting, referred to an **evil** alicorn named Nightmare Moon."

Several ponies shouted to the effect that she *was* Nightmare Moon. Twilight's heart stopped for a moment. Luna was incredibly sensitive about her relation to her inner darkness. It was actually true, in a sense. The two alicorns were the same pony.

Twilight didn't want to identify herself but risked it anyway by shouting "Who was at that Summer Sun in Ponyville? This alicorn doesn't look like Nightmare Moon"

Oops. Wrong allusion, she realized.

Four ponies that Twilight didn't specifically remember, as if in that dense crowd that meant anything at all, spoke up in agreement. This was not Nightmare Moon. She would have a deeper blue coat, and black wings. The crowd began to murmur, to mumble ... this alicorn was a stand in, a stooge for the tyrant. Perhaps even an illusion made from whole cloth.

Luna flared her wings wide; the crowd hushed almost instantly. Twilight feared the worst. That a line had been crossed and they all were going to die, right here. Twilight would never even get to say goodbye. She desperately looked for her mentor's eyes, tried to will Celestia so she could mouth an 'I love you' or something else appropriate for your last words ...

Princess Celestia was grinning her trollish grin. Still not looking at the crowd, Twilight saw her pretend she was examining her hoof but knew, somewhere inside her, that the motion was directed discreetly at her. "stay put" the hoof motion said.

And with that she could breathe. Luna was practically shouting to fill the lull, before somepony filled it with their own words. "I am Princess Luna, Regent of the Moon and immortal co-ruler of Equestria with my sister Celestia, whom you see to my right." At this she sort of lost focus, her face screwed up in confusion. She turned to Celestia and asked so quietly Twilight had to strain to hear Luna quickly whisper "Are we actually immortal, Celly?"

Princess Celestia's eyes glowed with an ear to ear grin, but the lips were tightly pursed into almost normalcy. Almost. Celestia shrugged, and Luna looked back to her loyal subjects. "Anyway I don't answer to Nightmare Moon and you should all be thankful. If you want a tyrant to rule with selfish lack of concern look for her on the throne. But I will not be among those who will call for her."

Twilight, sidling forward another row, mumbled to the ponies in front of her "Maybe she learned something useful during her exile."

The mare to Twilight's right, her coat the yellow of a urine-stain for lack of a better metaphor Twilight decided not to spend time thinking of some other name for that unfortunate coat color chose but instead focus on her brilliant blue-striped red mane, took Twilight's com-

ment another direction entirely. Shouting at the tall pony addressing them, "So was it even you who that all-white flying freak banished? Who spent the time on the moon? But you're another pony, you just said."

Twilight could almost see the strain on Luna's face, not to look Twilight in the eye. She hoped the herd would see it as determination to address the seriousness of the question. "It was I. I remember those thousand years as clearly as the years before, when I still was Luna. And if any of thee be descended from those ponies I wronged by jealousy and rage, than I apologize to thee in proxy of thy many-times-great grand dams and grand sires. Most of whom I am ashamed to say I wronged, by murdering them. So I doubt many of thee be related at all."

Some stallion far to the right of the herd shouted "What of the moonrise? The stars have aided your ascent! Now is the time for battle my lady!"

Luna winced at the mention of more battle. Hoping to forestall another murmuring session Twilight tried to give Luna the main stage again. "Why! Why did you raise the moon early?" Twilight shifted forward within the herd, making sure everypony could hear her.

Luna saw who had asked, and blinked. She was either at a loss either for words or was as bad as Twilight at intrigue and subterfuge. Several other ponies took up the cry of "why?" and a stallion near the front even shouted "Have you not called for us? There are hundreds more my liege!"

Twilight rolled her eyes, feeling pretty certain this was probably way more than half of the Nightmaremoon party's whole roster right here. For all of Equestria if not farther.

"I was in a battle." Almost a whisper, but the crowd quieted to hear their herd-proclaimed leader speak. "I was about to fight the most horrible monsters I've yet seen set hoof on Equestria's soil, and I was afraid I was going to die." After a false start on her next sentence, she instead flared her wings again. This time Twilight saw Luna's horn glow, and felt certain she was calling down lightning to kill some pony. So everyone would know what it was like to see death. To be dead. Twilight scurried away from that terrible gaze.

And as Luna folded her wings the magic student suddenly understood that a fear aura had brought this unreasoning fear of death. Luna was explaining again, "And when you're afraid you don't always make the best decisions. I wanted to raise the moon one last time. I wanted make sure I didn't have to stop fighting just to cast such an un-battlelike spell. And as my sister had not yet set the sun to bed, so too would some young filly somewhere not yet be in bed and perhaps" Luna took a shuddering breath as a single tear began its descent down

her face, that old fear of being forgotten and ignored still gripping the regent. "Perhaps that filly would see the foal's moon and know happiness, instead of the misery that war brings."

Luna hung her head, and someone in the front row, now just a few ponies to her right and one row up, shouted angrily "So, what? We just go home, your majesty?"

Twilight tried to head this one off too. "There was a mistake; her majesty just said the moon thing was nothing about you all all." The stallion whipped his head around, and this time she thought she recognized him from the Ponyville Summer Sun Celebration crowd.

The periwinkle eyed, dark-green coated stallion certainly recognized Twilight. "You! You're the mistake! You're the tyrant's personal stooge aren't you! Miss too-good-to-buy-commoner-goods! What do you mean by this ruse!" Now whipping his head to bear down on her teacher, he continued his senseless tirade. "Tyrant Tia! What do you mean by planting this spy among us?"

From behind the herd a galloping orange pony shouted "She don't mean nothin' by it! Tarnation is your head made o' brick? She buys mah apples lots o' times!" Twilight nearly leapt for joy like a little filly! She wasn't alone anymore!

Well except for the two princesses but it was hard to feel they related to you. Anyway looking downhill over the crowd Twilight saw Rainbow Dash leap up to awkwardly fly to the front of the crowd. She noticed as Dash did that, that two thirds of the herd was watching the princesses for their response ... but all the pegasi were watching the tell-tale errors in flight. Not to mention the three feathers that drifted free.

Feeling confidence return, Twilight responded to her attacker. "I am indeed the personal protégé of Princess Celestia, and an honors roll student at the Canterlot academy of magic. And I will tell you all without hesitation that I also support fully Princess Luna because she also is a friend of mine.

Of course that was a slight exaggeration as she'd only spoken with Luna a few times but Twilight sensed a kindred spirit, a lover of deep study appreciative of long nights spent in the library.

As Applejack made it around the herd's edge, Twilight saw the damaged hoof had a large boot around it. As her friends gathered around her Twilight told them "C'mon girls I think we need to support Luna just now." and waved them on with her nose.

Surrounded by the element wielders now, Luna sat carefully and regarded her followers silently. Celestia stood, and finally turned and addressed the assemblage. "I recognize many faces in this crowd, and for some I know you have traveled hard and fast on such short notice

to be here tonight. My apologies for the misunderstanding but your services are clearly not needed so I would offer instead, one night free at the Inn, and you can return to your normal lives tomorrow. For some, I know you have chosen the nocturnal lifestyle, perhaps to honor my sister and I'm sure she thanks you, but that means your workday has just begun."

Here she looked straight at the front row pony that had accused Twilight of being the tyrant's personal spy. "Brave Runner, is your food wagon nearby? I'm sure you could sell bean burritos and cabbage sandwiches all night. Canterlot's a big town, lots of ponies awake at this hour. Who knows you might even meet friendly faces in the crowd."

Brave Runner shook his deep blue mane and sputtered for an answer. Princess Celestia didn't give him any time to recover, calling for her guard Sprintpoint who was hiding in the rocks behind the herd. "Yes your majesty?"

"Help Brave Runner get his mobile meal cart set up out in front of the Inn, and you can call it a day." Walking over to the earth pony, she summoned a bag that Twilight guessed to be filled with money. "Everyone gets one of something. And you can keep the change if there is any, alright?" The bag dropped in front of the stallion, bits clinking together. Brave Runner stared blankly at his money, looking empty and defeated.

The herd filed carefully past the alicorns, except for the nocturnal neighsayer and the guard, both of whom had run downhill to retrieve Brave Runner's source of income.

All the tension of speaking in front of a crowd suddenly dissipated out of Luna as Twilight heard her sigh deeply, and drop from a sitting to a laying position, curled up in the middle of the rocky dirt road. Looking to her sister, she commented "Have I said how much I don't like doing these public address things?" and now back at her ring of personal supporters "I thank all of thee. That wouldn't have gone so well without thy help. Especially thy poor flight, Rainbow Dash thou wert the epitome of war wounded. Err. I" suddenly blushing Luna looked off at the rocks and stuttered a little, trying to find a way to word that more valiantly.

Pinkie Pie giggled until Rainbow Dash cracked a smile. "That was pretty pitiful wasn't it? You know as successful as today has been and all, I'd really like not to have another like it. You know?"

Chapter 9

Final

Prince Jack walked slowly through the woods, grunting to his tall bipedal companions, finally repeating himself in Ponish. "And that's how Equestria was made!"

Spark Impulse walked close behind the still overtired alicorn, hoping not to get collapsed on again but not willing to rescind his duty either. He watched the feathered rumps twitch as their owners laughed and pointed, their claws waving madly in what moonlight filtered through the canopy.

He decided he was just as glad not to know what their handsigns meant.