

Celestia stood before the remains of Canterlot Castle and did her best to keep a straight face. On the castle grounds before her, were hundreds - no, thousands of cedar coffins, lined in a row. They were situated so their heads faced the morning sun. The small pedestal usually reserved for the Summer Sun Celebration was out in its full glory, as was she. Instead of her formal dress, she was gilded in new golden armor, which reflected the sun into the colors of her mane. A line of spear ponies stood at attention behind her, while the Pegasus Guard stood in the ruined towers.

Along the grass before her were the survivors - stallions, mares, fillies and colts. All of them had witnessed the terrible destruction Discord had wrought on the city. Each of them gave a part of themselves to defend it, but to no avail. They were ponies without a home, but not without a country.

News had spread of the fall of Canterlot - so damaged was the city, it threatened to slide down into the valley below at any moment. Even with the repairs, the city would be lost to inhabitants for years until it was safe once more. Ponies from all over the nation had risen up to the task, bringing food, water, and temporary shelter to their capital. They helped to empty the grand history from the college and castle - archives which spanned over a millenia of study. Soon Manehattan would carry these artifacts and treasures through these dark times.

But more so than ever in the past week, Celestia had been preparing for her official speech to address the nation at large. Many hours of planning and review had consumed her time in the lower archives as she prepared to speak to her subjects. All of her other time had been spent studying the northern fronts - troop movements, refugee patterns - for anything that would help her find Discord.

But in reality, Cunning couldn't be anything more than frustrated. Vengeance had been unexpectedly killed in her attack on the castle - a horrid blow to his plans. It was only after receiving word of her failure in ousting First Strike that his tensions eased. Whoever stayed behind to fight Celestia in the north had already sent their taunting letters to him. The guard was furious. The survivors were ready to take arms and march north and his leak to the press sent the nation howling for action. Of course there were some - like Desert Wind - who wanted to avoid direct conflict, but the support was already there. Ponies were leaving their homes to join the Royal Army, or sending specialists to prepare armor and weapons for the coming storm.

Little did they know the storm had come and gone. It was a matter of principle to Cunning, that he should follow up on his promises. He would take the world to bring Celestia's love. But it wouldn't end there. He would enslave it. No pony would escape his grasp, lest they be crushed underhoof.

"Princess? We're ready." Whispered Nightwind.

Cunning slipped back into his assumed persona, looking over the crowd. They were speaking in hushed tones, or grieving silently for some lost loved one. The pain they felt was palpable. It was... exhilarating.

Celestia nodded to her guards. The thrum of magic slowly spread out over the crowd, reaching out to every corner of the country. Phonographs, speakers, even film reels began to move on their own in homes and businesses. Ponies in Times Square stopped to listen to the voice hover into the city. Casinos in Las Pegasus honed in on gambler and owner alike, turning them from their games and their livings.

“Attention citizens of Equestria. This is a live broadcast from Canterlot Castle. Please listen carefully to the following address from Her Majesty, Princess Celestia.”

A short pause followed the initial address. The unicorn nodded to the Princess, who took her place on the podium

Time to forge a nation, Cuning thought.

"My loyal subjects. It is with a heavy heart that I speak to you now. One week ago, at the hour of midnight, this city - the symbol of our great Kingdom, was subject to the most brutal attack seen in pony history.

“For hours, both guard and citizen alike battled to keep the forces of chaos at bay... and while they finally prevailed, it was a bitter victory. Canterlot is no more.

“But these citizens knew from the moment they picked up a weapon to defend this city, there was more at stake. While it was a slim hope that the city could be saved, they fought for the survival of our nation - the survival of harmony.

“It is for this reason they fought. It is for this reason, I am taking a stand.”

Celestia paused for a moment to catch her breath. But her words held conviction now - the ferocity of the Goddess of the Sun was slowly being poured into her speech.

"We have come to a point where we must decide whether to keep our nation, or let it be destroyed. Countless families have been shaken and many more have been torn apart.

“Five years ago, many loyal ponies died because their fear was manipulated and molded into a terrible weapon. Even while they fought, the very pony leading our country’s destruction was no more than a puppet. The one behind the strings knew it would fail, and expected it to do so.

“While it pains me to open old wounds on a day of mourning, it must be said that the Civil War was just a test - a trial for the conflict to come, so that rather than fight, we would fall apart at the seams. Just to make sure that we were still vulnerable, Discord expertly sent Starfall’s former minions to strike at the very fears used to control us.

“Once more we have lost families on a scale as grand as Cloudsdale. We have lost Canterlot - its stallions, mares, even foals-" She choked on the word, fighting back the urge to scream. "And I... I have lost as well. My sister. My niece. My subjects. My home.

"Though Discord sought to divide us through loss, we now stand on equal ground.

"My loyal subjects... It is time to fight back.

“No longer shall we watch our cities burn and our love ones be taken from us. We will not sit here and wait for chaos to consume the rest of our lives, and the lives of generations to come.

“From this day forward, any pony seen to be assisting or associating with Discord or his forces, shall be considered a threat to this very nation; no, the world.

“Finally, I hereby declare that a state of war shall exist with any nation that finds it within its interests to side with this monster, so that the world will be safe once more.”

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After days of hard flying through the freezing north, it came as a surprise when the temperature shot up to that of a warm spring day in a matter of hours. The mountains, which had gotten much taller as they flew, gradually tapered off into bright green hills dotted in wildflowers. Small geysers blasted the air with steam right around the transition area, making for a little bit of a rougher flight. At least, that was what she expected - after all, years of weather training told her that sudden changes in temperature were rough on flyers.

Instead, she felt nothing - the change over into the thermals was gradual, flawlessly smooth even. That's when she noticed the other creatures flying around the deepening valley and her jaw dropped.

Watching the birds gave her a distinct overview of the common flight trails - each of them was neatly organized, allowing for hundreds of birds to pass over one another without slamming into each other all while coasting on the hot air. It was as if something had designed these flight paths, or manipulated existing ones to flow as they did. To her knowledge, very few weather ponies could even do that sort of thing, albeit on a very small scale. Here... this was beyond her imagination.

“You're gonna be swallowing flies if you don't close your mouth, Rainbow!” Applejack called. It was barely audible through the wind, but Rainbow did as she was suggested. She gave a small frown at the farmer, who looked like she was laughing. Though at this speed, anything short of yelling was drowned out.

Applejack held on tight to the big dragon while ensuring Twilight and Dawn weren't going to fall off. *If only he had a saddle*, she thought. It immediately brought up an image of Rarity strapping him in, fussing over the details. She laughed even harder as Spike banked to the right for a descent. He pointed down to a small mountain, right in the center of the valley. Gilda and Rainbow flanked him on either side before they began to land.

The mountain itself was rather hollow - only noticeable as they approached. Every bit of it was worked stone, featuring murals, decorative pieces, landing areas, and small gardens. Waterfalls poured out from the sides of the mountains, while streams of lava poured into open bowls, dug out of the stone. As they drew closer to one such landing area, Gilda noticed the lava was being channelled into the mountain by small pipes.

The moment they landed, two other dragons appeared from inside. Rainbow swallowed. They did not look happy to see them. It didn't help that they were plated in steel, carrying halberds reaching nearly as high as the roof of sugarcube corner. Being with Spike didn't help either. They were two or three times his size at least. Considering he could barely carry three ponies, these dragons were much, **much** older.

“Shiikah.” They spoke in unison, bowing.

“I have an emergency. Bring us to the king,” he said.

They eyed the Gryffon warily, until they noticed the sword she was carrying. Their eyes went wide.

“The end times have truly come!” One spoke, his voice wavering.

“Quiet, Vrak,” the other spoke. His voice was deep and smooth, devoid of the low growl Rainbow and Applejack expected. “Do not be rude to the Empress or the Bearers of Order.” He stepped aside, motioning with his claw, “This way, esteemed guests, Shiikah.”

The halls were adorned with more of the artwork Rainbow had seen outside - mainly murals and decorative molding. But this time, the pictures told a different story. Grand armies stood on either side of the hall, with their leaders standing on the high ground. By where they entered, several unicorns, backed by a gryffon, an alicorn, and some strange serpentine creature stood on the walls of a city. Above them it appeared as though some ponylike creature - almost an alicorn - hovered over the battle.

As they progressed, they witnessed those on the front lines of the battle - all sorts of creatures fighting one another. Flags lay trampled on the ground, with no discernible symbols or markings to identify the nations. But as they approached the throne room, they spotted two recognizable figures immediately:

“The Princesses...” Applejack whispered. “What the hay are they doin’ on a mural way up north?”

Spike stayed silent and stared ahead, gingerly carrying Twilight and Dawn in his arms.

“Spike? What’s this all about?”

“It’s complicated,” he said shortly. It was clear he wasn’t saying anything else on the subject. Applejack tried to push the issue as they entered the central hall, but very quickly retracted any such thought on the matter at hoof.

The king was one of the largest dragons both Rainbow or Applejack had ever seen. The dragon the six of them had dealt with taking a nap all those years ago was about as big as these guards. The king dwarfed them in size.

His scales were a deep crimson-gold which reflected the torch light throughout the main hall. The spines were each a brilliant silver, but honed like curved steel blades. He turned his head to the newcomers, opening his glossy blue eyes to the room.

“My student. You return with guests,” he spoke. His voice rumbled through the hall like thunder. “My meditation revealed their identities after you began your journey back. I am glad I dispatched you on the errand of observation. I expected no less than action.”

Spike bowed before the King.

The King laughed softly, “A student does not bow to his teacher, for he can never learn when he believes he is lower. Rise, Spike.”

Spike rose, blushing from embarrassment. The others, who had bowed in kind, did not dare to rise in kind.

“You may rise, my guests. I am King Thereweil, Grand Master of Runes and most ancient

amongst Dragon-kind. Dark times have brought you to my doorstep. I'm sure you are aware."

He rose to his full height, which unnerved the guards ever so slightly, although enough that the animal part of Gilda's brain was ready to flee from the room. She silenced it as best as she could but stayed stock still.

He waved his hand over the room and the walls slid away and into the floor. Hidden behind them was a library to rival the one in Canterlot Castle. A soft blue glow covered the books, emanating from a giant sapphire fixed at the top of each shelving unit. "My personal library. Of the many tomes within it, one holds the knowledge you seek. He picked a huge green tome from the shelf and placed it on the floor.

It was the size of a pony, bound together with roots and vines. The covers seemed alive. Plant life grew on the book - flowers, grasses, and small bulbs had long since taken root. He opened the book and with his free claw began to accumulate magic. It glowed with golden light, almost like a unicorn's horn.

"Bring me the young Princess," He said softly.

Spike gingerly lowered Dawn to the floor before his master. The elder dragon summoned a pillow from his throne and slid it underneath the young filly. He removed his claw from the book, and pressed one against the nearly shattered emerald. The other, shrouded in magic, was brought to rest over the tome.

The book seemed to convulse and wiggle out of the way. But instead, the pages flared wildly, flipping deep into the center of the book. Just as suddenly as it began, the book stopped and lay frozen.

"Ah... I should have guessed," he whispered. his brow furrowed in concern. "Vrak. Fetch me a bowl of geyser water. Ferid, bring me another emerald. Move quickly!"

They nodded and scrambled into the halls.

"Twilight Sparkle will have to wait. Draining a bit of one's life magic won't kill. Death's Vein however, will bring a most agonizing death - one I would never wish on a child."

Rainbow looked horrified, and screamed, "What do you mean death? They both almost died?!"

The King looked hard at the pegasus, causing her to shrink back. "I know it is in your nature, Loyalty, but you must calm yourself. I can heal the young Princess. My student has already saved her mother from a similar fate. Had he not arrived, she may have fixed the poison herself - but at a cost of her own life once more."

Rainbow gawked at him and Applejack flopped onto the floor from the shock. Spike lowered his eyes to the floor.

"I know the pain you must feel at my words. I know you will take no solace to hear that her outburst was to protect you - her friends - and her child. It is rare that any being can access the energy of the body - rarer still that she can shape a spell with it."

Rainbow quickly turned around and bolted from the Grand Hall.

"Rainbow!" Applejack yelled, giving chase. It was fruitless, she knew - but it was dangerous

to go out by herself.

Gilda watched the two disappear down the hall, before bowing to the King and following afterwards.

The King looked down at the little filly, using his free claw to brush back her mane. “How the sins of family bind those who are innocent to their punishment. Yet, you still have your part to play.”