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Entering Faerie for the second time was difficult for Sunset, not just due to how things had gone previously, but also because it felt just a little like going home and she didn't want to ask herself if it was because of the place's magical similarity to Equestria, because she was ***of*** Faerie now or because Luna was here and she had Sunset's name for an eye, which itself was two insanities in a trench coat all on its own.

As much as she would have liked to stay behind and let Luna's father enter Faerie alone, though, it wasn't actually an option. Small measures of guilt aside—bundled up in the trench coat with the insanities, probably—Luna had Sunset's Faerie-tainted ***physicality***, whatever that really meant, and without Sunset taking it back, the girl probably wouldn't be able to leave.

Wait—no. That wasn't why she was risking herself coming back. That would be stupid. She wanted her physicality back because it was ***hers***. Sunset didn't want to be any more fae than she had to be, and remaining a magical being made of ideas and concepts was too much even if she didn't really know what that meant. She knew she didn't want it.

What she ***did*** want, of course, was to be able to leave this place behind again, and... well, there was a bit of a contradiction there. You might even call it a problem, because if Luna gave Sunset back her Faerie-tainted physicality, then ***Sunset*** wouldn't be able to leave, and that was a sacrifice she wasn't willing to make.

She was Sunset Shimmer. She didn't ***make*** sacrifices. Not for other people.

Even if she wouldn't even be able to say those words—that name—if not for Luna.

...

Damn it.

Maybe Luna's father would know what to do. He seemed to have an answer to everything they came across, all prepared in advance and packed up in a single large bag that he strapped around his arms and carried on his back. Most of it was practical equipment for hiking, effective enough that she had to rush to keep up with him and his long legs, even through the underbrush.

Still, now that Luna had sort-of-not-really explained the 'cold iron' thing to her, the number of bits, bobs and buckles on his outfit made of dull, gray metal with the occasional spot of rust took on a new meaning, to say nothing of the cleated boots and barbed hiking stick he used as a third leg to steady himself as he raced into the forest, forcing Sunset to augment her run by clumsily flapping her new wings, taking to the air in short hops and bursts in order to keep up.

For all that Xenophilius seemed ready to use his iron gear to stomp and stab his way to his captured daughter, though, he surprised Sunset by pulling something else out of his pack at the first sight of the tall, pointy-eared humanoids that faeries took the form of under the metaphysical influence of Luna and her father.

The thing that Xenophilius brought out wasn't any kind of weapon as she might have expected—at least, not a traditional one, anyway. It certainly did the job better than anything Sunset could have imagined, though. She wasn't sure what it was, at first, appearing to be nothing more than some kind of bell-shaped object on a handle. Reassuringly, this proved that Sunset's eyes did, in fact, work, because that's exactly what it was: a bell on a handle.

An iron bell.

It worked exactly as you'd think it wouldn't, which is to say, the moment he rang it, letting out a high, flat 'ting' that seemed to stretch out like the sound of a tuning fork, the faeries ***burned***, clutching their ears and fleeing where possible.

Half a second after Sunset realized that that was a real thing that was actually happening, she flinched back at the thought that her current state wasn't entirely as different from them as she'd like, but fortunately, she was apparently still different *enough*, as all that happened was her standing there listening to the ring of the bell dying out and having to hurry even harder to catch up to Xenophilius, who was still striding confidently forward with more determination than Sunset had ever seen in a single person.

As Sunset followed, she spotted the form of one of the faeries that hadn't been able to get away lying on the ground, pale skin shriveled with burns, writhing in pain, and for the second time seeing it, Sunset was struck by the brutality with which the faeries' weakness was wielded.

Not that they didn't seem to deserve it.

Sunset only had to remember the iridescent, opaline seelie queen sitting on her throne, acting kind and magnanimous as she took advantage of Sunset's naïveté about the world she'd found herself in in order to have very little of her already limited pool of empathy to spare for them.

Very little wasn't none, though, and she couldn't help but wonder if the faerie left behind, curled up on itself in pain, was even in possession of its own name, or if it had ever had a choice in the matter.

Fortunately, there wasn't much time for Sunset to think too much on the issue as they raced through the dark forest to the unseelie city, and after the first example, the mere threat of the iron bell was enough to clear the way... mostly. Xenophilius only had to ring the bell once more, at the gate of the castle, to make his way inside.

Now that they were there, of course, Sunset realized that she didn't actually have any idea how to get up to the tower where they were keeping Luna by hoof—first, because she'd gotten there by teleportation before, and second, because they weren't keeping her in a tower at all, but dragging her out by the hair.

Sunset saw red. Actually, she saw white, and it was that particular iridescent, opaline white that didn't fit in with the rest of the décor that had her seeing red. She knew that seelie, even as a tall, blonde, voluptuous, pointy-eared humanoid. She would always remember the creature that had done everything in her power to own her, and though she was too far away to actually tell, she'd swear she could see the scars of a chain of paperclips around her neck.

Sunset didn't wait for Xenophilius; the instant she spotted Luna in the literal hands of Titania, she pulled the barbed iron walking stick from Xenophilius with her telekinesis and teleported between the two of them in a blast of fire. This time, rather than an easily predicted blast from her horn, Sunset was already in the process of swinging her appropriated weapon when she appeared, and the iron struck true with a sickening ***crack,*** forcing Titania's arm up and causing the hand fisted in Luna's hair to loosen from the pain.

Titania reeled back, hissing in a manner more appropriate for the bug-pony form that Sunset had first met her in. Undeterred, Sunset swung again, but the seelie queen had already been backing away from the moment the iron touched her skin and the second swing fell short.

"You!" Titania growled, clutching her injured arm to her chest. Apparently, even the force of the blow was exaggerated in the case of an iron weapon, because the limb was badly broken, crooked in a way that sent an uneasy of disquiet mixed with sick, guilty satisfaction to settle in her stomach.

Sunset wanted very much to press the attack, and pay the seelie queen back for tricking her into eating her food and giving her her name, but she wanted even more to get out of this cursed place, so she held back and instead focused on getting Luna to her feet.

Now, Sunset wasn't the most observant of ponies when it came to other people, but even with her hunched over and crying, Sunset could tell that there was something different about her from the girl she'd left behind half an hour ago, aside from the delicate black dress that she was wearing.

The delicate black dress that she was taking off in the middle of their escape.

Sunset gaped, utterly baffled at her rescuee having a sudden fashion emergency. "W—what are you doing?!" she shouted. "This isn't the time to be worrying about what you're wearing!"

Luna gave Sunset one of her confused looks that suggested that ***she*** was the weird one for asking the question. "I told you, didn't I?" she said, dropping her gaze to the floor and biting the joint of her finger. "I didn't hallucinate that, did I? I'm sure I mentioned it, but it's been so long..."

Sunset didn't get the chance to pry any more of an explanation out of the girl, because as soon as Titania had put a measure of distance between herself and any more implements of iron than she turned and summoned up a crashing wave of water that filled the entire corridor.

She had, however, not put ***enough*** distance between herself and any more implements of iron, because as the wave of water came crashing closer, so did Luna's father, bringing to bear the ringing of the iron bell for the third time.

If Sunset had been surprised by the effectiveness of the iron bell on its first use, it was nothing to seeing the tide of Titania's magic turned away by the wave of sound. There didn't seem to be any use that the bell couldn't be put to in opposition to the fae.

...Which is why it was unfortunate that an arrow the size of a spear came from down the hall behind Titania and struck the bell and, from the lack of ringing that followed, apparently fouling it.

The figure that followed after the arrow, having been the one to fire it, appeared as a tall pointy-eared humanoid, clearly male even to Sunset's eye, bare-chested and muscled beneath a cloak of emerald green leaves, but not wide. The man had an heir of dignity about him, with a well-trimmed, salt and pepper beard and matching hair in a fine weave of braids.

"Oberon," Luna whispered, shrinking back and wanting to be anywhere but there, to which Sunset was inclined to agree. Where Titania was tempestuous and wild, he had a more solid wisdom to him that told very little, like an old-oak forest that was mad at you for hurting his wife.

Without the iron bell to ward off the fae, the situation had suddenly become rather more immediately threatening and Sunset made the executive decision to get them all the hell out of there. It strained her to teleport not only Luna but also her much larger father, but a pissed off seelie king was good motivation and her recent ascension was an unexpectedly heavy thumb on the scales as well, and the fire of her teleport managed to whisk them away before any of that potential threat could be realized.

Things got very hectic just then, though the déjà vu of fleeing another faerie city with an army at their tails was broken up by Luna somehow managing to divest herself of her remaining clothes and undergarments and the fact that it isn't déjà vu if the previous experience actually happened.

The previous experience meaning the fleeing the city thing, not Luna's sudden aversion to haute couture. Sunset still had no idea why the child was now streaking out of the city naked and, frankly, she wasn't entirely sure she

wanted to know. It certainly wasn't important when they were only narrowly being missed by Oberon's arrows on their way out of another hostile city.

Fleeing into the wilderness was both easier and harder than fleeing down the mountain had been. On the one hoof, the foliage was excellent cover from sight and oversized arrows, but on the other, it was significantly more treacherous to traverse at speed, and Luna had to be carried by her father because, again, she'd chosen to do the chase scene naked—not that the dress she'd been wearing had come with footwear appropriate for a daring woodland escape regardless. The stilted shoes that had been left behind in the castle had probably been meant to hobble her.

Sunset was just realizing that they hadn't ran into any unseelie patrols for quite a while, nor had they seen the seelie diarchs since escaping the city, when the reason for said discrepancy became clear.

Why give chase when you could head someone off at their obvious destination?

Rather than a random spot the same as any other in an overgrown forest, the portal back to the human world was now at the center of a large, sun-dappled clearing, and between them and the portal stood Titania and Oberon, half again as tall as the thin, blonde, pale woman standing between them wearing a simple white summer dress and weighed down by heavy golden chains.

The family resemblance was clear.

The whispered "Momma," from Luna just confirmed what Sunset had already guessed. This was Pandora Lovegood; the mother whose loss Luna had cited for her dislike of the fae.

Xenophilius put down Luna and pulled a shotgun out of his pack.

Sunset blinked. She didn't realize that humans had shotguns, but she supposed that Xenophilius did have a printing press, so maybe it wasn't that odd. From the look of it, the Seelie didn't agree, and their tall stature made them easy targets, though she didn't expect he would actually fire with his lost wife right there.

She turned out to be wrong, twice over; first in assuming that he wouldn't fire, and second, that his wife was right there. The thunderous ***boom*** of the shotgun shook the clearing, scattering what became evident as an illusion like leaves in the wind.

The trio of two seelie diarchs and their captive appeared next at the edge of the clearing, and Xenophilius must have been seeing something that Sunset wasn't, because he once again fired again without hesitation, peppering the trees beyond with tiny, deadly pellets that Sunset could only assume would be as viciously effective against any fae as they were at tearing down their illusions.

Xenophilius let the arm aiming the shotgun slacken slightly as he scanned the tree line for the real seelie diarchs and his wife, but for whatever reason, there was no immediate sign and Sunset could see that he was tempted to go after them. He was clearly torn between his lost wife and the daughter that was dependent on him, and when his guilty glance shifted from Luna to Sunset as if he'd only just then remembered that she was there, Sunset knew what he was going to do.

No. Just no. Absolutely not.

Xenophilius set the shotgun on the ground and kneeled in front of Luna, one hand on her shoulder, the other under her chin. "Luna, honey—my little crabapple," he said, looking her in the eyes. "I want you to go home with Sunset, alright? Just go home and wait. Can you do that for me?"

Luna sniffled and nodded, answering in a voice raspy from disuse. "Okay, daddy."

Xenophilius stayed that way for a while, letting the moment stretch on as he drank in the sight of his daughter, committing her image to memory. "Merlin, sweet pea, when did you get so big?" he mused. "You're growing up so fast; you'll be fine—and I'll be fine—and I'll bring mommy back. I promise."

Sunset looked away as Xenophilius kissed his daughter on the forehead and gave her a crushing hug. Soon enough, though, he was picking the shotgun back up and doing something with his wand.

And then he was gone, the asshole.

Still, Sunset didn't want to be in this world any longer than necessary, so she wasted no time in using her telekinesis to drag Luna by the hand into the center of the clearing.

You know, come to think of it, maybe one of them should have explained to Luna's father the whole thing where Sunset had eaten food from this place and Luna had taken that onto herself to allow her to go get help, because that might have been relevant to his decision-making process.

"So, uhh... you got this?" Sunset awkwardly asked, tilting her head in the direction of the way home, marked as it was on the other side by a ring of mushrooms.

...

You know, come to think of it, Xenophilius kind of had a point even if he'd missed it entirely. Sunset didn't have much of an eye for humans, but Luna did look a hoof taller than she had an hour ago, and she wasn't even wearing those precariously stilted shoes that the faeries had dressed her in.

Well, it probably had something to do with having borrowed Sunset's physicality, which she was really, really hoping she'd be getting back soon. Sort of. Maybe. As long as it didn't stop her from going home—or just anywhere that wasn't this nightmare of a world.

Rather than answer, Luna focused on the portal as if she could see it. She had her left eye closed, which made sense, she thought at first, but on second thought... did it? That was the eye that Sunset's name had replaced and was allowing Luna to see what Sunset saw, and not wanting the distraction was understandable, but if the eye saw what ***Sunset*** saw, then did Luna closing it actually do anything?

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Sunset closed her own left eye, just in case it actually mattered.

Luna reached her hand out and pushed it against the portal as Sunset had done before for her own tests, and she clearly felt a similar pain, as her hand tensed up and she pulled it away quickly, holding it against her chest and massaging it with her other hand to soothe it.

Sunset was getting a little worried about Luna, but then, of course she was, since the girl was her only hope of finding her way out of this place relatively intact, and that there was something about Luna to be concerned about went without saying.

In the little time that Sunset had known her, Luna had been... strange, but enthusiastic, at least in regards to anything other than the fae. Now she was still strange, but also more than a little dotty and distracted.

The concern was apparently unwarranted, though, or at least not an urgent issue, because after a short period of giving off the impression of a bird confused by a mirror, Luna nodded her head, turned to her and answered with a simple, "Yes," Luna confirmed with more of a casual certainty than Sunset would have expected, though it was certainly a bit of a relief. "There will be side effects," she added.

"Side effects?" Sunset parroted with some concern. "Look. At this point I don't care if you turn me into a—" She was going to say 'turn me into a human' as a matter of hyperbole, but given how a few words had already gotten her in trouble here, she suddenly felt that maybe she should just keep her mouth shut. "Just... Just give me back what you borrowed and get us out of here. I don't care how."

"Yes," Luna said, in no particular hurry. "I think you do. It is rather important, you see, that you see. It must be a trade. Half of what makes you physical for half of what makes me."

Curse her big mouth—but she hadn't even said anything! Sunset didn't want to dither, but she couldn't help it. "And what's that supposed to do? It's not going to turn me into some... human-pony hybrid, is it?" she asked with a great deal of concern and apprehension, because she really would still do it if it would get them out of here.

Luna gave Sunset a look and this time it really did seem like she was seriously wondering if she was really asking that. To Sunset's chagrin, it took her a moment to realize what she was missing—the fact that Luna had equal parts of their two physicalities already and she still looked perfectly human, if a little taller, and the opposite was true of Sunset, but without the height difference, which was weird, but whatever.

"Oh... right," Sunset said, looking away for a moment. "But—hold on—" she interjected. "How does that help anything, if you have half and half already and you can't do it?"

"But I don't have half and half," Luna corrected her. "I have two wholes."

That... maybe that did actually make sense, she supposed. If Sunset's tainted physicality was acclimated to the faerie lands' level of magic and needed that level of magic to survive, then Luna's own physicality wouldn't dilute that need, only raise it even higher.

Sunset shook her head. "Whatever. Fine, fine, just do it already!"

The answer was quite simple. "You have to take yours back before the trade can be made, if you want the pieces to fit."

It didn't come from Luna, though.

Sitting there, arms—one of them in a cast—around her knees in her iridescent white dress and watching the two of them with open curiosity, was Titania.

Sunset leapt to face the seelie queen, but Titania just sat there placidly as if she was interested in what Sunset was doing but not really worried about it.

There was an obvious reason for that of course; neither Sunset nor Luna had so much as a stitch of clothing between them, let alone anything made of iron. For a second, Sunset thought that she might still have Xenophilius' hiking stick in that weird way where things in this world could just be there when you remember you have them, but she seemed to be out of luck there. He must have taken it with him when he left to reclaim his wife.

Then again, that all explained why the seelie queen wasn't terribly concerned about them, but it didn't explain why she was just sitting there.

Still, Sunset was angry at herself for not being more on guard. She'd—rather ironically—been too preoccupied with hurrying Luna up to notice the very thing she was worried about sneaking up on them.

It was worrying, though.

"So," Sunset said, eyeing the seelie queen carefully so she wouldn't be caught by surprise again. She wasn't sure if saying Xenophilius' name would be a problem, but she wanted to know, "Is... ***he***... still out there, or did you circle around while your husband lured him off?"

"Hm?" Titania said, cocking her head in question. "Oh—I never left," she said with an innocent-seeming smile. "Don't let me interrupt you, though. Go on—I want to see this."

Sunset risked taking her eyes off the seelie queen for a moment to glance uncertainly at Luna, hoping for some kind of direction, but the young girl looked to be almost as at ease as Titania. Instead, she just nodded. "Go on."

Sunset blinked. Go on? What—oh, right. Titania had told her that she had to take her physicality back first, which was a problem because she had no idea how. She hated being out of her depth, but ever since she first stepped through that portal, she'd barely been able to follow what was going on.

"So... how do I do that, then?" she finally gave in and asked.

Luna put a finger on her cheek, giving the matter some thought. "Well, ask for it back, first of all. You're more fae than I am, it should come naturally."

Sunset felt silly doing it, but she supposed that ***was*** how Luna had initiated the process of borrowing her physicality in the first place. "Alright, so... may I have my physicality back?"

"Of course," Luna agreed, and... it was kind of exactly like remembering she had the hiking stick in that it was just kind of there, and like with her ascension, in that once she had the intent to use it, it was gone again, once more a part of her.

Luna let out a sigh of relief and rubbing at a spot on her chest. Oddly, her advanced stature hadn't changed; she was still a hoof taller than she'd been before. "I... I'd forgotten how that feels," she said and proceeded to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It was... a weight on me, and a weight on the world."

"Hmm!" Titania agreed, making a pleased sound like someone stretching after sitting still for too long.

The chittering was new, though.

For some reason that Sunset couldn't intuit, the seelie queen was an iridescent, opaline bug pony again—and it wasn't just her. The whole area had gone back to Sunset's more vibrant version of the faerie lands, though it was subtle since both of them resembled the forest near the Lovegood home.

Sunset, for her part, had to hold herself back from attacking Titania outright as a new wave of anger rose up in her, freshly remembering that smug-looking face. As long as the seelie queen wasn't attacking them, asking for anything or offering up any deals, though, it was better to let her be and see how long her queerly mild temperament lasted.

"So," Titania chirped happily. "I'd like to propose a deal."

Sunset's hackles rose, and even Luna's mouth tightened in displeasure. "A deal?" Sunset asked very, very carefully.

"Of course!" Titania said. "That was adorable! I'm rather impressed, you know. It's not a lot of you mortals that can actually do what you just did, but you—" she pointed her hoof at Sunset, "—are naturally a lot more like a fae than a regular mortal and you—" she moved her hoof to point at Luna, "—are just a special little thing, aren't you?"

Sunset wasn't sure how to feel about being 'naturally fae-like,' but she guessed it just came with the magical quality of Equestria being similar to Faerie, which was something that she'd already been aware of.

"So!" Titania clapped her hooves together. "As long as you're trading around your—what did you call it?—your 'physicality'—why not skim a little off the top for me?" she said, following it up by singing in a teasing fashion, "I can certainly make it worth your while~!"

Sunset looked to Luna. "Any idea what that would actually do?" she asked.

"Aren't you the one who's been back home without it?" Luna asked, then nodded. "Yes. I am sure that it was you; daddy wouldn't have been so upset if I was there."

Well, that ***was*** true, though it had been for such a short time and she'd been in such a hurry that she hadn't really had the time to examine it.

"Oh, it won't do much," Titania dismissed, waving the matter away with her hoof. "It'll be quite beneficial for you, actually!"

Sunset spent a moment making sure she wasn't going to say something that would open her up to losing another part of her before she asked, "How is that?"

"Well, you'll be just a little fae-like, of course," Titania explained. "Just a little *conceptual*. It'd be a terrible waste if you just went back to being completely, solidly physical given how much of a natural you two are at being fae. It won't be much compared to here, of course—just a little wiggle room in your existence—but that just makes it more fun!"

Sunset chewed at her lip, considering. There... were benefits. Actually, there was another, even better reason to do it. "***If*** we accept," she said, still keeping an eye on her phrasing as best she was able. "Then I want it to be only ***my*** physicality." Her Faerie-tainted physicality, she didn't say, though the seelie queen certainly knew that. They were already trying to minimize the amount of it that either of them had to take, taking some more of it off the top could only be to their benefit in that regard.

"Hm?" Titania queried, cocking her head to the side. "Well, yes! I only ***want*** yours! That's the entire point!"

"...What's so special about mine?" Sunset asked.

Titania gestured at herself with her hooves. "Why, ***this***, of course! Faerie has no physicality of its own, so when beings who have their own 'physicality' pass through here, theirs bends the world around them with their perspective!"

Sunset blinked at the seelie queen's explanation, forgetting entirely about checking her words beforehoof. "You... want to be a pony?" she asked, making sure that she got that right.

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked, holding her opaline hoof in front of her and appreciating it. "It's fresh! It's new! It's something I've never seen before! Why, Mab has been crowing for ages about having gotten her hands—hooves?—gotten her hooves on that one—" she gestured at Luna "—holding parties every month, just happy to have any perspective at all, not even realizing that she'd let the real prize get away!"

Sunset paused, but not to consider her words. "Wait—what do you mean, 'every month'?" She looked at Luna again and, yeah, she was still taller than she had been earlier, and maybe she was a little less chubby in the face, but it was hard to tell; she'd only just met the girl the night before and she wasn't an expert on humans. Luna had said that faeries couldn't lie, though, and the idea of time differences wasn't entirely alien to a pony who had spent most of her life investigating all the biggest, most impressive kinds of magics. "How long has it been?"

Luna tapped her lips with one finger, thinking. "It has been hard to tell, but... a year? Yes, just about a year, I think."

That... For some reason that set a feeling in Sunset's chest that she did not like, so she opted to ignore it.

That did shine a new light on the fact that Luna was Sunset's responsibility until her father returned... though maybe not so much.

"Right," Sunset said, acknowledging it and moving on. She glanced briefly at Titania, then back to Luna. "Well... I'm tempted to agree?"

Luna took a similar glance at the seelie queen. "I don't believe it's dangerous, but..." She addressed Titania directly, "We shall need details, and—and something in return." She paused briefly, visibly straightened and said, "My mother."

Titania rolled her eyes, disregarding her. "That's nice, dear, but *you* don't have what I want."

Luna made a show of pulling her eyelid down, showing off the turquoise eye that was somehow Sunset's name.

Right. Luna kind of owned her, in a way.

The seelie queen was taken aback. Quick as a snake, she grabbed Luna's chin in her hoof and moved her head so she could see it closer. "That—what did you ***do***?!—how did you even—that doesn't belong there!"

Sunset couldn't believe it, but it was apparently up to her to play mediator, so she gently separated Luna and Titania. "Okay, look—um—Luna—maybe I should do the negotiations," she said. "And Titania; Luna doesn't really know what she did, just that my name is now playing the part of her eye, and she can see through it."

"Well, of course she can see through it," Titania said backing off in a huff. "It's an eye."

You know what? Sunset wasn't sure if Titania understood or not, but she wasn't going to explain it. For multiple reasons. "Yes, exactly," she said nonspecifically.

"Now—Luna does have a point," she continued, channeling Princess Celestia as hard as she could. "I'm open to negotiation, but we'll need to hash out some specifics and, as much as you've talked up the benefits of losing something, I'm still losing something and it's only natural that I actually get something in return..."

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A t-shirt saying, 'I tried to bargain with the faerie queen and all I got was this lousy t-shirt' was not the prize that Sunset had been hoping for. Admittedly, she hadn't been very hopeful about actually getting Luna's mother back, but this was a new low, even if Luna did need something to cover up. Why, exactly, Luna had disrobed if she needed to be covered up was something that Sunset still wasn't privy to, but the shirt was long enough to be a dress on her, so at least there was ***some*** use for it.

Sunset couldn't help but think, as Luna pulled the shirt over her head, that it would be very unfortunate if Mab, the ***other*** faerie queen, ever saw the thing.

"Okay, great. Deal's made, everyone's got what they're owed, it's been nice, but we've gotta get going," Sunset said, trying to hurry things along. Titania was still sitting there, still giving a sweet smile, pleased as punch, but Sunset was very aware that the seelie queen had little reason to stay that way now that she'd gotten what she'd wanted.

Not waiting for a reply, Sunset physically turned Luna around with her hooves and began pushing Luna towards the portal, keeping an eye on the seelie queen over her shoulder, who was doing a cute little wave with the hoof that was sticking out of her cast as she watched them leave. It was only, at the last moment, when Sunset checked to make sure she was pushing in the right direction that she realized there was text on the back of the t-shirt as well, finishing the sentence with '...and stabbed in the back,' followed by a picture of a knife stabbed into the shirt with blood around the wound.

A very realistic picture of a knife.

The blood was spreading.

It was not a picture.

Luna grunted in pain as she fell through the portal.

Sunset swore.

The next few minutes were frantic. Sunset came out of the portal to find Luna collapsed on the forest floor, a now very clearly three dimensional gold-inlaid opal hilt sticking out of her back, and absolutely did not panic. At all. Definitely. She one-hundred percent calmly and collectedly—and quickly!—picked the child up in her magic and made haste towards the Lovegood home by way of the river, which was in entirely the wrong direction.

Having remembered to follow the magic as she had last time, it was a relief when Sunset finally spotted the chess rook styled building and not the knight piece that had briefly existed back on Faerie. Yes, she'd already been back once in just as much of a hurry, but she wouldn't have put it past the seelie queen to have somehow tricked them into going someplace else or nowhere at all.

In Sunset's state of hurried complete and total calm and with her magic occupied, door latches were not something that she felt like dealing with just then, so, with the wounded Luna following behind her in the teal glow of her magic, Sunset raced up the walkway, planted her front hooves, did a pivot on the front step and bucked the front door; it wasn't magically reinforced, so she foresaw no reason it shouldn't work.

It wasn't magically reinforced, but it ***was*** solidly built.

And, as front doors do, it opened outwards, which was not the direction that she was trying to buck it in.

"...Ow," she whimpered, standing on her front hooves, her back hooves sunk slightly into the otherwise entirely intact door. Given that Sunset had spent most of her life studying and practicing magic, It was probably only thanks to her recent ascension into an alicorn that she didn't break an ankle.

A groan from Luna shook her out of her stupor, reminding her that the young girl was far more hurt and she was wasting time. Sunset awkwardly walked her rear legs down the door, walked her front legs up to the latch, which was barely in reach and set to fiddling with it, flapping her wings to get just a little more height.

The latch clicked open, and Sunset whisked Luna inside setting her on a couch in front of the fireplace—face down, of course, which became a problem when Luna struggled to get a word out with her mouth pressed against the cushion while Sunset ransacked the tower looking for any more of the batch of Wiggenweld potion that Xenophilius had brewed for her. He'd said it would be good for deep injuries, and you didn't get much deeper than a knife in the back.

Fortunately, Sunset's instinct to check his potions lab turned out to be right on the money. ***Un***fortunately, it took her a great deal of searching to find the potions lab, which was in the basement.

Apparently there was a basement. Who knew?

By the time Sunset returned with three vials of what she was pretty sure was the Wiggenweld potion, Luna had managed to prop herself up on her elbows.

"Here," Sunset said, taking the cork off one of the vials with a *pop*. "Drink this: it's a healing potion your father made for me—I think."

Luna shook her head, her face scrunched up in a grimace. "Don't bother. Floo. Saint Mungo's. Hospital."

Sunset hesitated, but only briefly. She didn't exactly want to charge into a public place in the middle of the day considering she'd escaped from what passed as the lawful wizarding authorities in the lifetime ago that was yesterday, but she had to admit that having an ornate knife of faerie origin in your back probably wasn't the kind of thing that you take a potion and sleep off.

After recorking the potion, Sunset picked Luna up in her magic again, doing what she could not to jostle her, and turned to the floo. It was a good thing that she'd already figured out the floo system, because Luna was in no condition to show her how it worked. The way that Sunset had come up with to activate the floo in the Ministry of Magic building worked just fine, and she spoke clearly.

"St. Mungo's Hospital."

That name seemed to be enough, as she felt the floo connect without problems and she... stopped right in front of the fireplace. After a short while, the green flames went back to their natural orange.

...Wait.

Was she really going to reveal herself to whoever might be at the hospital just to get help for this girl? That wasn't like her. She'd gotten all caught up in the urgency of it but she could just... not. Sure, this was just a little all her fault and the girl had chased her down in a nightmare world that had taken her mother from her in order to save her from mind controlled slavery only to end up losing an eye, spending an entire year imprisoned in a cage and losing her father when he came to rescue her, putting his trust in Sunset to keep her safe, but...

Okay, so yes, Sunset guessed she owed it to her a tiny bit.

Oh, and she didn't want to find out what would happen if Luna died while she still had Sunset's name for an eye, so there was that, too.

Faith in her enlightened self interest restored, Sunset triggered the floo again, said the name of the hospital and stepped through, levitating Luna alongside her.

***

Being used to her teleportation spell, Sunset had barely given the chaotic spinning of the floo much thought on her trip from the Ministry of Magic to the Lovegood home, but being whirled about and jostled did not agree with Luna in her condition—or maybe it was just her condition that didn't agree with Luna—either way, the wait for the floo to take them where they needed to go seemed much longer than the matter of seconds it was in reality.

Evidently, Sunset and Luna didn't quite agree with the floo, either. Maybe it was having two passengers at once, or maybe it was Sunset's active telekinesis, but when she finally stepped out the other end of the floo in the entryway-slash-waiting-room of St. Mungo's, she was grateful to be a quadruped, as she came out with a bit more ***oomph*** than she had entered it with—not much, but like she was being tossed out for being rude.

The clattering and clopping of Sunset's hooves on the polished stone floor as she did her best to stay upright drew some attention, but not as nearly as much as one might have expected of sounds that surely must have been associated with having some kind of unexpected animal indoors with them.

As it turned out, though, Sunset was not the only person in the room with hooves, as there was a scruffy-looking man in a worn brown coat who looked like he'd gotten on the wrong end of a goat in both senses of the word. He wasn't the strangest one in the room, either, but Sunset didn't have time to crowd watch.

After only a brief pause, the clip-clopping of Sunset's hooves on the stone floor picked back up as she galloped the short distance to the front desk and the receptionist, the former of which was, like the Lovegood's front door, not designed with ponies in mind, so, halfway there, she leapt up and flapped her wings, landing fairly well with a softer clip-clop on the wooden countertop.

The receptionist was an older-looking woman with her gray hair done up in a messy bun and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses on her dour face, giving the impression of someone who had seen everything and was no longer capable of excitement. Sure enough, she took one look at Sunset and pointed a feather quill at a floor directory that was mounted on the desk.

"Third Floor: Potions and Plant Poisonings," the receptionist informed her in a dreary, lifeless tone.

Sunset blinked, looked down at herself and said, "No, no—" but she was interrupted before she could explain.

"Fourth Floor: Jinxes, Hexes, Curses and Incorrectly-Applied Charms," the receptionist intoned with just as little emotion as before.

"Ugh, no!" Sunset insisted. "It's—"

"Second Floor: Magical Ailments and Diseases."

Sunset slammed her front hooves on the desk, jostling an inkwell, among other things, and rattling the drawers. "I can read!" she shouted, then continued on, not letting the woman interrupt her again. "I'm not here for me! I'm here for her!" She pointed a hoof at Luna, who was floating a short ways back, surrounded by the teal glow of Sunset's magic, hanging in the air with her head and arms hanging in front of her like a kitten being held by the scruff of her neck."

The receptionist tilted in her seat to get a better look at Luna, but didn't seem to have an immediate answer. "What seems to be the problem?" she asked without any urgency.

Sunset was about to yell at her again, but stopped and forced herself not to. Taking a breath, she levitated Luna forward and pointed a hoof at the shirt with the words, 'I tried to bargain with the faerie queen and all I got was this lousy t-shirt' on it. She then turned Luna around in her magic and pointed at the words, '...and stabbed in the back,' with the knife below it, the bottom half of the shirt now covered in blood.

That finally got things moving, and though the woman was clearly old and lacking in empathy she did apparently know how to get things done quickly. Very soon, several healers in lime-green robes showed up levitating a full-sized mattress between them which was somehow made up with perfectly tucked-in sheets and staying that way while they got Luna situated, allowing Sunset to let go of her levitation spell.

Once Luna was all set, the healers, already casting spells to keep her alive, began to take her away and Sunset made to follow them, but they stopped her. "Hold up," a middle-aged healer said, blocking Sunset's way with his hand. "We're taking her to Artifact Accidents—you need to head up to the forth floor."

"No, I ***don't*** need to go to the fourth floor," Sunset said, rolling here eyes. "I just look like this, okay?"

The healer rolled his eyes back at her and gave the other healers a 'can you believe this?' sort of look. "Look, I'm sure you think that, but that's not unusual when it comes to the fair folk."

On the one hoof, it was better for them to think that than for them to realize the truth, but on the other, she didn't want them to 'cure' her, nor did she want to let Luna out of her sight. She hadn't forgotten all the things she'd found out about the humans' Wizarding World at the Ministry of Magic or from Xenophilius afterwards, and frankly, she trusted these people about as much as she did the seelie queen.

"No, ***you*** look," Sunset said, leaping up onto the floating mattress with the help of her wings, managing not to make a fool of herself. "That girl's parents are lost in bucking fairy land, I have no idea when or ***if*** they'll ever make it back and they left her in my care. I am the closest Celestia-damned thing she has to a guardian right now and I'm not letting her out of my sight—you got that?"

"...Guardian?" the healer repeated in question, thinking about the word. "Do you mean you're her familiar?"

No, she meant like a parent. "Yes, exactly...ish," she answered instead. Eh, it was close enough, and though she didn't know exactly what that meant here, magically or legally, Luna did still have Sunset's name and probably wasn't going to be able to return it, if Titania's reaction was any sign. That probably made the claim more accurate than she'd like to think about.

The healer gave her a dubious look, but they had an injured little girl bleeding out on the bed next to them, which was very effective at hurrying decisions along. Besides which, with Sunset now sitting on the emergency medical mattress, they'd have to get physical to separate them and that was just more trouble and delay than it was worth.

"Ugh, fine," the healer groused and motioned the ones levitating the bed on. "It's not my job to question magical talking unicorn ponies."

"Excuse you," Sunset said with huff, sitting up straight and spreading her wings to show them off with pride. "***I*** am an alicorn, thank you very much!"

"You're a pain in the neck is what you are," the healer shot back. "Just stay quiet while we save this girl's life."

***

Sunset did what she could to pay attention to the spells that the healers were using, but by the time she was no longer being distracted with establishing her right to remain with Luna, the initial burst of casting had died down and for the next short while it was just the odd diagnostic charm or two. Once she decided that they weren't doing anything too heinous, she eventually lost interest and just... existed in a state that wasn't panic, worry or fear.

It had been a hell of a day for Sunset—and a hell of a year for Luna, apparently; she was still coming to terms with that. She was still coming to terms with all of it. Just... damn. She felt... she didn't know exactly what she felt, but she could admit that the Lovegoods would have been better off if she'd picked someone else's floo at random.

Of course, someone else might not have been so incredulously accommodating, but maybe that would have been better. Sunset was not a nice pony and she'd never felt bad about hurting others to get the upper hoof. If she'd come out of someone's floo and they'd tried to attack her or capture her, she'd have had no problem destroying their lives and taking whatever she wanted. Hell, if she'd come out of someone's floo and found an empty house, she'd have helped herself to whatever she could carry and thought that it served them right for having an unsecured fire travel node in their homes.

That wasn't what had happened, though. She hadn't intended it and there'd been no benefit to what had happened.

Well...

Okay, so becoming an alicorn wasn't exactly 'no benefit,' nor was having her life saved, and she hadn't asked for them to risk life and limb and worse for her sake. There was a part of her that wanted to say that they'd brought it on themselves, and yet...

...And yet, the alternative was too horrifying to consider. She'd really just barely escaped lifelong slavery, and no matter the flexibility of her morals. She couldn't just call saving her from that a foolish action deserving derision.

So, instead of reveling in her new alicornhood, Sunset felt... bad. She felt bad and... guilty and... tired. Very, very tired, and not in a sleepy sort of way, though she was that, too. She drifted off to sleep feeling even more lost than the night before.

***

Sunset dreamt of flying, and she dreamt of Equestria. She dreamt of Canterlot and she dreamt of Princess Celestia. She dreamt of showing off her new wings and she dreamt of how proud her mentor was that she'd figured out the thing that the princess couldn't tell her—because telling her would have poisoned the well with greed.

She dreamt of confusion, of explanations, of arguments. She dreamt of disappointment, rebuke, shame and the loss of something that could have been.

***

Sunset woke to the sound of wings shuffling, bringing to mind Princess Celestia and setting her heart in her throat. When she opened her eyes expecting the warm, white feathers of her ex-mentor, though, what she actually found was a fluffy, puffed-up brown owl perched on the footboard of the bed preening its wings and keeping an eye on her with beady, black eyes.

Just as she was processing the presence of a large predatory bird that was almost as big as she was, the owl seemed to finish what it was doing, shift itself from side to side, then burst into a furious flapping of wings, that exited the room via an open window, which closed after it.

Cursing, Sunset had covered her face with one of her forelegs to protect her eyes, only slowly lowering them again once commotion had died down and she was sure that the owl was gone. In the owl's wake, a thick, slightly yellowed envelope floated down onto the sleeping Luna's chest.

Well, it was probably cheaper than pegasus mail, and delivered by something marginally more intelligent, she thought with some level of sarcasm, though she winced when she did. Princess Celestia would not have appreciated that comment... not that she had any reason to care what Princess Celestia thought any more.

For some reason, that felt a little more raw this morning than it had yesterday.

Regardless, it was in bad taste, and she was pretty much part pegasus herself now, depending on how you looked at it. She'd certainly idolized the idea of wings enough for it to be hypocritical—not that she'd ever let hypocrisy stop her.

Sunset stood up on the bed, stretched, and thought nothing of opening Luna's mail, though she stopped to take measure of the girl herself first.

To the healers' credit, Luna looked peaceful and serene laying there—and most importantly, still breathing. Asleep, she was missing the tenseness of yesterday, a lock of her long, blonde hair stuck in her mouth, fluttering in her easy, even breaths.

Reassured and pretending she wasn't, Sunset reached for the envelope on Luna's chest, only for a small, fair hand to slap on top of it, blocking her hoof.

Luna sat up, grunting adorably in the process, and scooted herself back against the headboard of the bed, slowly opening her eyes to see what she had in her hand; a classy-looking envelope with a hand-written address in green ink.

Luna Lovegood
Room 6
Ground Floor
St. Mungo's
London

Luna's sleepy eyes widened, and she quickly flipped the envelope over, revealing a large wax seal in four colors, each quadrant of the shield having its own animal imprinted on it. Sunset couldn't tell what the animals were, or read the ribbon below it, but Luna seemed to instantly recognize it; she clutched the envelope to her chest and started to sob.

Well, this was awkward. Was the letter a notification of some sort? Maybe the doctors had reported what Sunset had said about Luna's parents being gone and executed Xenophilius' will?

Gingerly, Sunset approached the crying girl and sort of... patted her on the head with her hoof. She tried to get a better look at the letter as she did so, but Luna still had it pressed tightly to herself, hugging it like it was something precious.

Sunset let Luna cry for a bit, and when she finally seemed to be tapering off, she risked asking, "So... what is it?"

Luna spent a moment composing herself, then took another good long look at the envelope, holding it out in front of herself. "It's..." she began to say, but stopped short of answering, opening the envelope to make sure. She scanned the letter quickly with wet, teary eyes.

"It's my Hogwarts letter."

"Hogwarts?" Sunset asked, thinking back, because she was pretty sure that it had been mentioned. Last night seemed like months ago, but it did come to her. "That's that magic school that you're going to next year, right."

Luna nodded, though she corrected Sunset, "Not next year. This year."

Oh. Right. Because last night ***had*** been a year ago for Luna.

"So that's... good, right?" Sunset probed. Learning magic was pretty much what she'd founded her entire life on, so the idea that someone might not be chomping at the bit to go to magic school was completely alien to her.

Luna, though, nodded. "It's just... I just realized..." she explained. "It's really over."

Ah. Right. The trauma. Sunset had no idea how to handle that, so, for once in her life, she decided not to say anything, and since standing there next to Luna not saying anything was awkward, she sat down and continued to appreciate not being in a dimension made of nightmares.

At some point, Luna started absently petting her and Sunset... continued to do nothing. If doing nothing helped, she'd do nothing all damn day.

***

Later in the day, after the healers had been through to check on Luna and take care of some of the paperwork, Sunset idly decided to take a look at Luna's Hogwarts letter.

Her first impression was... it was sparse. Other than the headmaster's list of titles—which was actually truncated to make it as short as possible and nothing compared to some of the official correspondence she'd seen cross Princess Celestia's desk—the entirety of the letter was, essentially, a single sentence saying, 'You've been accepted' followed by another sentence with expected response and arrival dates. She'd seen longer dinner notices.

Along with the letter, there was another page with a short list of equipment, which was of more interest to Sunset. The clothes actually didn't surprise her since she'd heard of school uniforms, though Celestia's School For Gifted Unicorns hadn't.

Regarding the book list, though, she wasn't sure what to think. Some of the names of the authors looked almost Equestrian, and she didn't know enough about how they categorized spells to comment on the coverage there, but they did seem to be missing books for a number of classes that she would have thought were normal.

Maybe they weren't though? Come to think of it, her sociology class had been pretty small, and philosophy of magic had just been her and Princess Celestia.

Moving on, the actual equipment page was also on the minimalist side, though in this case, it was clearly only what was absolutely required and no more, but that was interesting all on its own. CSGU had included recommended amounts of stationery, notebooks, saddle bags and so on. Hopefully, no one showed up with only what was on the list. Especially the—what were they called, again? Oh, right—the muggleborns.

Sunset didn't think that 'muggleborn' sounded all that nice, but then, she came from a society where a third of the population was essentially referred to as 'dirt ponies,' so maybe she shouldn't throw stones.

"Hey, Luna?" Sunset asked, looking over at the young girl and getting her attention. "This 'Hogwarts'—it's a boarding school?" She wasn't sure, but she thought it might be with the uniforms requiring name tags and all, unless they were like Luna and apt to disrobe and random times, like for exercize.

"Mmhmm!" Luna confirmed, squinting at something on the other side of the room with her left eye closed.

"Okay, actually," Sunset said, having decided she wanted an answer to that. "I'll get back to that, but first—you never got to answer me. What was with throwing off all your clothes when we were running from the fae?"

"Oh." Luna looked a little troubled, and Sunset wondered if she shouldn't have mentioned it, but the moment passed. "Yes, I'm sure of it now; I told you back at the start, that it wasn't good to take gifts from the fae."

Sunset blinked, suddenly recontextualizing things in her head. "Huh," she remarked. "So you did."

Luna nodded in satisfaction, and Sunset went back to her original subject.

"Anyway," she continued. "This letter says you can bring 'an owl ***or*** a cat ***or*** a toad—are those familiars?"

Luna gave it some thought. "Yes... but actually no," she answered vaguely answered, then, with a slight hesitation, she explained. "Daddy... daddy said that it's so children with real familiars don't seem to get too much special treatment, so everyone is allowed one."

That did seem sensible, except... "Luna?" she prompted again.

Luna gave Sunset her full attention, tilting her head in question.

"Everyone here thinks I'm your familiar," Sunset mentioned.

"Yep!" Luna agreed.

"And I'm going to Hogwarts with you—at the very least because they have a proper library."

"And because daddy said you'd take care of me," Luna added.

"He actually didn't, exactly, but fine, yes," Sunset said, moving on. "Luna—I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm not an owl or a cat or a toad."

This, of course, seemed entirely sensible to Luna, as it was the truth. "Of course," she agreed. "You're a crumple-horned snorkack."

Sunset rolled her eyes. "I'm an alicorn," she reminded Luna, spreading her wings for emphasis—and it was a reminder, since it'd been a year for her since it had last been mentioned.

"Nope!" Luna said, looking almost smug. "Legally, you're a crumple-horned snorkack and my familiar."

"What."

"Those were some of the papers I signed earlier."

"..."

"And of course I mentioned you in my letter to the headmistress."

"Luna!" Sunset shouted in exasperation.

"Should I not have?"

***

The next day, Hogwarts' Deputy Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall, stood in a hall on the ground floor of St. Mungo's in the Artifact Accidents wing, preparing herself for what she was sure was going to be a trying meeting. In her hand, she held a notarized copy of Ms. Lovegood's familiar registration that she'd just picked up from the Ministry of Magic that morning. It read:

Owner: Luna Lovegood
Name: Sunset Shimmer
Species: Crumple-Horned Snorkack

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose, expecting a headache.

This, she suspected, was going to be a long year.