

Natural Order

The moonlight glittered off of the icy walls of Lady Winter Chill's throne room, casting a pale glimmer over all present. Winter Chill herself stood at the top of the staircase leading to her throne, flanked by four guards, two of them pegasi and the other two unicorns. They were dressed in the silver-blue armor of the Royal Guard. The armor covered their flanks, hiding their cutie marks and replacing them with the symbol of their Lady.

The doors at the far end of the hall opened, and Winter Chill scowled, the temperature around her dropping. Her guards shivered, holding their positions despite the plummeting temperature. Their armor was enchanted to keep them warm, containing their body heat so that they didn't freeze while in such close proximity to the Lady, but even still crystals of frost began to creep along the armor of the two ponies nearest Winter Chill.

"When I call for you Dead Leaves, I expect you to respond punctually. I do not know how my sister allows you to behave when you are in her home but I will not tolerate your insubordination or your disrespect, do I make myself clear?" she said as the dusty earth pony approached the foot of the stairs.

"Of course My Lady, I meant no disrespect," Dead Leaves replied, inclining his head in the slightest of bows. The ever-present smirk on his face clearly indicated that he was anything but sorry.

Winter Chill grit her teeth, her eyes narrowing as she glared at the pony. She wanted nothing more than to freeze him in place and shatter him into a thousand pieces for his rudeness. It took all of her self control to keep herself from doing just that. Something about the pony set her on edge. He was crafty and manipulative, and something else, something unsettling that she could never quite put her hoof on. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was using Autumn Gale for his own purposes. Autumn Gale had always been the smartest of her sisters, even smarter than she herself, but things had been different ever since Spring Rain had been lost. Winter Chill knew her sister was still clever, but she had never been quite the same. She hated to think that a pony as loathsome as Dead Leaves might be taking advantage of Autumn Gale in her weakened state.

"I'm not interested in your empty apologies Dead Leaves, just make sure it doesn't happen again," she said, dismissing her guards with a gesture of her wing. The guards bowed in unison before descending the stairs, one of them shooting Dead Leaves a dirty look as she passed, and taking positions near the hall's main door opposite the throne.

"I trust you've kept in contact with my sister?" Winter Chill asked.

"Of course. We simply await your command and the trap will be sprung."

Winter Chill allowed herself a small smile at that. "Excellent. If your intelligence is correct then the timing will be perfect. The Summer Sun Celebration has been Equestria's greatest holiday for centuries and the preparations will be keeping Celestia busy. We'll use that to our advantage. With any luck, she'll be too busy to do anything about Luna's condition, and the Moon Princess' own insecurity will be enough to drive the two apart."

Dead Leaves' grin grew wider, a glint in his normally dull eyes. "A truly cunning plan My Lady, certainly worthy of one as brilliant as yourself. You have nothing to fear. Everything will proceed smoothly on our end. The plan is foolproof."

"We can only hope," Winter Chill said, regarding the earth pony coolly, "However, I did not call you in order to chat. I have every confidence that Autumn Gale will perform her part to perfection. She always does. I simply wanted you to inform her that in light of her latest report I have decided to make a slight...addition to the plan."

For the first time since he had entered the throne room Dead Leaves' grin faltered. "A change in plans? My Lady I know I do not need to remind you of how delicate this plan is. If any changes are made this late it could-"

"Do not lecture me! I am more than aware of the fine line we are walking here. If we draw Celestia's attention before we are ready everything will fall apart. However, you may rest assured that any addition I make to our plan will only serve to strengthen our position in the long run."

Winter Chill's eyes glowed ghostly silver, her wispy mane glittering in the moonlight. "I will be sending Snow Drift to Equestria several weeks prior to the Summer Sun Celebration, to Ponyville. She will be my eyes and ears on the ground, and she will be there to take advantage of any...weaknesses the sisters may present."

Dead Leaves' eyes lit up in understanding and he let out a raspy cackle. "Oh ho! Truly devious My Lady! Wonderful even! I'm sure Snow Drift will be a most useful asset to have in place. This is truly a marvelous plan, and coincidental even. It just so happens that your sister has commanded me to travel to Equestria as well. It seems she wants me near the Princesses for the final...push, as it were. I would be more than happy to accompany your dear student on her trip."

Winter Chill's eyes narrowed and she glided silently down the stairs, landing in front of Dead Leaves. "I have warned you already; you are to stay away from Snow Drift. My sister trusts you but I find you foul and repulsive. Remember, Snow Drift may be an asset in the coming struggle but she is still my precious student. If I find out you have done anything to put her in danger I will bury you under so much snow and ice not even my sister will be able to get you out do you understand me?"

"Of course My Lady, I would never do anything to harm your beloved student." he said,

bowing deeply before the alicorn, "I merely wished to offer my services as an escort."

Winter Chill regarded the earth pony for several moments before turning and making her way back up the stairs. "You will travel with Snow Drift, but you will be under constant supervision. Six of my best guards will be accompanying the two of you, so I expect you to be on your best behavior. Now if there is nothing else I would appreciate it if you got out of my sight."

"Very well My Lady. It will be as you say. I wish you a...pleasant evening." Dead Leaves bowed once more before taking his leave, the guards glaring at him as he exited.

Winter Chill let out a sigh once Dead Leaves had gone. That pony truly was intolerable. She would never understand why her sister insisted on keeping him in her service.

"Captain!"

At her call one of the pegasus ponies guarding the door snapped to attention, flying forward and landing with a bow in front of Winter Chill.

"Yes My Lady, how may I be of service?"

"I want you to prepare six of your best to accompany my student to Ponyville, in Equestria. I will arrange for you to be provided with a map. Arrange for whatever provisions you deem necessary for the trip. Also, I want you to find Aurora. She is to accompany your soldiers and my student. For the purposes of this assignment she will be given the rank of captain. Make sure your soldiers understand that they are to follow her orders for the duration of this assignment."

The pegasus captain rose from his bow, his head tilted in confusion. "Of course My Lady, it will be done. But...if I may ask, why Aurora? She was only recently inducted into the palace guard."

Winter Chill smiled, placing a hoof on the Captain's shoulder. "Now Captain, don't go selling your soldiers short. Aurora may be young, but she has shown a remarkable amount of skill. She has also shown a great deal of leadership capability. Think of this as a test of her abilities. Also, as I'm sure you know, she and Snow Drift have been friends since they were fillies. If anyone is going to be motivated to protect my student it will be her."

"Of course," the Captain said, returning her smile, "My soldiers will do whatever is necessary to protect your student, but the motivation that comes with a personal attachment cannot be manufactured through training. I'm sure your student will be in the best of hooves."

"Very good Captain. Now, go begin preparations. You will leave first thing tomorrow and

it is already late. When you find Aurora, tell her to send Snow Drift to me. I'm sure she'll know where to find her and I still need to explain to her what her new assignment is."

With a salute, the Captain took off, leaving Winter Chill to ponder the best way to explain to her student what she expected her to do.

"Ugh! This doesn't make sense! Why can't I find anything!"

Snow Drift sat on the on the floor in the uppermost levels of the library, surrounded by stacks of books. Ever since she had found that book mentioning the Sun and Moon Princesses, she had been determined to learn more about them. She was almost certain they were real, or least had been. It would certainly explain the two broken statues in the throne room. It might also explain the mysterious darkness that had plagued Equiiria nearly a year ago. What she couldn't explain, and what she had been hoping to find somewhere in the libraries records, was why their statues had been broken. What could have happened between them and her teacher to make her do something like that?

The sculptures that lined the hall were meant to be more than mere decoration. Each pony depicted there had earned Winter Chill's respect, and she had crafted each statue herself, as a memorial of who they were and what they had done. For her to shatter a pony's memorial must mean that they had had a severe falling out.

Snow Drift growled in frustration, slamming another book closed. She was getting nowhere. She had spent most of her free time for the last several days holed up in the library looking for clues, but had so far had little success. She had only been able to find snippets here and there that mentioned Equestria, and most of those were in passing. The only solid piece of information she had been able to put together was that Equiiria had at one point been part of Equestria, and that after some sort of confrontation between the leadership the nation had been split. Of course, this was something she had suspected from the passages she had read in the first book, but it had come up often enough in texts that she was fairly certain it was true.

Her teacher rarely talked about her past, and Snow Drift rarely asked, so it stood to reason that she had never mentioned it before. However, it was curious that none of the more recent text books she had read during her education mentioned anything about it. In fact, now that she thought about it none of the history books she had read growing up had mentioned anything concrete about Equiiria's origins at all. It was as if it had simply always been, and that was that.

She stood up, stretching in an attempt to get the numbness in her legs to go away. Looking down into the main foyer of the library, she saw a teal pegasus walk in, scanning the library. Snow waved down at her for a moment before the pegasus looked up and returned her

wave, flying up to her.

“Hey,” Aurora said, landing next to her friend, “All the way up here again? What are you looking for in all these old things?” She poked at a stack of books with her hoof and winced when the whole thing collapsed, sending up a cloud of dust.

“I don’t know, a wild goose chase I guess,” Snow said with a sigh, her horn shimmering as she restacked the books, “I read something a few days ago, a story about a pair of alicorns that raised and lowered the sun and moon. There wasn’t much there, but from what I gathered they’re from someplace called ‘Equestria’ and they somehow knew Lady Winter Chill and her sisters.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of anything like that before,” Aurora said, looking curious as she peeked at the titles of some of the books Snow Drift had been reading, “Are you sure it’s not just an old mare’s tale? I mean, I know alicorns are super powerful, and Lady Winter Chill and her sisters are supposed to be in charge of the seasons, but moving the sun and moon? That sounds a little farfetched don’t you think?”

“Maybe, I don’t know to be honest. I’ve seen Lady Winter do such extraordinary things with her magic that I wouldn’t doubt that it’s possible. Besides, she told me once that there is magical power inherent to these sorts of natural systems, and that accessing them lets an alicorn wield the power of those systems, at least for a time. I think the principles might be similar to the way I use my magic, but on a larger scale. I’m not sure though, alicorn magic works on a level high above what we unicorns are capable of,” Snow Drift said, remembering a lesson Winter Chill had given her back when she had just begun to study under her, a lesson about the nature of elemental magic and the importance of being able to feel the system you were trying to control.

“I guess,” Aurora shrugged. As a pegasus, she had never had much interest in magic. “But I don’t see why you’re spending so much time in the library looking for answers. Wouldn’t it just be easier to ask Lady Winter Chill yourself? I mean, she is your teacher after all. I’m sure she’d be willing to tell you what you want to know and who better to explain it than a pony that was there when all this stuff was happening?”

Snow Drift looked down at her hooves, biting her lip. “I...I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You know those two statues in the throne room? The broken ones?”

“Yeah...?”

“Well I’m almost certain those were the sculptures of the sun and moon princesses. Every time I’ve asked about those sculptures in the past it’s made Lady Winter angry. I don’t think she’d want to talk about it, and I really don’t want to get her mad at me by asking if it’s something she didn’t want me to know.”

“Hmm, I guess that makes sense. And I know there’s no stopping you once you’ve got it in your head to find something out. Anyway, I didn’t actually come here to ask you about your studies. Apparently I’ve got an important new assignment!” Aurora said, her chest puffing up with pride.

Snow Drift smiled at her friend. “Really? That’s great! Your first major assignment as a member of the palace guard! Do you know what it is yet?”

“Not yet, the Captain just told me that he was putting a team together for an assignment requested by Lady Winter Chill herself! I’m sooo excited! I can’t wait to show them what a great soldier I can be!”

“Well I’m happy for you,” Snow Drift said with a chuckle. No pony she had ever known had a work ethic like Aurora, not even herself. It was nice to see the hardworking pegasus getting some recognition for her efforts.

“Oh, he also told me to find you and have you report to her Majesty at once. I guess she has something urgent to discuss with you.”

“Really?” Snow Drift asked, concern evident on her face, “But it’s so late, what could be so important at this hour?”

Aurora shrugged. “Dunno, but we better get a move on, you don’t want to be late. Again.”

Snow Drift blushed, remembering the scolding she had received the last time she was late for a meeting with her teacher. “Alright, let’s go. Why don’t we meet later after you find out what your new assignment is? I’d love to hear about it!”

“Sounds good. I’m gonna go and meet my captain and get my briefing, I’ll meet you in your room later. See ya!” Aurora said, hopping off and gliding back down to the library’s entrance.

Snow Drift watched her friend go before taking a moment to straighten up her study area, sliding the books she had collected away in a corner. A small frown formed on her face. It wasn’t like her teacher to call for her so late at night. She could only hope it was nothing serious.

Snow Drift entered the throne room, wincing at the sound the door made as she closed it, disturbing the unearthly silence. She hated to admit it, but she was feeling a touch apprehensive. She didn’t know what she had been called for, and it made her nervous to be left

in the dark. Spotting her teacher at the other end of the hall, she couldn't help but take a moment to admire the alicorn. In the moonlight, she looked every bit the deity she was. Her mane sparkled like freshly fallen snow and the light passed through her wings, casting a shimmering light against the walls. She made her way down the hall, her steps the only sound in the chamber.

As she approached, she noticed that her teacher was standing before the broken statues Snow Drift had been investigating. She felt a lump in her throat and the butterflies in her stomach increased in intensity. She was confident that she hadn't done anything wrong, but that didn't mean Winter Chill wouldn't be angry with her.

"You called for me teacher?" she said, coming to a stop and bowing before the alicorn. Winter Chill had yet to take her eyes off of the statues' shattered remains. It was several moments before she turned and answered her student.

"Snow Drift, thank you for coming, I know it's late but I have something important I would like to discuss with you. Please, come stand next to me," Winter Chill said, gesturing with her wing for Snow Drift to approach.

Slowly, Snow Drift complied, stepping forward until she too was facing the broken statues. Her teacher didn't seem angry, but still she was having a hard time relaxing.

"I know what you've been researching lately, my student," Winter Chill said, watching Snow Drift out of the corner of her eye. The young unicorn tensed up and Winter Chill couldn't quite suppress a soft smile as Snow Drift's face was touched with pink.

"I'm sorry!" Snow Drift cried, immediately bowing before her teacher. She wasn't quite sure what she was apologizing for but it was clear that she had somehow upset Winter Chill by investigating something she shouldn't have. "I should have just left it alone. I was just so curious and you always seemed so upset when I asked about it so I didn't want to disturb you with it and-

"Shh, there is nothing to be concerned with Snow Drift, you have done nothing wrong," Winter Chill said gently, placing her hoof on her student's shoulder, bidding her to rise, "I never said I was upset with you. As a matter of fact your research is timely. However, I am curious. What have you managed to find? Most of what you would be looking for was lost long ago."

Snow Drift slowly rose to her feet, her face still red, though now from embarrassment rather than shame. She had overreacted and assumed the worst. Of course her teacher wasn't mad at her! Why would she be? All she had been doing was a little harmless research into something that had happened hundreds of years ago. She couldn't help but let out a chuckle at her own foolishness before turning her attention back to the statue, trying to remember what she had been able to learn.

“Um, well, not really all that much honestly. I mean, it was only in the oldest records that I was able to find anything, and most of that was just legend” She scraped at the floor in frustration. She hated it when she failed to find something, and hated even more when she had to report on those failures. “All I was really able to piece together was that our country used to be a part of another, called Equestria, and that it was ruled by the Princesses of the Sun and Moon. It mentioned some kind of conflict between them, and you and your sisters, but I couldn’t find anything specific. I...I thought about asking you again but...every time I have before it seemed to upset you.”

Winter Chill nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. “Yes, most of what was written about the events that took place then was lost, and I must admit I have been...reluctant, to talk about it. It is a sensitive topic for me. However, things are happening now that might serve to right the wrongs that were made so long ago. As such, I feel it is time for me to tell you what happened.”

Snow Drift’s ears perked up. “Really?! You mean you’ll tell me?” she practically shouted, unable to contain her excitement.

Winter Chill nodded, her expression serious. “Tell me Snow Drift, what do you know about alicorns?”

Snow Drift blinked, the question catching her off guard. “Only what everypony knows really. Alicorns are exceptionally powerful magical ponies, growing larger than any regular pony and possessing both a horn and wings. They also are nearly immortal, living for thousands of years, if not longer, and are very resilient. I never really studied alicorns before though, I’m sure there are loads of things I don’t know.”

“Well your answer is correct, although you are right to think that there is much you don’t know,” Winter Chill said, “In truth, no alicorn has ever been extensively studied. We never felt like submitting ourselves to the scrutiny of others. And there are so few of us. To the best of my knowledge, there have only ever been six alicorns, although I cannot be sure of that.”

“So the Princesses of the sun and moon really are alicorns? They do exist?” Snow Drift asked, her expression thoughtful.

“Indeed they do. They are the oldest of the alicorns, and the most powerful. Centuries ago my sisters and I ruled together with them, maintaining balance in the world,” Winter Chill said a little wistfully, “The Princesses, Celestia who ruled the sun, and Luna who governed the moon, were our closest friends. While they ruled over the sky we maintained the earth, changing and guiding the seasons in the same way they did the night and day.”

“So does that mean you aren’t related to these other alicorns like you are to your sisters?”

Winter Chill shook her head. “No, we are not related by blood, though I have no doubt that we share a connection. My sisters and I were born of the earth, and were destined to rule over the changing of its cycles. Spring Rain, Summer Sky, Autumn Gale, Winter Chill. Thus were we named and each of us bore the responsibility for one quarter of the seasonal cycle. However, as our power is that of the earth the power of Celestia and Luna is that of the cosmos itself. They were born of the stars and thus Celestia governs the sun and the day while Luna does the same for the moon and the night.”

She smiled, remembering the times when they all ruled together. “For ages we ruled as equals, understanding the importance of the balance we held. We were happy, and the ponies we watched over were happy too. Back then, ponykind was still a simple species, nothing like the grand civilization we have today, but it was enough for us. Well...for most of us.”

“What happened?” Snow Drift asked.

“Things changed. After awhile, our subjects began to play favorites, looking down on the gifts they had been given. Luna was the victim of most of their scorn, while Celestia basked in their praise. Luna began to become...jealous, bitter even,” Winter Chill sighed, an expression of sorrow making its way onto her face, “I must admit, I was probably the first to notice the changes in Luna. She and I had long been close friends, and I felt some of her pain. Ponies have never appreciated the winter in the way they do the other seasons. They only see the death and not the beauty.”

Snow Drift opened her mouth to protest but Winter Chill raised a hoof to silence her.

“I know you understand the beauty of winter my loyal student, but you have lived in it your whole life. It is as much a part of you as your magic. But most ponies only see the cold and darkness. So when Luna began to grow bitter about the ponies ignoring her night I sympathized. I understood what she felt but rather than help her I encouraged her bitterness and rage. I suppose I simply didn't want to feel alone either, and it was comforting to know she understood.”

“I thought things would stay the way they were. But I underestimated just how angry Luna had become. Eventually she pushed everypony else away and let her feelings of jealousy consume her.” Winter Chill hesitated, looking at her student's attentive eyes. “There is something you must understand about alicorn magic, Snow Drift. At the heart of our power is balance. It is how we govern the changes in the world. However, within each of us is the capacity to break that balance, to destroy everything about ourselves in order to fully access our magic. When that happens, we become a new pony altogether, born of our own desires with no concern for anything else.”

“Then Luna...she let her magic turn her into somepony else?”

Winter Chill nodded. "Yes. She ceased to be Luna and became Nightmare Moon, a pony determined to bring everlasting night to Equestria, to force everypony to accept her and her night. At the time, I was shocked. I couldn't believe my sweet friend had turned into something so fierce and cruel. But my sisters and I thought she could be saved. We thought that with our power, and Celestia's, we would be able to turn her back."

Winter Chill's expression darkened and she growled, and she stomped on the ground, shards of ice clattering to the floor. Snow Drift let out a startled cry and took a step back. "But we were betrayed! Celestia told us she wanted nothing more than to free Luna from her anger, but when the time came to confront Nightmare Moon, Celestia used the most powerful magic in existence not to save her sister, but to banish her to the moon!"

Snow Drift gulped. It was frightening to see her teacher this angry. The temperature in the room had dropped and the snow in the corners had begun to swirl, creating small vortexes. Still, she thought she could understand her teacher's anger to some degree. She remembered reading that part in the book she found, but it seemed hard to believe that anypony could do such a thing to their sister, no matter how misguided she might be.

"It was then that I realized that Celestia had always meant for that to be the outcome. She just wanted Luna out of the way so that she could take control of both the sun and the moon, and become the supreme ruler of Equestria's sky. We knew that it was only a matter of time before Celestia turned her greed to our domain as well, so my sister's and I decided to split the kingdom. We would let Celestia rule her lands if she would leave us be."

The snow in the room calmed somewhat and Snow Drift decided to venture a question. "So is that why Equestria and Equiria are separate now? When you and your sisters decided to rule separately from Celestia?"

"Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple," Winter Chill sighed, "Celestia was unwilling to hear us out. She said she wanted to avoid any more drastic changes in the leadership. She said she didn't want to put any more stress on our subjects than necessary." She let out a humorless laugh, "Nothing more than another attempt to grab power. In the end, words were not enough, and we came to blows. We fought her, all of us except Spring Rain. She was always so gentle...but we were no match against her, not with the power of the sun and the moon behind her."

"What happened?" Snow Drift asked, her concern for her teacher greater than her fear.

"I came so close to dying," Winter Chill whispered after a moment of silence, "I don't think even Celestia knew how powerful she had become. But Spring knew. She could feel it somehow. We fought for days, weeks even. But in the end I was the only one left standing and Celestia decided to put a stop to our fight. I could tell as soon as she cast the spell. There was too much magic behind it for me to survive, and I was too injured to get out of the way in time."

But Spring she...shielded me. It took all of her magic, but I was left unscathed. However, the exertion was too much for her. She died."

Snow Drift couldn't help but gasp. Winter Chill had never spoken about Spring Rain to her before. She had always wondered why, but now she knew. "I'm so sorry teacher..."

"Stop."

Snow Drift stopped, her breath caught in her throat.

"When Spring died the battle ended. None of us, not even Celestia, had the heart to keep going after that. The country was separated, and we retreated to the western lands and founded Equiiria. It was supposed to be our paradise, but without Spring Rain it was never to be. The cycle of the seasons became locked with me, unable to progress to the next with nopony to guide its progress."

Both ponies were silent for a long time, staring at the shattered statues of Celestia and Luna. Finally, Snow Drift broke the silence.

"But...if Celestia was able to take control of the moon in Luna's absence then...then why couldn't you or one of your sisters do the same with the seasons?"

"We tried, once," Winter Chill replied, her voice bitter, "Remember that alicorn magic is balance. Celestia was able to govern the wheel of sun and moon because she took control of the entire cycle. With the seasons, only one of us was gone. But three ponies cannot achieve balance in a system with four parts. Autumn Gale tried. We thought that since she was Spring's counterpart, she would be able to do it but...she couldn't. She held both seasons for but a moment and the strain of the broken balance drove her mad. She hasn't been the same since then."

Snow Drift stood in silence. She had been so eager to hear this story, but now that she had she felt drained. She couldn't imagine how much her teacher had been through. She felt a sudden anger at Celestia and Luna. How could they put her beloved teacher through so much? It was unthinkable.

"Why did you tell me this?" Snow Drift asked, "Why did you think I deserved to know?"

"Well, you are my most precious and loyal student, I knew I could trust you," Winter Chill said, giving her a small smile, "Perhaps this is a story I should have told you long ago and I was just to frightened to tell you. But there is more to it than that. Celestia took my sister from me, she shattered my family. It's her fault Spring is dead, and it's her fault Autumn Gale lost her mind. She broke the balance of our world. But now, the time has come when that balance can be restored, at Celestia's cost. She will pay for what happened, and in doing so the balance will

be restored.”

She turned away from the statues, looking Snow Drift in the eyes. “But I can’t do it without you.”

Snow Drift blinked. “Me? What can I do?”

“Luna has returned. After one-thousand years of imprisonment she is back and with her return Celestia will be forced to acknowledge the mistakes she has made. However, if she does not other steps will need to be taken. I am sending you to Equestria.”

Snow Drift gasped again, almost falling over. “To Equestria!? Really!? Why? What good would I be all the way out there?”

“You will be taking up residency in a town called Ponyville. Celestia’s own student lives there. I want you to get to know her, learn what you can about both her and the Princesses. I will tell you more when it becomes necessary. However, for now I ask that you accept my instructions and act with the same loyalty you have always shown me.”

Snow Drift could hardly believe her ears. Not an hour ago she was sitting comfortably in the library and now she was being sent on what sounded like an espionage mission.

“Of course teacher,” she said, bowing once she had caught her breath, “I am honored that you have enough faith in me to trust me with this task.”

“You are my loyal student, Snow Drift. This is something only you can do for me.”