

Of Harmony & Chaos

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Chapter 6: Crossing Paths

Light. Demanding, horrible light. Even with his eyes closed it somehow managed to burn at his retinas. He rolled over, but it made no difference. The light still prodded and stung at his eyes, unrelenting in its efforts to wake him up. Suddenly, he realised that light had been joined by an ally: Discomfort. Why was his bed so hard?

'Dragons.'

Dragons. What odd reason for his bed to be uncomfortable. Why had he thought 'Dragons'?

'We fought a dragon. Then escaped and hid in this little cave.'

Ah. They had fought a dragon and hid in a cave. It all made sense now.

Discord's eyes fluttered open. He was lying flat on his back, head pointed towards the small slit that was the cave entrance. Cruel rays of orange were squeezing through and beaming directly into his face. The floor was cold, hard stone littered with pebbles and little rocks that dug into the draconequus' back. It all made sense then. With a drawn out yawn, Discord rose to his haunches and groaned as seemingly every sore joint and aching muscle popped and creaked. He looked around. The other four were still asleep, all huddled together to help keep warm and comfortable. The bright orange line cutting across them told Discord it must still have been early dawn and he was tempted to wake them, but thought better of it. Their ordeal last night had been an extreme one, and they were in no rush; he could afford to let them sleep longer.

'But what to do? Start on breakfast...?'

He definitely wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. Even though he was still a little tired, the hard floor would ensure that by the time he had nodded off again, he would need to get up anyway.

'The saddlebags.'

That was right. Their equipment and supplies had been left in the clearing when Firefly had been taken by the dragon. With a bit of effort, he would be there and back in a few minutes. Trotting carefully so as to not wake his companions, Discord slipped quietly out of the cave onto the narrow mountain path. The sun had still not escaped the clutches of the horizon; to think, his mother had to wake up so early everyday in order to actually start it on its way. Try as he might though, Discord could not see their home from where he was. It was either too far or hidden amongst the sprawling expanse of green.

'Oh well.'

A tad disappointed, he then turned his view to the woods below him, trying to pick out the clearing

where their bags hopefully still sat. The forest, however, was still quite dark and the morning rays clawed at the shadows, but fell short. Discord had two options: the first, to wait until it was lighter and he had the eyes of his companions to help him; the second, to go for an early scouting mission.

'A fly would be good.'

He picked the latter. He stretched some more, moved to the very edge of the path, looked down the dangerously steep slopes below, and then leapt. The whistling wind was strangely soothing and Discord chuckled as he fell.

'To think, the sound of a lethal plummet to almost certain doom can be comforting! Hilarious!'

He was of course, in no real danger. As the earth drew close enough to allow individual rocks and the occasional flower to be visually picked out, Discord opened his mismatched wings and swooped away from death's stony maw. He allowed himself only a moment more fun swirling and twisting freely in the air before getting to work and finding their would-have-been campsite. It didn't take him long; they hadn't flown that far in pursuit of the dragon after all, and had travelled in one direction.

'Let's hope no critters have had their way...'

With a soft thud, the draconequus landed in the damp grass of the clearing. The stream, burnt-out remains of a campfire and makeshift shelter told him that this had certainly been where they had stopped momentarily the night before. Holding his breath, Discord trotted over and peeped under the tarpaulin. Luckily enough, all their bags were there and didn't look to have been raided in the night. With a long sigh of relief, the draconequus began to gather up the various bags but began to feel somewhat apprehensive while doing so. Would he be able to carry *all* of them back up to the cave? He could make several trips, but it would be a bit of a bother. Frowning, he lifted each pony's bag and weighed them individually. None of them were especially heavy, but combined they would surely prove a fierce foe. Magic was naturally an option, Discord knew several spells which would help him carry all the bags. He was wary, however, of casting anything on Luna's or Celestia's packs. Other than the obvious, he wasn't entirely sure what either of his sisters had decided to bring and he knew of several objects and substances they owned which could...react, with any direct contact with magic. And it would just be plain rude to rummage through their things.

'Compromise.'

It was all that could be done if he wanted to make the one trip. Discord settled on using his magic to lighten the load of his, Surprise's and Firefly's bags and then simply hope he was strong enough to carry his sisters' packs at their full weight. He slipped his own bag onto his back and grabbed the eight others by their straps, shrouding four of them in a golden glow. Setting his sights back onto the mountain that was cloaked in a thin fog, Discord jumped into the air and flapped his wings.

'I should be able to manage this...'

The additional luggage was by no means light, but neither were they extraordinarily heavy. It would be tiring no doubt, though Discord suspected that he would be far less exhausted by this trip than he had been by some of the other trials they had already endured.

'Hopefully they aren't awake yet. I wouldn't want them to worry.'

The sun was still rising yet the return voyage was not as exhilarating as it had been. Coming down the mountain was far more nerve-wracking. With the added weight, Discord was unable to fly as fast or as nimbly as he had initially, and as such was very wary of encountering their scaly friend from the night before. Fortunately, the jaunt passed without incident and the draconequus was able to locate the cave and its safety after a few minutes of searching, having been sure to mentally note down its approximate location before leaving. A second later, and Discord was once again in the company of his sleeping sisters and friends, still closely knitted together to share each others' soft coats and body heat in the cold, hard hole they slept in.

'To wake or not to wake...'

Discord wished himself to have fallen asleep with them beforehand, so at the very least his body wouldn't have been in as much painful protest as it was earlier. He looked to each of them in turn, breathing and snoring peacefully, until his bright yellow eyes fell on her. Celestia.

'By the Elements, she's so beautiful.'

She most certainly was. The morning light of the sun was gentle to her, unlike it had been to Discord. It didn't shine and directly besiege the meagre defence that were her eyelids. No, rather it played gently across her heavenly white wings and coat, blanketing her in gold.

Discord sighed quietly to himself. He shouldn't be thinking of her like that; she was, after all, his stepsister. But ever since that day when he had first laid eyes upon her, there had always been that lump hidden in the very depths of his heart, kept sealed down there through sheer willpower alone, a lump that had grown ever larger and more restless with each passing year.

'I love her.'

As much as he would like to deny it to himself, Discord could not. He loved her, perhaps he always had. And it wasn't simply her beauty that caused the draconequus' heart to defy all reason and circumstance and long for the alicorn. She was as smart and kind and gentle as she was nature's masterpiece. True, even after all those years spent together Celestia had never *truly* warmed to Discord like Luna had and their mother intended. But even so, the draconequus could tell that Celestia had a pure heart and wished only the best for every being, despite not always loving each and every one of them personally. As Discord placed the packs in the corner by the entrance, he heard a pony stir.

"...Discord?"

"VIATOR! VIATOR! WE LOVE YOOOOOOUUU~~~!!"

"Where's your next show going to be!? When!? I HAVE to be there!"

"Grand & Mightful Viator, please can I have your autograph!?"

“VIATOOOR! VIATOOOR!”

They wouldn't stop. For thirty minutes now, the Grand & Mighty Viator had simply been standing on stage basking in the crowd's never ending applause and love. He had long finished his performance to a silent audience that then required a minute to fully absorb and appreciate what they had just seen. A show so amazing that many of them would be unable to return to their normal lives now that they knew just how indescribably excellent life could be with the influence of one such as the Grand & Mighty Viator, of which of course there was *only* one. Many even had to be taken to hospital, having either fainted or slipped due to the tear-drenched floor.

The Grand & Mighty Viator looked back and forth through the screeching crowds with a smug smile. His performance had proceeded even better than expected, and he had expected it to go *very* well. He was the Grand & Mighty Viator after all. As he swept his gaze over his adoring audience, the azure unicorn spotted a news mare struggling to get closer and shout some questions at him while waving a pencil and notepad. Naturally, additional coverage was always good so why not just do an interview here?

“Please, quiet.” The performance pony hadn't even needed to speak; his raised hoof was enough to hush the roaring waves of affection into near-perfect silence. Turning his head, Viator nodded once to the news mare, giving her permission to speak.

“Grand & Mighty Viator! Manesterdam Weekly, please, would you mind answering just a few questions?”

“But of course not! My work here is done, I can spare the time.”

“Wonderful! Now, my first question is: just *how* are you so Grand & Mighty?” The whole crowd was listening to the news mare and looked up eagerly to their new hero who was casually inspecting his hooves for dirt.

“Why, a simple combination of unparalleled natural talent and years of incomprehensibly difficult training.” The audience applauded their approval as the news mare excitedly took notes.

“I see! Something to be expected, really! Next question: how do you react to claims that you're the best pony in the land, all of history and will never be surpassed in the future?” A ripple-like effect coursed through the throng of ponies as each leaned forward in anticipation of the undoubtedly incredible answer.

“Well, since I've never been defeated in anything at any point in time and since no pony with even the slightest hint of power has yet to challenge me, I can only assume that...” An even greater ripple. This was, hoofs down, going to be the greatest reply ever to leave a pony's mouth. “...I am.”

“WWWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!” The crowd went insane. They danced and writhed with excitement. Their lives were complete. They could be struck down then and there and would die happily. The news mare however, though barely able to write due to the shaking in her hooves, was not done. The Grand & Mighty Viator raised another hoof to calm his people.

"F-final question, and then a message! What was your personal favourite part of your show?"

Viator chuckled smugly. What a silly question! His favourite would naturally be the same as every other ponies' favourite. "Obviously, my *personal* favourite was...was..." The Grand & Mighty Viator stopped, hoof in the air. What was every other ponies' favourite part? What did he actually *do*? "...it was...uhh..." He couldn't remember. He had just performed the greatest, most spectacular show that cemented his place in history and ensured he would be immortalised in memory, art and song. And he couldn't remember it. He couldn't remember any of it. He was drawing a total blank. "...*clearly*, I enjoyed all of it! I have no particular favourite...uhh...p-part!" They didn't scream. They didn't hug the air fantasising that the Grand & Mighty Viator was wrapped in their legs. There was no reaction at all. "N-now! That message you mentioned? What is that?" He had to dazzle them again. Remind them just what he had *done* for them.

"Oh, yes, yes of course! This comes from an old friend of yours! He wrote in and asked us to tell you this!" Viator raised an increasingly sweaty eyebrow as the news mare cleared her throat and put on an impressive accent. "Time ta git up, pardner! Rise an' shine there!"

Viator twitched. He had heard that voice before. And he did *not* like it. "Where did...?" spluttered the unicorn. Before he got a reply he noticed something dreadfully odd from the corner of his eye. The crowd was frozen still, everything was, and not only that, they were...*changing*. The Grand & Mighty Viator stared in increasing horror as the ponies around him began to warp into...rocks? Others simply began to disintegrate, blowing away in a cold wind that had appeared from nowhere and left an empty floor where there had once been hundreds of ponies packed tightly together. Then the walls of the stadium began to morph as well, becoming a dull grey and littered with the occasional plant or weed. He whipped back around to the news mare, trying his best to suppress the panic in his voice. "What is going on!?"

"Looks ta me like somepony 'eres 'aving a mighty bad dream. C'mon now, time ta git up 'an back on the road."

"A dream...? So all this...No! No! NOOOO!"

Viator opened his eyes and glared pure, boiling hatred at the other cheerful pair looming far too close over him.

"Ya'll awake now, pardner? Seemed like dem bed bugs were nipping somethun fierce! 'Course ya weren't sleepin' in no bed, but ya git ma meaning, yea'?"

"Yes, yes I do. Now, I think we should ju-"

"We probably ought ta be hittin' the road sooner ra'er than later. Still a couplo hours trek till ya git ta da plains." Viator was reminded once again why he did not appreciate the company of Craggy.

In the end, Viator had decided to leave behind the broken heap that was once his stagecoach. It would have simply taken too long to repair, even with the unicorn's considerable powers, and he wanted to reach New Manesterdam as soon as possible. He had also, with great reluctance and uncertainty, decided to ask Craggy for help carrying what could be salvaged from the smashed remains of the performer's wagon. As Viator had feared, the green earth pony had happily offered his assistance, even

stating it was part of his duties as 'mountain ranger' to lend a hoof to anypony in need.

Viator pulled himself to his hooves from the blankets he had been wrapped in. As he looked west along the winding path of the gorge bottom, he sighed. Climbing back up the higher, more direct path would be both difficult and dangerous and Craggy had highly advised against them trying. The earth pony claimed the unicorn should never have been on that path in the first place since it was so unstable. That of course had begged the question as to why Craggy had *also* been on it, but Viator was already too tired of the mossy green pony's voice to ask anything but the bare necessities.

As the travelling unicorn magically rolled up his blankets and placed them neatly in the dirty worn saddlebags he had managed to retrieve from his coach he simultaneously lifted out a loaf of bread and precisely cut two slices from it telekinetically. He then preceded to stuff down his throat as quickly as possible. It was *his* food, and he didn't want the infuriating 'ranger' trying to leech some off him. Even if he was helping Viator out immensely, he should still have his own!

"Ya ready there, pardner?" Viator waved a hoof behind his head to signal to the earth pony that he just about was, still trying to conceal his chewing with the rest of his body. Once Viator's bread was safely in his stomach, he slipped his saddlebags on and turned to face Craggy, who was kicking dirt and dust over the ashes of the fire they had made.

"Shall we be on-"

"A'ight, let's hit the road!" The two began a brisk trot along the canyon floor in silence. With all his might, Viator tried not to look towards the ranger pony trotting to his left for any reason. Instead, he tried merely to appreciate the rugged beauty of the steep mountains and cliffs or plan a new performance. Perhaps the stores of Manetserdam would stock ingenious new items which he could incorporate into a show? He had even heard that the legendary Star Swirl had moved there.

'It must be, or at least will be, a city of great magical commerce and learning! Oh, it is obvious that I, the Grand & Mighty Viator, will find destiny waiting for me there!' The thought sent a shiver down the unicorn's spine and he grinned to himself. He was pumped.

"Y'all never did say what ya did, pardner! Ben tryin' to work it out from ya mark, but it jus' ain't happening!" Viator's excitement instantly deflated. He didn't want to talk to Craggy. But then, he somehow doubted the irritating stallion would give up and accept silence. The azure unicorn sighed and looked back to his flank and the mark upon it, a stereotypical magic wand standing straight with a ring of light bursting from its tip and encircling it.

"I, am a performer. I travel the land and use my *great* talents for the entertainment of others!" As he finished speaking, Viator almost tripped over his own hooves. He hadn't been interrupted; Craggy hadn't cut in with something else. The azure stallion slowly turned to look at the ranger who simply nodded and smiled at him. "A-and I don't just use my own abilities, why, some of the things you're helping me carry are-"

"Ben meaning ta ask, what's all the fancy bottles and such we carrying for?" The unicorn stopped talking, stared straight ahead and ground his teeth together audibly. He had thought, hoped, *prayed* that Craggy might start changing. But no, clearly just a one off.

Thankfully, the agitating earth pony did not seem to mind having his question left unanswered and retained his ever-optimistic smile plastered on his muzzle even as the two continued to trot in quiet. Viator however, began to notice that there were a number of sharp rocks and heavy boulders lying loose around them. *'It would be easy. No pony would miss him, would they...?'* As the unicorn's eyes locked onto a particular large and heavy stone he shook the criminal thoughts from his mind. The Grand & Mightful Viator was no murderer! He just hoped to the sun that he could truthfully make the same claim by the time he left those mountains.

Plop!

'Missed it.'

Plop!

'Missed it.'

Plop!

'Missed it.'

"Ahoy!"

'Missed...what?' The young zebra stood still and listened, ignoring the slippery fish she had been trying to catch from a rockpool for nearly an hour.

"Ahooy!" Definitely a voice calling. She twitched her ears and tried to follow the direction of the sound, but was almost afraid to do so. The voice had come from *behind* her. And the only thing behind her was the Great Sea.

"Ahoy, I say! Can you hear me, lassie?" Kromi darted her eyes to the left and then the right. There was not a single soul other than her on the beach. The voice was speaking to *her*.

"Hmm, maybe speaks a different language per chance..." The owner of the voice cleared its throat. "He-llo. My. Name. Is. Coin Bag. Do. You. Under-stand. What. I. Am. Say-"

"By the Elders! I...I don't...you're *real* aren't you!?" Kromi had finally managed to slowly turn her head behind her. There, standing on the deck of a small, wooden sailing boat was a zebra-like being frowning at her. He didn't have stripes and his coat was platinum coloured. His mane, though not particularly long, was neatly arranged so it didn't get into his eyes while a white hat sat in between his ears. He appeared to have some sort of drawing or tattoo on his flank, though Kromi could not make it out at the distance he was at.

"Real? Golly lass, I hope so!" Kromi instinctively hit herself in the leg lightly. It hurt, so it couldn't have been a dream. So, in other words, Kromi was truly speaking to an individual who more than likely came from beyond the Great Sea. Not someone who had simply heard *tales* of the huge cities and lush

landscapes, but had actually *been* there, maybe even *lived* there!

"What's it like!? Are there really towns built on mountains!? With buildings so high they touch the sky!? Do they eat flowers and green grass there everyday!?" The young zebra hadn't hesitated to charge into the water just to get a little bit closer to the boat and its incredible passenger, who seemed taken aback by the girl's enthusiasm.

"Calm down lass! One question at a time! One at a time I say!" It took several minutes for the surprised sailor to calm the jumping zebra, she was so consumed with excitement. Once she was simply trembling rather than bouncing, he lowered a small rowing boat from his yacht and came to shore.

"I say girl, you're acting like you've never seen a pony before! The name's Coin Bag by the way, if you didn't hear it before."

"A pony? Are you a pony? I haven't seen one before!" Coin Bag, as he had called himself, raised an eyebrow at the zebra, who continued to stare straight at him with a huge grin spread over her muzzle.

"Never seen a pony...? Ah, well, that would explain it then, wouldn't it?" On closer inspection, Kromi noticed that the mark on Coin Bag's flank was of three stacks of gold and silver coins. She also saw that he had a small sliver of facial hair above his mouth, which he proceeded to stroke gently while in thought. "A bit of a mystery though. I thought Shardsail, Rubybox, even Blackmane and all their crews traded dragon hoards with you zebra folk! Unless..." Without letting go of his hair, Coin Bag looked around the beach and trees growing behind it. "No pier...this...this *is* Cairib...isn't it? Please tell me it's at least close by?" The doubt was clear in his voice.

Kromi knew of Cairib, but had only ever been once, when she was very young. It was by far the largest village within the known radius of Oromo, Kromi's home. Like many villages, Cairib it was built on the shores of the Great Sea, unlike many villages however, it wasn't shrouded from the water by trees. It had been a long time since that village had come to mind, but Coin Bag's words made Kromi think. Cairib was located to the west of Oromo, further along the coast. Kromi often saw the big boats sailing in Cairib's general direction, and if they were trading boats like Coin Bag had mentioned, then it would make sense for them to go to the biggest, most visible village they could find. Was Cairib where the big boats docked? How long had they been going there for...? Cairib wasn't *too* far from Oromo, a few day's hard galloping at most. The young zebra was sure she would be able to go there by herself if she wanted to.

"Lass? I say, lass, are you alright there?" Kromi blinked out of her thoughtful trance at Coin Bag's calling.

"S-sorry! And no...this isn't Cairib...Cairib is several days that way!" She pointed with her hoof to the west.

"Oh, blast! I *knew* that wind was too strong south!" As he spoke, the stallion pony lifted his hat and pulled a roll of paper from it while at the same time revealing to Kromi that he had a horn. Despite her best efforts, the zebra could not get a good look at it before it was hidden again under his hat. "Hmm, so if I was going faster south than I thought, then I'm probably about...here!" Coin Bag jabbed at a spot on the paper which he had unrolled and scrutinised for a few moments in an attempt to show Kromi where they both were standing. The sheet of paper was clearly a map; Kromi had rarely had the chance to look at them but knew that her tribe owned a precious few.

"Wow..." The map confirmed the zebra's hopes. North of where Coin Bag pointed, where they currently were, lay a large expanse of water and then more land. And unlike Kromi's native land, which had been coloured almost entirely in varying shades of yellow and brown, the terrain beyond the Great Sea was green with occasional splodges of blue or bumps of blackish grey and white. Kromi pointed to the beautifully colourful drawing on the map. "Are you going to go here?" she asked, barely able to contain her exhilaration.

"Back to where now? To Ploughmouth? Ah, well yes of course! I wouldn't be able to run the Ploughmouth-Cairib route very well if I didn't now, coul-"

"TAKE ME WITH YOU! PLEASE!" One moment Coin Bag was casually conversing with his new zebra friend, the next her face was almost planted in the sand by his hooves. He was thoroughly surprised.

"I say...either my ears need a good scrubbing or I swear you just asked to take you with me?" As he spoke, Coin Bag gently tried to lift Kromi's head from her bow with an expression composed of both confusion and amusement.

"Please! Please take me with you! I *hate* it here! I want to go explore, have an adventure, get away from this...this...this *bucking place!*" Such was Kromi's frustration that she was forced to take large breaths. Coin Bag placed a comforting hoof over her shoulder to try once again to calm her.

"There, there lassy, let's talk about it, shall we? Over a nice cup of tea, hmm?" Kromi didn't know what 'tea' was, but she nodded anyway, still shaking a little from her outburst.

"You'll do no such thing!" The two whipped their heads around to try and locate the source of the voice. Standing just by the trees that marked the end of the beach, was a small crowd of angry-looking zebra, including Kromi's parents, lead by the same wrinkled elder that had scolded Kromi earlier.

"Mama? Papa?" Coin Bag noted that the young zebra standing by him almost sounded afraid.

"Get over here child! And *you!* We do not want any of your cursed pony goods! Be gone! Back to the waters with you!" The elder almost spat the words and pointed her staff accusingly at the unicorn.

"Wait here lass, I'm sure we can talk things over and be best of chums lickety split..." Coin Bag forcibly injected confidence into his voice, but his stride towards the zebra was steady, slow and cautious.

"I said back with you, pony! We do not want your kind corrupting our way of life like you did Cairib!" Both sides tensed and the zebra audibly hissed at the pony, causing him to hesitate.

"Hmm, seems I'm clearly not welcome!" Another hiss emanated from the mob. "Now, now! No need to get our tails in a twist! I'll be on my merry way..." Slowly, Coin Bag began to back away from the crowd.

"Mama, Papa, please stop this! He's my friend!" The young zebra's efforts were met only with a disapproving glare.

"I will not tell again, child! Come *here!*" Kromi hesitated, but ultimately submitted. If she refused, she would no doubt receive a severe beating later and if she tried to flee with Coin Bag then they would try and hurt him too. Defeated, Kromi lowered her head sadly and slowly walked over to her parents who refused to look at their daughter. "The same for you pony! We will not ask again. *Be gone!*" Coin Bag complied and retreated to the rowing boat. The tension began to relax only once the platinum pony had reached his yacht and begun hoisting the dingy up its side.

"Let us go, Kromi. And you will never speak to an outsider again, understand?" Kromi simply nodded and watched as the crowd began to disperse back through the trees. As the last of the zebra vanished into the foliage, Kromi sighed and picked herself up but jumped in shock when something hit her flank. Rearing her head back, she saw a large bag suspended in the air by a shimmering aura of bronze light. The unusual sight captivated her entirely before a sharp whistle drew her attention to Coin Bag's yacht. She could make out the pony waving at her, a similar glow shining from under his hat. She waved back and thought that just as the boat's sails caught the wind and began to set out, she caught Coin Bag wink. The young zebra watched as the boat sailed off to the west then quickly looked around her to ensure there were no prying eyes before undoing the knotted sack and examining its contents: a wooden and bronze tube with two pieces of glass fixed in either side; a brightly coloured cylinder with a rounded arrow head and a small length of string emerging from its rear end; some small collections of neatly collected paper and finally a hastily scrawled note.

"I think I can see why you don't like it there, lassy! Just sit tight and don't worry your stripes though! Come next run, I'll be sure to offer you a jolly 'tour' of this old rig! Who knows? We might 'accidently' leave the sails out and get caught in the wind! I've left my predicted schedule on the back of this note and included manuals on how to use those two toys. Keep an eye out for me with the telescope then signal with the firework when it's safe and I'll bring her in quick as can be to get you!

*Best Regards
Coin Bag, Merchant Extraordinaire"*

A single tear dropped onto the note, smudging the still wet ink. Kromi quickly wiped her eyes to stop herself damaging the note any further but could not help smiling at it for a few moments more. She wasn't going to forget her promise to herself. Just as those amazing lights had inspired her to do so, she *would* escape this place and travel to better lands. A little bit longer, and everything would become better.

BANG! BANG!

"There we go, careful now! Hoist it up nice and slow!"

"Hey, get some more cement mixing!"

"Are those timbers from Gallopotris here yet?"

"Anypony seen my helmet?"

Dawn smiled. It was busy as usual in the Manesterdam outskirts. Her uncle would no doubt be

grumbling, but she had gotten used to it for the most part. And the earth pony had to admit, it could be quite the sight seeing the feats accomplished by the growing cities' endless army of construction ponies. She did not, however, have time to marvel at the engineering accomplishments. Not only were there groceries to buy, but she had to pick up their latest orders from the library. As she turned on to another street, this one free from any construction work, Dawn shook her blond mane to try and remove any dust that had gathered in it. The staff at the public library would throw a fit if she began trailing any form of dirt into their immaculate marble halls. They could well react in a similar manner if she brought bags of provisions in with her, so she decided to go to the library first.

Victory Dawn liked Manesterdam. In the outskirts, there were the breathtaking towers slowly climbing higher and higher towards the clouds, surrounded by groups of fluttering pegasi and the glowing spots of unicorn's magic. And then there was the inner city, finished in its construction for the most part and absolutely striking. Almost every building was unique in its architecture but they all shared a common trait: height. Ten floors was a bare minimum, a minimum the vast majority of the towers choose to exceed. Of course the city wasn't just buildings; a massive green space, which Dawn loved to stroll through, had been left close to the centre as both a place of recreation, and also to serve as a reminder of every pony's duty to take care of their environment.

"No! You can't borrow it! It is *strictly* for display only!" Dawn was so caught up in enjoying the sights and wonders of the city that she almost didn't notice the ruckus taking place just within the large white building that was Manesterdam's Public Library.

"Please! I'm an excellent guardian! There's no need for you to worry about it! Just two days! Two days and I'll bring it right back!"

"NO!" As Dawn approached the scene, she could see an unusually tall unicorn wearing a simple white dress, wide brimmed hat and sunglasses trying desperately to grab a worn tome from the hooves of one of the library's curators. Despite her face being well covered by the glasses and hat, the curator's eyes flashed with recognition. "Wait a second, I remember you! You were the one who *forced* us to sell you the collection on the studies of '*Extra Sensory Perception through Involuntary Spasms*'! Do you realise how *rare* they were!? Do you realise how rare *this* book is!?"

"Oh, erm, well, yes, but..." The tall white mare began prodding her hooves together in embarrassment. "...But I haven't read anything on the moon in maybe four hundred yea-Uhh, I-I mean ever! Yes! I haven't read any good research on the moon ever! And that's '*The Viability of Life on Lunar: A Study of Mixing Magic & the Moon*!' It is *the* book on the whole subject!"

"No. Now please, leave before I have to call security." The mare gazed longingly at the book once more before sighing and pacing out of the library, head down. The blue earth pony already had her suspicions as to the true identity of this character.

"...Ms. Aumean?" Quicker than Dawn thought possible, the disguised alicorn was by her side with a silencing hoof in the blond pony's mouth.

"Shhh! Sorry, Dawn, but I'm not really supposed to be here..." Equidae Aumean, the powerful sorceress, poked her eyes out from behind her large sunglasses and darted her head around, scanning to see if anypony had heard her name being spoken.

"Whh nht?" It was unsurprisingly difficult for Dawn to speak with a hoof in her mouth.

"Oh, sorry." The alicorn quickly pulled her hoof from a frowning Dawn's jaws and shook it a bit to try and get rid of a string of saliva.

"I said, why not? Is this why you're being all...secretive?" Aumean glanced to the library with a flash of guilt.

"...Yes and no. Why don't we talk over a nice cup of tea?" Dawn nodded slowly, still frowning.

"That sounds nice...but first I have to pick up a book order," she nodded towards the white building "from there. I suppose you'll just wait outside...?" Aumean simply nodded sheepishly in response.

Half an hour later and the two ponies found themselves sitting at an outside table by a casual, friendly establishment situated right next to the park. Aumean had directed them here rather than Dawn and her uncle's home, much to the confusion of the blond earth pony. As the alicorn magically sipped her tea, Dawn examined her disguise in greater detail. Aumean had seemingly gone to great lengths to conceal her identity and status. Her hat and glasses covered her mane and face while the white dress ensured her wings and tail were also hidden. The whole situation was quite bizarre, and Dawn was intent on finding out exactly what was going on.

"So..." Dawn waited to continue while Aumean placed her cup down lightly and let out a long, relaxed sigh.

"Yes, all this," she gestured to her hat and glasses with a hoof. "It's all quite simple really. Partly, it's just to hide my...standing. You know how I hate people staring or wondering how I have both a horn and wings. It can be bad enough in Ponyville. I don't think I could cope with it in a big city like this with so many ponies." She took another sip of her tea and adjusted her hat a little.

"But why the hat? And glasses? The dress I can understand, but why hide your identity as well?" As Dawn spoke, Aumean looked back up the street towards the library and laughed nervously.

"I don't suppose you remember that *little* incident years ago, when I-"

"When you almost got arrested for nearly stealing that book? Yes, I do." Dawn smiled at the memory. She remembered herself as a filly rolling around on the floor in tears of laughter at the huge fuss Aumean had stirred. Her uncle's attempts to defuse the situation while simultaneously attempting to cover up the fact that he knew the alicorn had been equally hilarious.

"Heh heh, yes...that incident." Aumean blushed and laughed nervously again.

"You also said you weren't supposed to be here...?" The ivory mare nodded in response.

"You see, my children recently embarked on a journey. A journey that I planned for them and one that will eventually bring them here," she looked to the eastern sky with a frown "Now, I'm *supposed* to stay at home and keep everything in check there, buuuut..." Dawn similarly frowned as Aumean childishly drew out the word.

“But?”

“But then I heard that somepony had donated a surviving copy of that book to the library! Its been lost for hundreds of years; I just had to try and read it again!” The alicorn’s eyes glistened over with excitement as she talked about the book she had tried to obtain. “If I remember correctly, it was a truly *fascinating* read, very advanced theory and magic.”

“...so you don’t want them to know you’re here?”

Aumean nodded with an awkward grin. “Celestia certainly wouldn’t approve of me leaving the house empty, even if it is quite a trot into Everfree. Were I at home, I could check their progress. Once I set out to come here however, I can only guess. They may well end up arriving here earlier than I anticipated,” the alicorn took another quick slurp of her tea and pointed hoof in the direction of the library. “And knowing my little ponies, they would probably want to at least visit the library once. And since I was going to be there as well...”

Dawn nodded and took a long sip of her tea, which was now a little cold. The alicorn’s reasoning made sense, she supposed, though one thing was left unexplained. “So this visit has nothing to do with the lights?”

Aumean placed her cup down and raised a questioning eyebrow. “Lights?”

“You didn’t get Uncle’s letter? It certainly would have been fast if you had, but I did manage to find a courier soon after he wrote it, so it’s possible.” Aumean’s shaking head answered Dawn’s question. She didn’t think that the googly-eyed mail mare would be able to deliver the letter *that* quickly. “Two nights ago, we saw a series of bright objects fly from over the Western Range. Uncle thought that they were magical in nature, and that you might know something about them.” As soon as the earth pony mentioned ‘bright objects’ and the Western Range, the ivory mare’s eyes flashed from uncertainty to realisation.

“Oh, yes! I’m afraid that was my doing. I should apologize, I would have warned him in advance, but there are reasons why I can’t.” Once again, Aumean looked around as if she feared her fellow sorcerer might be sitting beside them. “Please, Dawn, don’t tell him I was here.” The alicorn’s expression of worry was not one that hinted at danger, but also that she was concerned that something important to her might go wrong, like a surprise party at risk of being found out.

“Why? Is it the reason you wanted to come here,” the blue pony gestured to the café, “Instead of home?”

“Yes. I may just be being silly, but I don’t want to take unnecessary risks. I would love to be able to explain to both you and Star Swirl, but right now, I probably shouldn’t. Don’t worry, everything will become clear in time.” Dawn was intensely curious. As her uncle had thought, Aumean was the one responsible for the magic comet-like objects they had seen. Dawn also knew that the red-maned alicorn was a very powerful user of magic, perhaps more powerful than even her uncle. With Aumean confirmed as the perpetrator behind the streaking lights, then Star Swirl’s other suspicion of the objects being connected with exceedingly potent magic was also now more likely to be true.

“I see...”

"I hate to ask you to hide things from your uncle, but this is important to me." The blond-maned earth pony looked hard into the alicorn's pleading eyes. Predictably, she could find no trace of malicious intent. "I promise you that I will explain everything soon, a few days at the very most." To Aumean's surprise, Dawn started laughing.

"Of course I won't tell him! Whatever it is, you and your secret are safe with me! It's not as if you're asking me to shave his beard while he sleeps!" Aumean could not help but break into a chuckle with her young friend.

"Thank you, Dawn. Thank you." The two silently dinged their near-empty cups together and smiled deeply as they drank.

"...Discord?"

"Ah, Celestia, good morning! How did you sleep?" The white alicorn simply mumbled something inaudible in response to the draconequus' questions, concentrating more on rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her hooves and stretching her wings as far as they would go.

"I'm a little achy..." she finally said in response, flexing her legs and neck to try and coax them into loosening from their stiff state.

"Yes, not the best place to sleep, but better than becoming dragon chow." Celestia's eyes shot open at the mention of the previous adrenaline-filled night, her memories finally filtering through into her still drowsy mind.

"By the Elements...I truly cannot decide if yesterday is something I want to forget forever or cherish. It was just..." she trailed off and brought a hoof to her chin in thought

"Exciting?" Discord offered, receiving a gentle smile for his efforts.

"Not quite the word I was searching for."

"Caaaaake..." Both were interrupted by Luna's sleep talk. Their conversation had caused both their sibling and Surprise to begin stirring, though Firefly lay snoring quietly just as peacefully.

"Luna...oh, Luna..." The elder sister calmly whispered and nudged the midnight foal, causing her to frown and grumble and wave her hooves around in front of her, as if trying to grasp something.

"Caaaaake...Oh!" The young alicorn's lashes fluttered open to the sight of her brother and sister giggling at what could have only been her dream-speak. It wasn't the first time Luna had awoken to such chortling; ever since she was a tiny filly she had had a habit of talking in her slumber. "H-heeey!"

"Ugh...morning everpony." Surprise was next to awaken, the chatter and Luna's protests having dragged her from her rest, though a grin managed to stretch itself across her muzzle "...all still alive,

huh?"

"We most certainly are, and with one of the Elements to show for it!" Discord smirked as he proudly held the orange gemstone high in the air. Everypony present -even the sleeping Firefly- smiled happily at being reminded that they had overcome the first of no doubt many trials. The gem glowed in the dimly lit cave, supporting the few beams of sunlight in wrapping each of them in a golden aura.

"Woouoooo!" The moment was interrupted by Ponyville's speedster cheering in her sleep.

"Do you think we should wake her?" inquired the snowy pegasus. She was debating with herself whether to try, likely in vain, to poke her friend awake or leave her sprawled out on the hard floor, apparently oblivious to the rough, uncomfortable surface.

"She can have a few minutes more. Meanwhile," with a snap of his talons, Discord levitated each of the packs he had retrieved to their respective owners. "You should check these and make sure everything is still there. They've been lying out in the forest unattended for the whole night after all."

"You went and got them? Wow, thanks brother!" Luna and Surprise's eyes lit up as their belongings were returned to them, and they hugged the packs like some sort of stuffed animals before unclipping their personalised clasps and rummaging through them.

"Yeah, thanks Dissy! Now we can continue straight on!"

Even Celestia managed a smile at seeing her saddlebags safe. "That's very thoughtful of you, Discord. Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. Now, let's wake our dragon-beating friend, have some breakfast, and be on our way." Another snap of his talons and a small, brass horn appeared by Firefly's head "Shall I?" His grin was its usual mischievous self and he had already readied his talons for another click.

"She probably won't wake up otherwise, trust me." Surprise was quick to inform, fully aware of how deep a sleeper the blue-maned earth pony was. Luna gave her consent with a giggle and clamped her hooves over her ears in preparation. Celestia rolled her eyes, but her attempts to hide a grin did not go unnoticed by the draconequus.

"Well, with all in favour then." His talons snapped together.

TOOOT!

"AGHH!"

"Good morning, Firefly!" The pink pony had leapt to her hooves in fright and was looking around with pinprick pupils.

"What...who...?" Discord had skilfully made the horn disappear just as the earth pony was still mid-air, destroying all evidence of the devious prank.

"No time for that, Fire! Quick, eat up!" Both Surprise and Luna were desperately struggling with

their lungs, trying to contain a fit of giggles. Discord and Celestia managed to each release a tactful, discrete chuckle as they both rummaged through their packs for something to eat. The others quickly joined them, despite Firefly still being in a state of slight shock and confusion as to exactly what had happened. She had thought the dragon had found them or some equally perilous situation had befallen the group.

Without abundant plants growing within the cave, the travellers were forced to take something from what they had brought. Soon, they had each finished their varied breakfast, buckled their saddlebags in place and were ready to continue their adventure.

"Let's go everypony!" For all the danger they had faced last night, Luna's call was still bursting with enthusiasm and motivated her companions enough to leave the safety of the cave without a moment's hesitation.

The dawn had long since broken, and the group was greeted by the mid-morning sun and a spectacular view of Canterlot Valley. They each only took a moment to savour it however, anxious to carry on and make as much distance as they could from the large den that sat higher on the mountain above them.

"You sure I won't get ponynapped today?" jokingly asked Firefly as she peered back up the track they had escaped from the dragon with. A trail of deep black smoke could be seen lazily floating around the mountain, signifying that the dragon had more than likely gone to sleep.

"Good...let's try to be as quick as we can, at least until we get deeper into the mountains." Celestia signalled with her hoof as she spoke and took the lead, breaking into a mild gallop down the mountain and further away from the dragon's lair. Her companions were quick to join her and the group fell into silence, concentrating only on the road ahead.

A few hours passed and the adventurers stopped for a break by a small spring. They had made good time, and though the dragon's mountain still dominated the eastern view, the deep crags and high mounds of earth gave them enough cover that the chances of being found by the fiery beast were minimal, were it to start hunting. As Discord, Luna, Surprise and Firefly cooled and splashed themselves in the fresh waters, Celestia sat in the shade of a boulder studying her map and the compass. She had only given a brief glance to the enchanted tool to confirm their general direction, but hadn't taken the time to perform any serious pathfinding since before finding the Element of Ambition. She was curious to see how both the compass and their possible route had changed.

'It's more northerly now,' she thought as she observed the compass' ever-changing needle for a few moments. It was true, the needle now spun back and forth between the northern and western pointers, unlike before where it had pointed exclusively in a westerly direction. To double check, the alicorn cast a quick spell and created a starry arrow in the air above her head. It pointed in the same direction that Celestia had aligned the compass' northern marker in, confirming that she was reading it right and they should generally head north east. *'As I thought. Straight to Manesterdam. What could be awaiting us there I wonder? I doubt another dragon.'* Celestia could only ponder their future momentarily before she was pulled from the depths of her mind by a splash of cold water to the flank. She blinked in surprise and turned her head to find her companions all soaking wet, their manes dragged to the ground by the weight of the liquid. Luna in particular had a sheepish expression and Celestia was certain she had seen the last few sparks of a spell pop from Luna's horn just as she had turned to look.

"C'mon Tia, the water's great! It'll freshen you right up!" Celestia had to admit, Surprise's words tempted her. She was quite sweaty from all the galloping and it would certainly be a good idea to clean the cuts and bruises she had received in the fight against the colossal lizard.

"I suppose a quick dip wouldn't hurt."

An hour later and Celestia's mane was still drenched from the watery assault she had suffered at the hooves of her companions. She had protested, but was secretly grateful. The wet locks of her pastel mane obscured her vision and were a little annoying; however, they also greatly helped in keeping the heat at bay and the odd shake of her head to sprinkle some droplets over her wings and coat was revitalising. Time passed and the sun crossed overhead and began to make its descent. For the most part the group was silent, preferring to save their breath for their legs and wings, but as the light from the falling star began to burn orange the quiet was broken.

"Why'd you all come on this trip anyway?" The pink pony's question caught the group off guard and they all slowed, frowning at Firefly.

"What do you mean, Fire?" Luna was the first to respond.

"I mean *why* did you all want to do all this? You all heard Meanie, none of us had to. And last night got me thinking, why did *I* come along?" By that point they had all come to a slow trot. "At first I just thought it was for the adventure, you know? But the things you said Tia, they made sense. I think, deep down, I joined you guys to prove something to myself, maybe prove something to others as well. And it just made me wonder if any of you had similar reasons." As if on cue, they all looked up to the sky in thought.

It was a difficult question. None of them had thought of any real reason. Celestia even blushed at the realisation that with just a little taunting even she had leapt at the task offered to them without much consideration for what it would truly entail. *Was* there a reason? Or had they all simply grabbed the opportunity as soon as it was presented to them?

'For mother perhaps...?' The thought made *sense* to the white alicorn, but didn't feel quite right. For all the years living and learning together with her mother, Celestia had never given much consideration as to what she would do when Aumean was gone. The very thought that Aumean *could* be 'gone' was also entirely new to her. *'Come to think of it...I don't even know how old mother is!'* Celestia's mind was undergoing a number of revelations. The very idea that she did not know her mother's age, had never even inquired into the subject, was shocking. She knew that alicorns were extremely long lived, but even without this fact she remembered the wise mare once telling her that guessing the age of an alicorn was a virtually impossible task. Once they reached the upper level of their immense life span; an alicorn would still retain their youthful appearance, giving no hints as to their exact age. The more Celestia pondered on it, the more she realised how little she knew of her mother's past and how little she knew of the alicorn race as a whole before their gradual change into modern ponies over the many generations.

"Gee Fire, I really don't know! I guess I just got caught up in all the excitement." Celestia's yellow maned friend brought her back to the present.

“Umm...sorry, I can't think of anything either.” Luna was next to drop her head down with an awkward smile.

“D'aww, don't worry you two! We've only just started this merry little quest now, haven't we? There's plenty of time ahead to think and discover!”

“That another way of saying you can't think of anything, Dissy?” The five began to pick up their pace again as Firefly shot the draconequus a grin, causing him to grin back in return.

“Guilty as charged!”

“What about you, sis? Do you have any special reason for coming?”

“Oh, err, no, I suppose not! Sorry, Firefly, we're making you sound like the odd one out.” Other than Discord, they all chuckled and giggled sheepishly with their speedy companion.

“Nah, don't worry about it! I should say sorry as well, for that little tantrum I had...” It was then Firefly's turn to rub the back of her head with her hoof and blush.

Before the ponies could hide their embarrassment by picking up the pace, a familiar roar echoed through the rolling valleys. Humour forgotten, they all instinctively dived behind a large mound of earth.

“Oh no, not this guy again...” They each poked their heads above the mound and scanned the skies above them, muscles tensed and ready to flee at a moment's notice.

Far to the south, in between the peaks of the stony spires, they saw it and breathed a sigh of relief. The dragon was heading in the direction of his lair, the opposite way from the travellers' route. Fortunately, this meant that the fiery beast should miss them by a good few kilometres.

“Let's not dawdle too much now. It's evening already and if yesterday was anything to go by, he likes to come out at night as well.” Discord's companions nodded in agreement and they set off in a gallop once more. “We should try and either get out of the mountains by nightfall, or find somewhere to hole up for the night quickly.”

Neither of them needed any further encouragement, and the group lapsed into silence once more. Determined to create as much distance between them and the dragon's home as possible, the adventurers cut down on their breaks as well, pausing only for a few minutes at a time for a quick bite and swig of water before marching onward.

Their swift pace was truly interrupted only once, when the group had to pause and fly over a section of road that had collapsed, bar Firefly who opted to slide around what little remained of the still crumbling path. They then briefly investigate the shattered remains of a stagecoach that lay on the gorge bottom below them.

“I hope nopony is hurt...” Luna, Surprise and Firefly waited on the upper path as Discord and Celestia went to investigate the remains.

"I bet they're fine, I don't see anypony, and they were probably pulling it from the front, so if they had fallen, we would be able to see them," the snowy pegasus tried to reassure the midnight foal, though she still held her breath as the alicorn and draconequus began poking their heads under the shattered boards of wood. The two seemed to pick up a few objects from the wagon and then flew back up, shaking their heads while holding the items with their magic.

"There's no trace of anypony there. Just a few cheap magic items and supplies. Looks like somepony's already had a look through it though, so I don't think the owner was hurt. They probably just took what they could after it fell." As Celestia explained, she and Discord dropped the items in question on the floor so the others could look at them. A few bottled rainbows, some firecrackers, and a jar of green illusion dust were among the objects strewn on the earth, all of them quite cheap from any alchemy store.

"Hey, why don't we take these things with us? That way we can return them if we find the owner!" proposed Surprise, opening her saddlebags to see if she had room for any of the vials or bottles.

"But what if they come back looking for them?"

"In the Western Range, Celestia? I doubt anypony would risk it for a few bits worth of common goods," countered the draconequus, picking up a swirling bottle of rainbow.

"I suppose you're right. But does anypony have room? We shouldn't give up our own belongings for them."

"Hey Surprise!" The pegasus looked over to Firefly to see a huge smirk. Her voice had a clear mocking ring to it. "I seem to remember you saying I *shouldn't* have brought so little...you *sure* I still shouldn't have?" Surprise was incredibly tempted to hit the speedster, but decided against it and endured her giggling as the earth pony loaded the supplies into her saddlebags which until now had lain deflated by her sides. Despite the light quickly fading, Firefly choose to put her sunglasses on rather than risk breaking or crushing them accidentally with the glass bottles now dinging repeatedly in her packs.

"Let's keep moving. This path is quite straight, so if we hurry we might be able to reach the Range's borders by nightfall." With that the group set off at full speed once more. True to Celestia's word, the terrain gradually became less rugged as they galloped on. The slopes and cliffs became less inclined and the mountains themselves grew smaller and smaller.

Another few hours passed and just as the sun began to dip below the horizon, the five travellers made their way around one final mound and saw their goal. Where once their vision was blocked by snowy peaks, deep gorges and sharp cliffs, the sight before them stretched on endlessly. Even within Canterlot Valley they could not see so far. Without thinking, the group came to a standstill and simply gazed. Below them fields of grass and wheat swayed gently in the wind, and a large winding river stretched out to the north west where the flickering lights of New Manetserdam could be seen sparking into life. They had passed a difficult hurdle in their journey and from then on, at least until they reached the city, they could relax a little and not push themselves too hard.

"Come on everypony. We just need to follow this path down and then we can stop for the night."

"In the open!? Under the stars!?"

Celestia smiled warmly to her little sister “I don’t see why not Luna.”

“Yay!” The dark-coated alicorn shared a cheer with Surprise and Firefly while Discord beamed a similar expression to his elder sister.

Rather than gallop, the group navigated the winding path down into the plains at a more comfortable speed and soon were able to appreciate the feel of cool grass under their hooves again. By the time they had reached the mountains proper, the sun was all but gone with the moon taking its place. It was only due to the darkness of night that they spotted a campfire burning alone a short way ahead of them.

“Look, a fire! Maybe it’s that cart’s owner!” Celestia certainly hoped it would be. Additional company would no doubt be pleasant and they would hopefully be allowed to share his or her fire, which would save them the effort of making one. It was not that making a fire was an especially difficult necessity, but Celestia and her companions had once again greeted the moon with exhausted breaths. They had been galloping nearly nonstop all day through rough terrain, and it had certainly taken its toll on their muscles.

As they approached the fire by the side of the dirt road, they could hear the voices and make out the shapes of two ponies.

“...I *assure* you, Craggy, you don’t need to come all the way to Neighly with m-”

“Aw, now don’t be like tha’, pardner! Even wit all your fancy unicorn magic, ‘Il be a mighty tough ride carrying all these ‘ere bags by yaself!”

“But! But! Don’t you...need to stay in the mountains? And do...whatever it is a ranger such as yourself do-”

“Naw, I’m a due a break bout now anyways, so I can come all the way to the city wit ya pardner!”

The travelling group stared at the azure unicorn. He seemed to be both on the verge of tears and wanting to stab the moss green earth pony next to him with his horn. It took several moments and despair-filled staring before the two noticed the diverse team standing looking at them.

“Please,” the unicorn began, his eyes bloodshot and his tone full of desperation. “Help me.”