

Dear Journal,

What does it mean to be alone? I mean truly alone? Have I come to a point of understanding the feeling? Is it enough when I fall asleep to my shivers and wake up to my tears?

I've gone beyond feeling sorry for myself. I like to think that the pony I am today is somepony older, braver, stronger, and smarter. But no matter how many qualities that pony may possess, she is still alone.

I... am still so very alone. I cannot deny that. Yet, I can't allow myself to be obsessed with that. After all, what purpose is there in such a fixation? What purpose is there in anything?

There has to be a purpose in all of this. Believing in some sort of purpose is what keeps me going, what keeps me banging my head against the thick wall of my predicament. It's not that I don't have enough things ushering me forward. I want to be remembered. I want to make a true impact on these wonderful ponies' lives. I want to walk up to those whom I once knew and have them recognize me on sight. I want to be able to make new friends and have them look forward to seeing me in the future.

But as I write all of these things—and remember that I am, in fact, the only one writing them—I wonder if I'll only ever be the single, solitary pony dreaming of them... instead of living them.

“And so...” Pinkie Pie plopped a box full of chocolate cupcakes atop the table in the center of Sugarcube Corner. She gazed at her two friends with excited blue eyes. “Then he says, 'The pegasi are promising beautiful weather for Ponyville this weekend. What are you up to Saturday afternoon, Miss Pie?’”

Twilight Sparkle and Rarity gawked at her, their faces blank. “Yes, and?” Rarity chirped emphatically.

“I say to him 'I'll be up to what I'm always up to on Saturday afternoons: ten bottles of sarsaparilla and a prayer!' Snkkkt—heeheehee!” Pinkie Pie's forelegs curled up against her chest as she giggled, gasped, and finally exclaimed, “Then he laughs and says, 'The shores of Lake Marestrom look really pretty this time of year.' Pfft!” She rolled her eyes. “Like that has anything to do with sarsaparilla!”

“Pinkie...” Twilight breathily remarked.

Rarity was leaning forward, her blue eyes sparkling. “You do realize, of course, that the stallion

was trying to ask you out?!”

“Oh.” Pinkie Pie blinked. She narrowed her eyes with a quizzical expression. “Really? What for?”

“You said he came to chat with you on several occasions over the last few weeks, yes?” Rarity pointed with a grin. “I doubt very much that he was interested only in what Mr. and Mrs. Cake had to offer.”

“I think someone's smitten with you, Pinkie.” Twilight smiled and levitated a mug of tea to her lips. “Please tell me you at least acknowledged his gesture.”

“Uhmhhh...” Pinkie Pie scratched her chin as her blue eyes swam across the ceiling. “I can't remember if I did or not. He kind of galloped out of here really quickly.”

“Oh?” Rarity's face sunk. “Whatever for?”

“Beats me, though it *was* after I tossed the lemon custard pie into his face.”

Twilight Sparkle spit out a mouthful of tea. She teetered over her edge of the table and gasped for breath.

Rarity was almost fainting. “You... It... He...What?!”

“P-Pinkie?!” Twilight rediscovered her voice in time to sputter forth, “What could *possibly* have possessed you to toss a pie into a poor stallion's face?!”

“He was only trying to bridge communication between the two of you!” Rarity was still reeling. “What in Equestria were you *thinking*?”

“I was trying to do him a favor!” Pinkie Pie barked in her defense.

“And just how was that a *favor*?!” Twilight Sparkle exclaimed. “He wanted to go out on a date with you!”

“Hmhhhhh...” Pinkie bit her lip, then shrugged. “I guess I just remembered something Dashie told me: 'All stallions ever want from a mare is some pie.' The poor guy was so shy; I figured I'd cut to the chase!”

Twilight and Rarity stared at Pinkie Pie for ten numb seconds, until finally they cracked. A snorting sound shattered into a series of unrelenting giggles. Their half of Sugarcube Corner vibrated with pure joy's melodic cadence.

Pinkie joined in the laughter, though an undeniable redness was blossoming beneath her cheeks. “Heeheehee... Uhm... I-I don't get it! Should I have tossed a cake at him instead?”

“Heeheehee—Oh Pinkie Pie...” Twilight Sparkle could hardly breathe.

Rarity leaned over and nuzzled Pinkie with a warm smile. “Don't you ever change, darling. One of these days, we're going to find you a gentlecolt who'll gladly take p-pie in th-the face fr-from youuuuu—Snkkkttt—*hahahaha!*”

“Heeheehee...” Twilight Sparkle stood up and levitated the box of cupcakes with purple telekinesis. “Come on, girls. Let's get to the park before the other three think we ditched today's picnic.”

“What about strudel?” Pinkie Pie bounced happily after them as the three made for the exit of Sugarcube Corner. “That's a little less messy than pie! Though it's kind of crusty. **Oh!** I know! I could avoid the glaze! It'd make it much more aerodynamic when I toss it at him!”

The other two laughed merrily, their high-pitched chorus ringing in my ears as they brushed past my table. I gazed over my shoulder from where I sat. Suddenly, the scent of dust wafted up to my nostrils, and I realized I was squeezing a pair of ancient history books to my chest. Sighing, I relinquished hugging the library checkouts and opened them up atop the table before me. The inside of Sugarcube Corner somehow felt less colorful. It was less warm too. I felt a chill dance through my body as I heard the last traces of Twilight's harmonious voice trailing from my ears.

With a shudder, I pulled the stone-gray sleeves of my hoodie over my hooves and absorbed myself in a sea of text as forgotten and timeless as I.

It's been almost thirteen months since the curse began. In that time, my life has gotten calmer. My days now are filled with tranquility, purpose, and resolve. I'd be lying, however, if I said that things have gotten any easier.

There are some nights when I don't have a magical tune echoing loudly against the walls of my mind. These would be blissful evenings, except that they afford me a chance to dream. There is nothing that makes a prison more painful than being able to dream. After all, what is the power of damnation without a slice of hope to merit its potency?

When I dream, I see myself trotting across an empty Ponyville. There are no other ponies besides me. I am the only equine soul to be seen or heard. Every hoofstep is mine. Every written word belongs to me. Every breath and song and sob holds anchorage in my throat and mine alone.

While this may seem like a nightmare, there are times when I prefer the world of these dreams to that which I'm forced to endure everyday. At least in my dreams I am encompassed by desolation, a far more sensible prison than one that is barred with the faces of so many happy and warm ponies.

Seeing Twilight Sparkle's smiles, hearing her voice: I am reminded of what we used to be. I'm reminded of the days when we and Moondancer were foals, when we played in the parks of upper Canterlot, reenacting major events in Equestrian History. Moondancer liked to pretend she was Princess Luna and Twilight—of course—was always Princess Celestia. More often than not, I was stuck with playing the role of Starswirl the Bearded. The other two would giggle and poke fun at me for having to portray the surly stallion sorcerer in our little get-togethers. It was worth it, though, because nothing made Twilight more happy than to be Princess Celestia. The world seemed a lot more colorful when she was smiling, and that was something I never wanted to disturb.

When the years went by, and Twilight left Moondancer and I to live under the wing of Princess Celestia, I didn't realize it at first—but something had been drained from my life that could never be refilled. We three were young unicorns then, and like all magical ponies our age we were far too eagerly swept up in learning history and spells and various Canterlot arts. Moondancer relocated to a Fillydelphian university to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. I studied music and composition at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. Our days were spent in becoming living repositories of knowledge; we pursued the future in our separate ways. As a result, our companionship dissolved, allowing our education and careers to take the forefront of our lives.

Not once, however, did this bother us in any way. Our friendship was something immortal, something immaculate. Occasionally Twilight Sparkle, Moondancer and I would get back together and talk about the directions our lives had taken us. We'd muse about the things we did in our foalhood. So long as we had the memories of what we once were, we could accept what we had become. Our friendship would last as long as we could remember that which united us.

Today, I am the only pony who can afford those memories. Moondancer and Twilight have lost something, and they don't even know it. But do they have to know it? As long as I remember them, as long as I let them laugh, smile, and play Luna and Celestia in my mind, then nothing is lost. I believe this with all my heart.

Then why is it that I see Twilight day in and day out, and I feel as though a phantom limb is speaking to me, that something lopped off my soul is screaming to be reattached, only to remain a numb spectre of something warm and irrecoverable?

I am so happy—so exceedingly enraptured—to see Twilight Sparkle having made so many friends in Ponyville. There was a time when I was worried about her. Moondancer and I pursued our careers with great vigor, but Twilight Sparkle had treated her career like a veritable obsession. On so many instances, I attempted to have the three of us reunite, and only Moondancer would show up. Together, we'd worry over Twilight's path in life. We missed her and shared a mutual concern over the future she was paving for herself. In her foalhood, Twilight always held a major attachment to Princess Celestia, but Moondancer and I both doubted she was aptly prepared for the consequences of being so closely connected to an immortal alicorn.

That's why it fills me with such joy to see Twilight Sparkle having relocated to Ponyville. There are ponies here with whom she's had the opportunity to commune. I truly think they've saved her from a life of perpetual isolation, a fate that would have stripped her heart of the opportunity to feel with the same vitality that she's exercised her mind.

And yet, every time I see her and her friends, I can't help but wonder if things could have been different. I came to Ponyville to visit her during the Summer Sun Celebration. What if the same opportunity that blossomed for Twilight would have opened a door for me? Perhaps I could have been making the same friends as her, attending the same gatherings as her, going to the same picnics and laughing over the same anecdotes and smiling at the same thoughts with her.

I've lived long enough to know that life is the sum of its days, and yet the flavor of its dreams. Sometimes the most beautiful choir is the one you can't join, the one you can only listen to. It's been many years, and I feel like I'm still playing the role of Starswirl the Bearded, giving the spotlight to Twilight Sparkle, allowing her to illuminate the stage with her smile. It's a wonderful play, and it deserves an encore. I just don't know how long I can sit here alone with my applause.

A few days ago, I stumbled through the door to my log cabin, and it felt like just any other afternoon I've ever lived. The same walls embraced me, dangling with the many musical instruments I made to be shared with no pony but myself. A fireplace yawned in waiting, something that would be lit at night—a night just like any other, spent alone with my thoughts and shadows.

This routine I live by is mind-numbing. As soon as I step over the hearth that I've built for myself, I know what the next few hours are going to consist of. I know that I'll be reading one of the many ancient tomes checked out from Twilight's library. I know that I'll be scouring the texts for any tiny bit of info that can clue me into the magical secrets behind Nightmare Moon. I know that I'll come up with either nothing or very little to go by, and the rest of the daylight will be spent sitting out on the patio, attempting to eke beauty from the fringe of the wilderness around me. Then, when evening falls—and the shivers make my bones twitch on the verge of a moonlit waltz—I surrender to the blankets of my cot, staring into the fireplace, trying to imagine another world where there is a smile for every tear, a laugh for every sob, and a pair of ears besides mine for every fear I have to stammer into the gaping abyss of the night.

Why do I even write this? Every ten journal entries or so, I ask the same question, and it is just as pointless and rhetorical as all the others. Right now, as I ramble poetically, I am sitting on a bench about twenty yards from the Carousel Boutique. It's a sunny day. There are very few clouds in the sky. The same squirrel has crawled up to me for the fifth consecutive occasion. I don't know if it realizes I've given it the same morsel of food four times in a row. Candy Mane has flown by three times, each time waving and saying the same greeting. Miss Hooves has trotted past the bench with Dinky, giving me the same smile and nod that she did yesterday and the day before and the day before that. Twenty minutes ago, for the sake of whimsy, I stood up from the bench and scuffed my name in the dirt path with my rear hooves. Sitting back down, I decided to count the number of ponies who stopped to give the four-letter word a cognitive glance. Twenty minutes have gone by, and my count is still at zero. An

hour will past, four hours, five days, or a thousand years—and I don't expect that number to go up any.

Who do I write this for other than myself? What other pony do I have to look after, to provide for, to feed or to blanket or to comfort? Who else will read this? Who else will have the *ability* to read this? Am I just circling words down a gaping funnel? There are times when I feel as if I'm only indulging myself with a great bowl of nothing. It would make far greater sense to write nameless songs in the dirt, or to fatten a squirrel to the bursting point.

There was a time when I used to compose music for a hobby. After all, why study music if you're not going to make more of it? It used to bug my parents. There were nights that I spent in my upstairs bedroom, repetitively strumming away at the same stubborn tune with a lyre or harp, attempting to unlock a musical symphony that I knew for sure would be Canterlot's next masterpiece.

These days, my symphonies are not my own. I go to bed and wake up with tunes haunting my mind, resonating in my horn like some accursed tuning fork. I do everything in my power to drag them out of me, just short of screaming. The nights are cold, freezing, and frightening. When I finally break the music down into a palpable composition, it hardly brings warmth, for another melody is there to take its place, filling my ears like ghost whispers. There are no strings left to pluck and call my own, for I am still threading loose the shadows of Nightmare Moon's endless night.

Perhaps, then, what's left of me to claim as my own is my words. This journal is a solitary piece, performed in a capella, an ode to joy... so long as I have joy to perceive, like a glimpse of the past or a hope for the future. I know very well that I may be the only pony to read what I am writing right now, but perhaps such is for the best. So long as I fill these entries with that which is beautiful, that which is inspiring, then it's a symphony that I can call my own. There are many tunes I've yet to unlock before I can even hope to tackle this curse. However, I must never lose grasp of the most important composition, to which I am the one true conductor.

I only wish the elegies were so clearly defined.

“Are you sure these are the books that you wanna check out?” Spike looked down at me from where he stood, perched, atop a rolling ladder that was leaning against a bookcase full of dusty tomes. “They're not written in Equestrian Basic. From what Twilight Sparkle says, many are written in Moonwhinny. I don't suppose you've got a laypony's knowledge of the lunar tongue, Miss...?”

“**Heartstrings**,” I murmur. I trot across the library and stand at the base of the ladder. “And you shouldn't concern yourself too much. I know this is dense reading material. Let's just say that I've had... time to invest in learning some of the old languages.”

“Hey, that's fine with me,” Spike said with a shrug as he pulled two large books out from their shelving. He winced at the sight of a scurrying spider and brushed loose a few flimsy cobwebs. “Honestly, I think it's kind of cool. Most ponies who visit this library—and Twilight Sparkle will be the first to tell you this—they come looking for a cook book or an adventure novel or some other really simple thing. It's a shame that she isn't here to help you find this sort of stuff. Then again... Heh...” He smiled as he crawled his small, portly frame down the ladder, balancing the books in a tiny hand. “Maybe it's all for the best. She'd get all excited that a fellow unicorn was checking out stuff this old and would talk your ear off about ancient Equestrian history.”

I couldn't help but brandish the thinnest of smiles. “You say that as if it's a bad thing.”

“Eh. To each their own. I kind of feel bad for some of the ponies who come here to study, especially when it's a gorgeous day outside. It seems like some of them just never get to leave.”

I took a deep breath and took the book from him with gentle telekinesis. “Believe me. I understand completely.” I adjusted the collar of my hoodie with a slight shiver before adding, “Still, it's worth it when we have forgotten treasures to uncover.”

“Hmm. That almost sounds exciting.” He smiled, his rows of tiny razor sharp teeth showing. “You must be doing some sort of wicked cool research project, Miss [Heartstrings](#).”

“I'll settle for 'cool,' alright,” I said with a nod. “The jury's still out on 'wicked.’”

“Jee, I dunno.” He scratched his green spikes and gave the books in my levitating grasp a slightly detestable glance. “I always get the chills when I touch books from our 'Lunar Collection.’”

“You're not the only one.”

“Cuz—Really!—Twilight's told me enough about them. The legacy of Nightmare Moon used to be a big deal long before Princess Luna returned from her whole thousand year imprisonment and all. Twilight says that many of the books written in Moonwhinny were banned from libraries all across Equestria. Can you believe that? It had something to do with... uhh... Princess Celestia being concerned that mortal ponies would read what [Luna had written](#) and somehow be afflicted by the taint of Nightmare Moon.”

“It was called the 'Great Canterlot Eclipse,’” I explained to him, mentally quoting Twilight as I shuffled over to a desk and prepared for a long afternoon of studying. “Scholars write about it to this day. It was a dark time in the aftermath of Nightmare Moon's tyranny when literature underwent a great deal of censorship. Eventually, as a few centuries rolled by, Princess Celestia realized the error of her ways, and she lifted the ban. This gave birth to the Modern Equestrian Renaissance, and Canterlot was founded as a center of art and learning, ultimately leading to it becoming the capital city of Equestria. Still, the effects of the Great Eclipse are evident in pony culture, and many things written down in the lunar archives remain undiscovered to this day.”

Spike whistled. “Wow. That's different than how Twilight explains it.”

That struck me rather curiously. “And just how does she explain it?”

“Simply that most ponies are too scared to read things that were once held in the library of Princess Luna.”

“Well, that's perfectly understandable,” I said sagely. “There's a great deal of darkness and loss attached to the name 'Nightmare Moon.’”

“Yeah, well.” He winked and pointed my way. “If it gets too freaky to research on your own, just give me a whistle. Even Twilight will say that I'm a pretty good research assistant. Don't be afraid to ask if you need help with anything, Miss [Heartstrings](#).”

“Really?” I opened one of the old tomes, waved the cloud of dust away, and squinted over the many alien words. My question was a very droll, tone-deaf plea. “Could you, by chance, tell me anything about the Cosmic Matriarch?”

“Uhhhh...” Spike's emerald eyeslits blinked dazedly. “The Cosmic What-now?”

“It's an old mare's tale, as far as most ponies are concerned,” Twilight Sparkle had once said. “But I happen to know it's a lot more than that.”

I gulped. I shivered. It was barely two months into my curse. I was living out of a green tent pitched alongside an abandoned barn just outside of town. That day, I sat in the waiting room of Aloe and Lotus' Day Spa, pretending to be another anxious customer—just so I could interrupt Twilight for this one desperate conversation. To this day, I thank my lucky stars that she was gracious enough to ignore the sight of the shivering bum in a stone-gray sweatjacket, looking like she needed far more than a frivolous massage or pedicure.

“How's that?” I murmured, trying to keep my composure. The world was a frigid tomb. My mind reeled from the same miserable tune spinning like a broken record in the thick of my skull. “How do you know it's more than an old mare's tale?”

“Because Princess Celestia has spoken about it... or her...” She giggled. “Or perhaps *them*. Whatever the case, I have no doubt that the Cosmic Matriarch is real. I've been our magical ruler's apprentice long enough to hear her infer as much.”

“Infer?” I gulped, struggling to remain still in the chair. The shivers were unbearable; I fought them courageously. I had to appear as interested in this conversation as my heart genuinely felt. “You mean to say that she's never outright come out and told you what the Cosmic Matriarch is?”



Twilight shifted with momentary discomfort. For a moment, I was afraid that I had struck a nerve, that I had lost her desire to educate me. To my elation, she continued, though pensively so. “It's very personal to her, I think. And I don't say that lightly. Princess Celestia has lived for a very, very long time. It's very difficult to stumble upon things that she takes personal stock in.”

“But she does with this?”

“Mmmhmmm. And Princess Luna as well. You see...” Twilight smiled and brushed a hoof through her mane as we waited “our turns” with Aloe and Lotus. “The Princesses who look after the Sun and Moon are immortal. However, while that fact is irrefutable, it makes ponies overlook something very important. Ironically, it's the one thing that every magician in Equestria has to learn before starting their career.”

I swallowed hard and uttered, “Everything has a beginning.”

Twilight glanced at me with pleasant surprise. “Why... yes! Heehee—How would you know that? Are you also a magician, Miss [Heartstrings](#)?”

I bit my lip and avoided her gaze. This was my fifth identical conversation with Twilight Sparkle, and I was only just then getting used to the whole ritual. “I've... done my fair share of reading,” I confessed and lied at the same time. All I knew were words, terms, names, and very few of them in Equestrian Modern. “But it's my understanding that no pony has ever been taught the true origin to the Princesses of Equestria.”

“And for a good reason,” Twilight said with a nod. Her lavender features were bathed in the gentle light of an aroma candle, giving my foalhood friend an ethereal quality as she spoke of holy things. “Mortal ponies live—*what?* Sixty to seventy years? Ninety years at most? Starswirl the Bearded was a major exception, of course, but most ponies are lucky if they see so much as a century go by before their time on earth is over. Can any of us really imagine what it's like to be an alicorn? To have lived for *eons*? To have seen the foundation of this world, and the birth of the Sun and Moon themselves?”

I fought another wave of chills, staring off into the distant candles as if they were alien stars twinkling beyond us. “I can imagine many things. It's a whole different situation to feel.” I glanced back at her. I could only hope my eyes were as sincere as my words. “What does Princess Celestia feel? Do you know?”

“I wish I could tell you, Miss [Heartstrings](#). I wish I could know—so I could tell it to all of my friends, or to anypony for that matter. But, even though I am Celestia's apprentice, there are many things that are still a mystery to me, and I think when it comes to the topic of the Cosmic Matriarch, it's far too sensitive a thing to press the Princess for information about.”

“You think she isn't willing to share what she knows?”

Twilight squirmed with a sudden awkwardness. “Erm... No. It's something far different than that, I think... or at least I theorize.”

“Oh?”

She looked at me. Her eyes were surprisingly vulnerable. “Would you, Miss [Heartstrings](#), attempt talking about your mother... if you had lived for so long that you could hardly remember her?”

A sharp breath left me. The shadows in the room doubled, like the thick curtain of night. “I... I never once thought of that...”

Twilight gently nodded. “I imagine Celestia thinks of that everyday, which is why I'm so reticent to bring it up in conversation.”

I let my gaze fall. “I'm sorry...”

“Hey...” She smiled and leaned forward. “Don't be. It's healthy to be curious, but we mustn't forget that there are still sacred boundaries in this world. Besides, though Celestia may not have much to talk on the subject, she did once say something that has stuck with me for as long as I've known her.”

I glanced at her again. “What's that?”

Twilight was grinning, a very soft and childish expression. “When I first became her apprentice, I asked her about the creation of the world. She was very vague in her answer, except for one curious detail.” She stifled a giggle, cleared her throat, and quoted her mentor. “The world began like all things began, my apprentice, not with a mere breath... but with a song.”

What is this song? Is it the same thing that gets stuck in my head every morning and every night of my life? Have I been made capable of sensing something that no other Equestrian soul has been blessed—or cursed—to witness? Why me? Why me alone? And what does Nightmare Moon have to do with it?

This is what I struggle over. This is what I wrack my brain with. Day after day—in Twilight's library, on park benches, before the fireplace of my cabin, under candle-light, in the frigid glow of the moon and the gentle kiss of the morning sun—I rummage through books, tomes, scrolls in search of an answer, until my eyes gloss over with the dust and exhaustion of all the ages this mortal soul is constantly struggling to catch up with.

It's taken me several months, and I am only barely scratching the surface of history's forgotten answers—assuming that they are indeed answers, and just not red herrings disguised by the obscure layers of time. The richest details are lost in several languages, and most of them dead. I've relied on codecs, translations, almanacs, and various other legends that dig and chip away at mountains of lunar

speech, and the most I know is that there is even more that I don't know, and may never know.

Was Nightmare Moon a musician first and a despot second? This should come as no surprise. My constant research over the last year has granted me remarkable insight. It turns out that every sentient culture in Equestria has a common retelling of a great deceiver whose gift was in the musical arts before turning into a bane of righteousness. Minotaurs write of a royal lyricist who—once scorned by a lover—trapped his entire kingdom in a labyrinthine spell. Diamond Dogs, often considered to be illiterate, actually possess several scrolls depicting a tribe of murderers who led their brothers astray with a 'Howl of Cyclones'. Even dragons have a spoken legend that tells of an ancient queen who petrified her brothers and sisters using a magically resonating diamond.

Perhaps my discoveries are a result of me—a cursed unicorn—*looking* specifically for information that relates to her plight. Still, I can't shake the uncanny coincidence of so many similar legends being told across multiple, different civilizations.

It's no secret that Princess Luna has an appreciation for musical arts. Then again, so does Princess Celestia. The sisters are both alicorn rulers of ponydom, and it'd be a heinous crime to not invest in the same culture that defines those whom they rule over. However, it's always been an accepted notion that ponies of ancient times relished more in the daytime than in the nighttime, and as a result Celestia's patronage was expressed in song and dance whereas worship of Luna was far more subdued. It doesn't take an immortal soul to imagine Luna seeking music of her own to fill in the gap.

But what connection could that have—if any—to the Cosmic Matriarch? I am certain—*no*—I am **convinced** that there must be a common thread. Twilight Sparkle is an apprentice after Celestia's own heart. If she quotes the Princess, saying that “all things began with a song,” I simply have no choice but to believe her. Our alicorn rulers began when the rest of the world did; **they're the only ones possessed with the ability to remember**. What better a way is there to preserve memories than through music?

Yes, this song is real. I am a lone soul, imprisoned in a cold bottle echoing with these ghostly melodies, like hidden phantoms on the dark side of the moon. Once I find them, I can find myself, and maybe—just maybe—I can rebroadcast them to the world, so that more ponies than just the alicorns can remember what has been lost since the foundation of everything, and then I can be as real as the song too.

Just yesterday morning, I knew it was time. I had put off the performance of the Threnody of Night for far too long. I had run out of excuses just as I had run out of fear. There comes a time when the desperation to find answers overcomes the trepidation of the cold journey ahead. Yesterday was just such a time. I had all the bits I needed to buy the ingredients. I had all the time to make my trip. I

just didn't look forward to the energy it was going to sap from me.

I needed to go to the Everfree Forest, and that meant bundling up. Where I was headed, the hoodie simply wouldn't be enough. It started with woolen socks. I slid these over my hooves, then slipped them into thick goulashes that went halfway up my fetlocks. I grabbed a thick brown cloak that I hadn't worn in over a month and draped it over my entire body. Next came a familiar yellow scarf that still carried with it the felicity of an elegant unicorn's generous smile. Finally, I grabbed a black snowcap that I had sewn for myself, with a hole made to allow my horn to pierce through. Grabbing a bag of bits, I telekinetically flung the dual hoods of the sweatjacket and cloak over my head and stumbled out the door to my cabin.

It was a thirty minute trot until I would get to the edge of the Everfree Forest, to where the thick bundle of clothing would prove useful. Until then, I sweated uncomfortably, assaulted by a warmth that was actually unbearable for once. Despite the temptation to strip of at least the cloak or goulashes, I pressed on, knowing that soon I would be wishing for all of the world's blankets to be engulfing me. I wondered what I looked forward to the least: making this trip, or performing the instrumental once I had acquired what I needed. I had to keep my mind distracted, if only to give me strength, if only to make me think of other situations where sweating profusely was as comical as it was awkward, like trying to explain my cutie mark for the millionth time to Applejack's and Rarity's sisters, or receiving a flower from Morning Dew.

#### *Morning Dew.*

A sigh escaped my lips, and I smiled for the first time in days. It's funny: all of my writings on the beauty of friendship and my hopes for relinquishing the binds of this curse, and it's still those two words that can bring me joy without fail. My burdensome journey became slightly more bearable, and I marched into the thick forest refreshed, so that I meditated calmly for once and did what every musician does when she's relaxed.

I composed.

There are seven lunar elegies connected to my curse. I know this only because they are all that I have discovered so far. They come to me without warning or announcement, infecting my mind, born in sleep or in waking fright. If it was a song that began the world, then it was one that ended me, and I must carefully bridge the gap between creation and annihilation.

Lunar Elegy #1, as Twilight helped me discover, is the "*Prelude to Shadows.*" Referred to only once in The Royal Equestrian Compendium Volume Twelve, it's the first piece of evidence in the Lunar Archives that suggests that Princess Luna ever took a hobby in musical composition. To that end, it

was the first tune that was stuck in my head the very moment I awoke to a world that perpetually forgot me.

Like all of the elegies that come to my mind, I endeavored to understand the nature of “*Prelude to Shadows*.” That meant performing the melody myself once I had completed the composition. I knew that there was something mystical and enchanting about the piece. What I didn't bet on was an actual magical effect for playing it out with my lyre. No sooner was I done with “*Prelude to Shadows*” when I found myself experiencing a severe mood shift. I became nervous, paranoid, and easily frightened. Every loose shape and beam of light spoke to me, as if something beyond the walls were closing in. I was almost mortified when another tune immediately took the *Prelude's* place in my mind.

Lunar Elegy #2, also thanks to Twilight, would turn out to be called “*Sunset Bolero*.” When performing the *Prelude* and the *Bolero* back to back, I realized that the music called for a smooth transition. It was then that I realized that the elegies coming to my mind weren't just random tunes. They were a suite, and I was on the verge of unfolding a grandiose symphony of mysterious proportions.

When I first played the “*Sunset Bolero*,” I was pleased to not experience a wave of uneasiness the likes of which the *Prelude* afflicted me with. Instead, I was overcome with an excitement I didn't expect. My heart's pulse rate went up and stayed that way for over thirty-six hours. I felt like I could run a marathon. Whether this was magically the result of the *Bolero's* heavy percussion or some sort of unexplained impetus that **only Nightmare Moon could understand**, I was at a loss to know. I was merely a mortal playing the tunes of **an unearthly alicorn spirit**. I was willing to bet that with only two performances, I was retaining more knowledge than even poor Princess Luna herself was capable of knowing at that point in time.

Lunar Elegy #3 took me a while to figure out, for I at first thought that I was simply hearing “*Sunset Bolero*” over again. It took several hours of meditating into the long cold night, but finally I realized that the third elegy was a modified version of the *Bolero*, slowed down, with a melancholic dissonance. Desperate for an explanation, I rummaged through the lunar texts available to me in Twilight's library. It took over two months, but upon mastering enough words of the lunar tongue, I was finally able to look up an ancient passage depicting Princess Luna and a second composition of one of her previous songs. This was how the “*March of Tides*” was born.

Performing the “*March of Tides*” had an instant effect on me. It made me light-headed, and time seemed to slow down. I realized then what the “*Sunset Bolero*” was preparing me for, because if my heart wasn't ready for the creepy effect of the *March*, I may not have been able to finish the composition. It was at this point of discovery that I realized that not only were these elegies meant to be performed in time, but they were being fed to me in just the perfect order, as if there was some invisible purpose behind the whole thing. I now had an even greater reason to practice these enchanted tunes, for I suddenly felt that some other spirit besides myself was involved.

Lunar Elegy #4 had no title, because for the longest time I didn't desire to name it. After the first performance, I had a panic attack, because I was blinded halfway through the instrumental. There's really no better a way to describe it. Halfway through the performance, all of the lights and colors were sucked out of the world. I remember collapsing in the middle of my new cabin that night, shivering, clutching at the shadows. I think I may have even screamed for help—not that anypony

could have heard me. It's difficult to remember. The important detail is that when the morning sun came, I could see it, and I was enraptured.

After that, I gave up on pursuing the elegies for over six weeks. Could you blame me? I was dealing with a symphony that was beyond my control. My curse certainly wasn't being lifted with any of my subsequent performances. Besides, understanding it didn't make me any less vulnerable a mortal soul to the work of an equine goddess. However, as the days wore on, and the fourth elegy resonated in the recesses of my mind, I was drawn back to the lyre like a mother to her sickly foal.

I picked an evening when the moon was full. It was a pale glow of comfort to my frightened senses as I plucked forth at the strings once again. I performed the first elegy, then the second, then the third. Sure enough, halfway through Elegy # 4, my vision left me. Bravely—blindly—I strummed on, and when I was finished with the composition, my vision returned. Not only that, but I was experiencing a strange peace, a tranquility that kept me awake and resolute in the middle of the night's freezing stare. The next day, I did some research at Twilight's library, and almost immediately stumbled upon an ancient tale about Princess Luna curing a village of a pestilence that had afflicted the ponies' eyes. What was more, she did it with a song, and the name of it was "*Darkness Sonata*."

After the harrowing circumstances involving the *Sonata*, I felt as though I could take on anything. So I engaged Elegy #5 with great courage and vigor. It turned out that my guile was almost for nothing. The fifth elegy resulted in a very comforting—almost whimsical experience. I wouldn't necessarily call it "happy." A more appropriate word for it would be "secure." According to Twilight Sparkle, the name of the instrumental is "*Waltz of Stars*," and it's an appropriate name too. Its cadence mimics the uplifting beat of the "*Sunset Bolero*," while incorporating a dissonance akin to "*March of Tides*," whereas "*Waltz of Stars*" achieves a far more transcendental effect.

Playing the "*Waltz of Stars*" was ultimately a neutral experience. While the tune's whimsy and ethereal quality enchanted me at first, I felt for days after the song's performance a sense of longing. I couldn't sleep, on account of how pathetically lonesome I felt. I couldn't stop thinking about the song, about the void through which my strings echoed, as if I was calling out to long lost sisters I could never see again. Why siblings? I still don't quite understand it. But when I think about the song, I look up at the starry expanse and suddenly I feel as if I have all the answers, even if they're not all discovered yet.

Then there's Elegy #6. Twilight Sparkle immediately recognized the tune, and then she shocked me when she said that it was none other than the Anthem to the Lunar Empire. She explained to me that the song had in fact been used as a military call to assembly in the years preceding the rise of Nightmare Moon. Before Princess Luna was banished with the Elements of Harmony, her tainted spirit tricked many unicorns into following her will. The result was an army that had gathered under Nightmare Moon's lead. Using these ill-fated ponies, the dark alicorn attempted to usurp the power of her sister and all souls who defended her.

It pains me to think that I was being taught by invisible tongues to learn a tune that had once meant the bane of my very own ancestors. Unicorns almost went extinct as a result of the war between the holy siblings of Equestria. The elegies I was uncovering were frightful and mysterious, but they were not without their own sense of beauty. I think it goes without saying that even the most insidious of tools we invent in this world all start as a noble work of art.

So, with great zeal, I poured through the pages of every ancient tome I could find. I soon discovered that almost anything related to the sixth elegy had been eliminated from modern history. In a way, it makes sense. No pony in their right mind would want to see something like the Lunar Empire become reborn in our day and age. Still, it's such a tragedy that fantastic works of art—beautiful by their merit alone—must absolutely be destroyed along with the nefarious shadows of the past. As my mind swam with the melancholic tunes being sung to my mind, it soon became clear that I didn't need to know the actual name of the elegy to ascertain its composition. Ever since my plight began, I've possessed an inexplicable sense that is not blemished by the fears and prejudice of time. Furthermore, I of all ponies should know that words are meaningless in my search. I can only imagine how much of Princess Luna's heart went into **her symphony** before her poisoned mind transformed it into something wicked.

I decided to call the sixth instrumental "*Moon's Elegy*," and its impact upon me was immediately noticeable upon performance. As soon as I had finished strumming the composition, I felt the chills of my curse doubling... tripling. It was as though every warm piece of the world had been pulled away from me. I felt numb, cold, hungry, and very impressionable. It suddenly made sense why this was such an easy song for corrupt warmongers to wield. If enough zealots were exposed to the "*Moon's Elegy*," I could see a despot like Nightmare Moon making them do anything with the simple promise of lifting the very effects of the tune. As a matter of fact, the only way I was able to free myself from the paralyzing cold was to play my way back through elegies # 1 through 5.

Perhaps, then, it's excusable as to why I've been so hesitant to tackle Elegy #7, a tune that Twilight Sparkle has herself called "*Threnody of Night*." A threnody is a song of tribute to the dead. I've hoped to be many things at the end of unraveling this curse, but *dead* isn't one of them.

And yet, what else am I to do? I certainly can't quit on these instrumentals. I learn them as I discover them. There is no skipping a tune, no jumping ahead to see how the entire symphony ends. I can't track down Princess Luna and ask her for help. I can't send a letter to Princess Celestia and call upon her wisdom. With the exception of Twilight's insight and Spike's research skills—both of which are fleeting assets at best—I am alone on this journey. It's a cold and treacherous trek, like a tiny pony flung into endless night, or a lone body trotting through a gloomy jungle.

Yesterday, at noon, I marched slowly through the Everfree Forest. I had no choice but to take it easy. It didn't matter how desperate I felt. Breaking into a full gallop would waste my energy, and I was utilizing every bit of stamina in keeping myself from passing out in the middle of that dense foliage.

It was cold. So very, *very* cold. My teeth chattered and the hairs of my coat stood on end. Even beneath all of my bundled clothes—the cloak and the scarf and the snow cap and the

sweatjacket—I was about ready to shatter into a million frozen pieces.

When the curse struck me, I was located in the center of Ponyville—at ground zero—where Nightmare Moon first touched down upon the earth after a thousand long years of banishment. For that reason, apparently, I am the warmest in the heart of Ponyville. Moving out, I am shivering along the town's fringes, freezing at my cabin, and downright numb at places very distant from the center, places such as Sweet Apple Acres.

In the Everfree Forest, I might as well be dead. The temperature is unbearable. To any other pony, I must look like a feverish mess, shivering beneath layers of wool and cloth. It's a feat in and of itself to pass my condition off as a temporary illness. I rarely ever trot out this far, and when I do it's only when it's absolutely necessary. I *needed* the materials for performing the "*Threnody of Night*." As a result, I had to keep going. I had to keep piercing the forest. Soon enough, I would have found my destination.

Everytime I looked at the uneven path ahead of me, the trail appeared to stretch on even further. To avoid fainting, I tilted my gaze upwards and allowed the frail specks of sunlight to bleed through the foliage and play with my eyes, keeping me awake. I've been told that the Everfree Forest is supposed to be frightening, that the unchecked growth of nature is a scary change from the orderly world that stewards like the pegasi maintain for us. As far as I'm concerned, all of the nightmarish things of Everfree are invisible and harmless, at least in comparison to the very real cold that assaults my body each time I venture out there. Making a sort of trek like I did yesterday is the mystical equivalent of diving into a subterranean lake hidden beneath a polar ice cap. I'd be warmer if I gathered a syringe full of permafrost and shoved it into an open vein. Toying with the mystical effects of a lunar curse is hardly a game, and yet I have no way of dissecting my situation unless I *play with it* just a little bit.

I had to keep myself distracted. I thought of the *Threnody*. I thought of the musical notes burned into the back of my brain. My ears twitched as I imagined each tune long before I performed them. In the streets of Ponyville, before the gracious bits of other ponies being flung before me, I had practiced the tunes—but each occasion was a purposeful alteration of the true composition. I couldn't practice the actual instrumentals by striking each note true; a perfect playthrough meant activating the magical spell attached to the elegy I was performing. I very deeply feared afflicting other ponies with the same mystical burden that I and I alone was enduring. After all, the purpose of freeing myself from the curse was finding a way to commune with such souls in the first place. It was a noble goal, and it was worth all of the trials, tribulations, and shivers... most of the time.

I felt a great shadow looming over me. With a gasp of joy, I realized that I had finally stumbled upon the treehouse. Various masks of exotic design greeted me as I all-but-stumbled into the door, rapping upon it with a shuddering hoof. I clung to myself, shivering upon the threshold. I felt weaker this visit. I wasn't sure how long I was going to last.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait for long. I heard her voice almost immediately: "Come. Come and enter, stranger or friend. For I have brews for all ills contained within."

I took a deep, deep breath and opened the door. I had to work every quivering muscle into producing a neighborly grin. "Good afternoon, Miss Zecora." I nearly stumbled dead across her floor. I locked the joints in my legs and stood as tall as I could, my teeth showing in the green torchlight.



“I'm so sorry to bother you.”

“It is hardly a bother, kindly mare,” said the meditative zebra. She stood over a bubbling cauldron, squinting at a series of herbs that she was sprinkling over a new and experimental concoction. “So long as you are in my house, you are in my care.”

“Well, th-that's good...” I winced past a wave of chills. I was afraid to look up, as if expecting the dangling decorations from her desert homeland to be replaced with deadly icicles. “Uhm... I've been told th-that you're a local hermit, and that you rarely wander into town...” The fact that this was the fifth (*or sixth?*) time reciting these words didn't make the task any less awkward. “...but I'm desperate t-to finish this scientific experiment that I'm working on for the Manehattan University, and I'm sh-short four reagents. I'm t-told that you have several sound stones that you c-commonly sell, is that true?” I clenched my teeth. I knew Zecora's answer before she said it. I only needed her to come out with it quickly. If only zebras were as punctual in their predictability as ponies.

“Hmmm, magical sound stones, a ram-crafted delight.” Zecora murmured to the hazy atmosphere of her home as she stirred the broth before her. “I say five pony bits per rock sounds about right. I wish I could charge less, but unfortunately sound stones are acquired through much trial and difficulty.” She trotted over towards a shelf where a black box resided. In so doing, she cast me the first glance since I entered, and her blue eyes widened. “By the shadows, pony, your attire! Is Equestria due for a blizzard most dire?”

*Here we go...*

I swallowed hard and did a very brave thing. I lowered the hoods of both my cloak and hoodie. Whether or not Zecora spots the chattering teeth beneath my smiling lips, I can never tell. I can only hope the gesture is enough to distract her, and so far it's worked every time. “There's no c-cause for alarm, Miss Zecora. Ponyville's not expecting inclement weather. It's just me and my c-condition.”

“And what condition, pray tell, is that?” Zecora grabbed four dark crystals from the black box and cradled them in a prehensile tail. She trotted towards me with an expression that was half concerned, half amused. “Before you, the most I've seen a pony wear is a hat!”

“It's genetic, so n-none of your m-medicines will help me.” After so many trips, it was the best excuse I had for making these visits short. I have nothing against Zecora. I'm sure I would love her company, and if I could predict her trips to downtown Ponyville I would visit her there in a heartbeat. It was just that the longer I stayed in her home the more certain I was that my hooves would go permanently numb. “Seriously, all I c-came for was the sound stones.” I was already reaching telekinetically into my floating bag of coins. Several weeks of street performances went into this shivering moment, and I wasn't about to tarry. “Five bits per stone? It so happens I have about twenty bits here...”

“Surely, there is more for you that I can do!” Zecora's face was long, sad. Then suddenly it brightened. “Ah! Perhaps a sample of dragon's brew!”

*Oh shoot.*

*She had never said that on any of the visits before.*

“Uhhh...” I stood, frozen in mid-payment, like a tourist who had suddenly gotten lost in the middle of a horrible jungle. “Dragon's b-brew? Miss Zecora, I swear, all I need is—”

But she was already reaching for a jar from a nearby counter and pouring red liquid into a wooden bowl. “If there is any noble truth taught me by ponykind, it's that one must keep hospitality first in mind. You can consider these sound stones as good as sold, but it would be cruel to let you leave so infirmed and cold!”

“Miss Zecora, seriously...” I ran a hoof over my face. *Why? Why do I have to be cursed in the middle of a sea of blessings?* I could have just grabbed the stones and ran. I could have even *stolen* them and used the twenty bits for my own benefit later. What would it have mattered? Zecora wouldn't have remembered me, whether I was a robber or a saint. *Why? Why do I have to play by this code? Haven't I gone through enough as it is? I'm alone in this nightmare. Don't I deserve to play a little dirty for once, especially if it means me getting what I need faster?* “You don't need to give me anything...”

“Your words say 'no' but your voice says 'yes'.” She pierced me as much with her smile as she did with that statement, all the while motioning me towards the fresh potion she had prepared. “Your trembles should decrease as soon as you ingest.”

I sometimes wonder if I'd be any less transparent if those I live with actually remembered me. With a defeated breath, I marched over and gracefully accepted her medicinal gift. The taste wasn't half as bitter as the knowledge of its uselessness. I've no doubt Zecora's brews could cure pony pox, leprosy, or even pegasus arthritis. The only thing capable of appeasing my situation is a smile—blissful and ignorant—and it was my job at the moment to aim it at her.

“Thank you very much, Miss Zecora. That was very generous of you.”

“It should provide enough heat to carry you back from which you came,” she said. “And now that you've sampled the dragon's brew, might I trouble you for your name?”

“Lyra,” I recited. “*Lyra Heartstrings.*” I set off the invisible metronome inside my head in anticipation for what would come next.

“Ah, such a delightful name is '*Heartstrings.*' If only every soul was designed after beautiful things.”

I can't help it. I giggle everytime I hear that. That alone—far more than the brew—made the cold momentarily manageable. “Jee, thanks. Too bad you don't have an instrument to read such lyrics off to.”

“My spoken rhyme is merely shamanistic tradition,” Zecora explained as she marched over to the nearby counter and picked the stones back up again. “I dare not encroach upon the ways of a musician.”

“Why not?” I asked. As I spoke, my gaze fell upon a wooden engraving lying on a nearby shelf. I saw the illustration of several zebra figures gathered around what looked to be a pair of festive drums. I felt my heart beating at the very notion. “Music is the best expression of the soul,” I murmured, my eyes dripping forlornly over the desert illustration. “Be it zebra or pony.”

After a pause, I hoofed her the twenty bits and slid the four sound stones she offered into my pouch. Zecora had said something new to me this visit, so I felt like saying something “new” to her.

“I’m sure there’re plenty of songwriters in town who’d love to work on something with you that doesn’t involve herbs or potion-making. Twilight Sparkle and her friends speak highly of you, otherwise I would never have thought to come here for these rocks.”

She replied, “I am sure they have better ways of spending their time than attempting to shape melody around a zebra’s rhyme.”

“But... you’re so...” I gazed around at the walls surrounding us. All too soon, I felt the shivers returning, but this time they were for her and not for me. I realized that the only alien thing in that place was me. Zecora had made a home away from home for herself, and the foundations of her little nest were as beautiful as they were strange. “You’re so alone h-here,” I eventually murmured, failing to hide the trembles in my frame once more. “And I get the feeling it’s because you choose to be, M-Miss Zecora. If I were you...” I bit my lip. *What was I doing? I should have just left and been done with it all. I had gotten the stones.* Foolishly, I continued, “If I knew that I had so many friends in town, I wouldn’t spend half as much time alone as I already do.”

Zecora seemed unaffected by my impassioned plea. She trotted back to her cauldron like a soldier returning to her post. “What I do in solitude, I do for the best. A shaman’s work isn’t done until she’s finished her quest.”

I gazed forlornly her way. “And all of those years that we spend working on something so important to us...” I struggled through a wave of frost. I felt like my eyeballs would freeze in their sockets, and yet I struggled to keep staring at her. “That’s a long time to live without a soundtrack, don’t you think?”

At that, she glanced curiously up at me. She gave a gentle smile. “I am curious that you would speak of ‘we’. Is there a shaman in this room other than me? Heheheh...” I’m sure that the chuckle coming out of her lips was meant to be whimsical. However, to me it felt like a bitter pill, more nauseating than all of the world’s exotic brews sloshed together.

“Shaman... Musician... Goddess...?” I gulped hard. The walls were closing in, and all of them laced with ice. I stumbled backwards out of the treehouse as if I was tripping over a snowbank. “What’s in a title if we don’t have anypony but ourselves to share our gifts with?”

Something reflected in the surface of Zecora’s bubbling cauldron other than her face. To her squinting blue eyes, it looked like a fine mist of vapors. She glanced up at the walls of her home. Aside from the curious sensation of having just used her voice to speak, this revelation had no effect on her. After all, she was always alone.

I returned to my cabin well before the sunset. Even then, I didn't immediately start performing the "*Threnody of Night*." I had to recover from my trip into the veritable tundra that the Everfree Forest was to me. I laid in the center of my cot, huddled beneath a mountain of blankets. I stayed there, weathering the fading waves of cold, practicing the *Threnody* in my head. But I did more than that. I had to steel myself for what I was about to do, for what no amount of meditation could truly prepare me for.

You would think my life is predictable, given the circumstances. That couldn't be further from the truth. My entire situation is one immense dive into the unknown. Even the **very alicorn who invented these tunes** is oblivious to the masterpieces I'm endeavoring to unlock. The only soul who possibly knows an ounce of truth is **Nightmare Moon**, and all ponies—those cursed and those blessed—are equally happy to see her gone for good.

It is the task of mortals to make sense out of senselessness. Goddesses have galloped among us for millennia, and this has never stopped being true. When my task becomes too formidable to bear, I simply remind myself that while I may be alone with my memories, I am hardly alone in my struggles. I take little comfort in this understanding, but I do take a decent amount of strength.

After an hour and a half of rest, I decided that I was ready. I grabbed my lyre. I grabbed a torch. I grabbed my music sheets, my notes, and an oil lantern. Finally, I brought along the four dark-crystal sound stones, devices that had been used for ages by rams and unicorns alike for absorbing acoustical frequencies. After hours of reading in Twilight's library, I learned that these same materials were used by proto-Equestrians in harnessing the frequencies of mystical enchantment. It's hypothesized that the substance had originally been made out of a vibrating stone whose age predates the first Rise of Discord. As a matter of fact, the rocks were believed to be immune to waves of chaos energies. After utilizing them myself, I realized that I could properly channel the effects of the lunar elegies and contain them to a small area of focus, so that the instrumentals I performed became much more manageable. If there was anything I needed from that evening, it was a way to properly manage whatever would come next.

With beautiful irony, evening had fallen. I trotted the dark length from my cabin to a tiny wooden shack positioned along the edge of the woods. My dim lantern illuminated my path. Reaching the shack, I unlatched the wooden door and opened it, revealing a hidden flight of wooden steps that led down a steep trench dug out of the earth. I had shoveled the hollow myself, spending several months of flexing my telekinetic muscle. Closing the door to the "shack" behind me, I marched down the depth of fifteen feet until I was finally standing in the center of a twenty-by-thirty foot rectangular cellar. When I first started these experiments, I wasn't sure exactly what danger the magical instrumentals might pose upon the residents of Ponyville all around me. I decided to play it safe and fashion for myself a "bunker" of sorts within which I could perform my lonely symphonies, in full

confidence that no other soul could hear the **compositions of Princess Luna** besides my accursed self.

I hung the lantern from a metal hook implanted in the roof of the underground niche. A dim amber light danced across the wooden boards barricading the walls of soil all around me. The floor was a sea of even gravel that crunched under my hooves, except for a plank of wood in the center, atop which a metal stand resided. Upon this pedestal, I planted my lyre. With magic, I floated a wooden stool over and propped it in front of the instrument. I then laid the sound stones in key positions in the four corners of the wooden plank, so that they surrounded me and my instrument. I meditated, focused upon the ley lines of magic attuned to my horn, and enchanted the four crystals. They glowed with a dark emerald haze that played with the amber kiss of the lantern above, making it feel like Hearth's Warming morning. Sitting down in the center of the ethereal halo, I collected my breaths, then propped the notebook full of musical notations in a notch positioned halfway up the pedestal.

For several numb minutes, I sat in dead silence, half buried in the earth like the ghost I was made to be, teetering upon the edge of unknowing. The hardest part of experimenting is always starting the experiment to begin with. What am I to discover? What horror or elation waits for me at the end of my last strummed note? Will I find a cure to my curse, or a deeper degree of damnation?

I thought of Zecora, for some reason. I thought of her sitting in the middle of her house, just as alone, just as far away from home, working on the latest of her shamanistic experiments. I wondered what drove her to do what she did—and in such solitude as well. Was it all pure, medicinal altruism? Did she have a goal in mind? Did she benefit from everything she ever did... and did alone?

I envied her zeal, her courage, to embark on a daily basis to work on things nonstop, for the simple sake of being busy. The day that my curse is cured, what will I do? Will I have as much of a drive as Zecora? Will I live up to all the things I've ever wanted the ponies of this town to see in me?

Nothing ever seems to get done when I think too much. That's why it helps to just *do* things, and the only thing I had to do yesterday was the experiment. I forced myself into the first throes of it, breathing evenly, sitting in a calm pose atop the stool as I forced the first of several strings to vibrate along the channels of my telekinesis.

*"Prelude to Shadows"* began, and with it came the shivering waves of paranoia. I felt the amber shadows of the lantern dancing above me as the dissonant cords came to life. I kept playing, choosing to focus on the protective green aura of the sound stones surrounding me. Soon enough, the *Prelude's* eerie melody ended. It is a short instrumental after all. My heart was ready for the *"Sunset Bolero."* The cellar resonated with its pulsating tempo as invisible percussion instruments sounded off in my head. I felt the glow of green light increase, and I realized it was from my horn and not the crystals engulfing me. The emerald brilliance began to shift and flicker, and that's how I knew that the *"March of Tides"* had begun. I allowed the numbness of the music piece to creep over my body, sending me weightless and fearless into the instrumental that was to come.

The *"Darkness Sonata"* started, and already I felt my blood beginning to freeze over. The lanternlight was growing dimmer, or so I told myself. I stifled a whimper deep in my throat and kept my eyes wide open to the subterranean blackness that was burying me. I felt as though the weight of twenty thousand generations of moon phases was bearing down on my body. In desperation, I swam towards the pale orb in some imaginative sky, and I discovered several invisible arms carrying me there

upon streams of mesmerizing cadence. I no longer felt afraid, for the “*Waltz of Stars*” was accompanying me. My vision returned, and I embraced the lanternlight once again with steely determination, for the hardest veil was just about to come. It hit me like a solid block of ice. I nearly fell out of my chair as the frigid kiss of the “*Moon's Elegy*” ripped through me, threatening to shatter my soul like glass. I skated across the alabaster surface of its melody with tenacity, utilizing every nimble talent in this lone musician's arsenal, for it was the last layer of mystery I knew how to pierce.

The “*Threnody of Night*” was next, the death of all my music and the anthem thereof. I tackled the dirge like a monk, pure in form and devoid of flare. One does not show off before the reaper; I was not about to turn a masterpiece into a farce. The solemnity of the tune was excruciating to my ears. I felt my breaths like delicate punctuations between each string pluck. If I hadn't seen the walls around me with my naked eyes, I could have sworn the cellar had morphed into a bottomless ravine. Where had all the echoes gone? Was it the sound stones creating this deathly silence that gobbled up the vibrating edge of each cord? Did the acoustics simply die?

I couldn't panic. There was no way to afford an error at this point. Who knows what would happen if I stopped in the middle of this instrumental, especially after I had played so much of it so perfectly. Was it perfect? It had to have been. What could have been more melodious than this? I had played variations of this tune so many times in the streets of Ponyville, and never once did it appeal to me with such beauty, a haunting beauty, a beauty that could tell a diseased foal that it was okay to embrace the darkness, for there was something beyond the black veil that was even more comforting than a mother's kiss.

Dear Celestia. What was I thinking? What was this *Threnody* speaking to me? I tried to call back to it, but something was deafening my ears. I heard the rattling of infinite chains, swirling into the dark navel of the world like cyclonic, black intestines. Art teachers lied to me when I was young, for there have always existed colors that were never meant to be seen, and suddenly every single one of them was reaching out from the *Threnody's* throat for me, blacker than black, like the blood of something that had crawled and wheezed across this world long before the goddesses gave birth to air, light, and sorrow.

I was too cold to be scared. The “*Moon's Elegy*” had made sure of that. I was a flightless insect being shoved down the maw of something far too enormous to be put into words, for the only way to recognize all that's existed was to forget it. My mind was not large enough. I tried stopping my music, but the lyre was going on without me. If I had a hammer, I would have smashed my horn to dust, but I found that the same thing was happening to my hooves. I looked down at my forelimbs and all I saw were tears.

The air grew sour. I looked without looking; I couldn't feel my body anymore. The light of the lantern had gone out. The crystals had all but shattered. A gray haze had filled the cellar. It tasted like a baby's first nightmare. I entreated the walls and the walls buckled. They leaked in a thousand places. They must have been as sad as I was to be crying so much. When their tears broke through—with the gloss of ages overcoming me in a frozen deluge—I gave up trying to count the many places in the world through which they shattered. There were so many dying, black stars, like the sand of a beach catching fire and burning out forever.

I fell back and the cellar fell with me. Into the blacker than black we swam, past the chains,

past the strings of the lyre stretching like wingbones from horizon to horizon, submerged, glittering with the pale sheen of endless moonlight. There, hidden beyond all shadows, I finally found my voice, and it was sobbing.

Alone in the penumbra of all my hopes and horrors I cuddled that voice and I heard...

I heard...

“Lyra?”

The gazelle of the northern Zebrahara have long employed the hollows of milkwood reeds to craft the flutes traditionally utilized in their wedding ceremonies. However, upon the introduction of polygamist rituals brought in by the migratory wildebeests, they've replaced the flutes for ocarinas crafted out of dried river mud, and this has been the standard form of social instrumentation for the last five decades.

“Lyra?!”

Ever since contact has been made with the zebra tribes of the southern plains, the gazelle have

learned to incorporate percussion instruments into their native songs. This has led to the first known case of Zebraharan songwriting since the rams performed their exodus to the Northern Mountains following the Age of Discord.

“Lyra **Heartstrings!**”

Mom's voice...

I look up from a sprawling assortment of textbooks and notes across my bed covers.

The rooftops of Canterlot outside my windows are every color of the rainbow.

Mom's mane is somehow brighter than everything else.

I wish I could say the same of her frown.

“Uhhhh...” I sit up straight, blinking. The air is cool, but that's not why I'm suddenly shivering. “Am I forgetting something...?”

“Your train leaves in less than two hours!”

“Oh shoot!” I scramble to scoop up all of my study materials and shove them into a turquoise saddlebag. “The Summer Sun Celebration! Twilight's going to kill me!”

“Kill you? She hasn't seen you in months!” Mom chuckles. I can never recreate the tonality in her voice. I wouldn't want to. “But seriously, Lyra. Must you take all of those things? You're going to meet with Twilight to *celebrate*. You'll have plenty of time to study when you get back.”

“I'm just zero point two grade points away from being top in class!” I exclaim as I gather the last of my things and tie my saddlebag shut. “I can't let myself slack off for even a second!”

“Well, at least try not to be rude when you're around Twilight by studying instead of catching up with her.”

“I think I know better than that, Mom.” I wink at her. I gallop to her side for a quick nuzzle before scampering down the stairs. “I'll send a postcard once I'm in Ponyton.”

“Ponyville.” She calls after me. “And *Lyra...*”

Her tone stops me dead in my tracks. I linger in the middle of the stairs, groaning. “Don't tell me... What have I forgotten **now**?”

“What else?” Her horn glows with aged grace as she floats an embarrassingly familiar instrument into my peripheral vision. “Even if you don't use it for your studies, perhaps you can play a song or two at the celebration.”

I smile. I feel my cheeks flush. “Thanks, Mom.” I grab the lyre with my magic and stuff it



down my saddlebag. "I swear, I'd lose my horn if it weren't attached to my head."

"So long as you look after your horn, then our baby genius has her future set out for her," she says. The last I see of her is a wink.

I descend the stairs.

The windows are wide open.

The air of Canterlot is crisp, rich, full of delicious sounds.

Dad stands in the middle of it, fiddling with his latest painting.

"Darn it," he mutters. "I can never get the colors to blend just right."

"It looks just fine, dad." I say in a sing-song fashion. I dash over to give him a swift peck on the cheek. "Photo Finish is going to love the portrait you're making of her."

"Actually, it's still-life of a bowl of cantaloupes."

"Erm... Yes. Well... She seems to be into fruity things." I giggle nervously and bolt towards the door. Bright sunlight engulfs me. "Gotta go! See ya soon!"

"Don't grow too attached to Ponyville, Lyra," Dad mutters. "It's farm country. I've been told the smell takes forever to get out."

*"Daaaaaad... I'll only be there for a few days! Heehee! You won't even know I left!"*

He disappears along with the painting.

Everything's a blur.

The train car keeps jostling.

It's hard to concentrate.

There's a foal crying two seats ahead of me.

I'm reminded of a Ponyrecki composition.

I scribble a few things in my notepad.

There are thirty-five lines left on the sheet, and I wonder if I could fit Octavia's latest "*Adagio for a Bearded Sorcerer*" on it by memory.

**"Ponyville! Next stop! Next stop! Ponyville!"**

Dear Celestia, there's so much noise.

The train's making a massive turn around the bend.

I feel myself tilting towards the window.

In my annoyance, a flash a glance outside.

I see apple trees, a windmill, thatched roofs, a bell tower, and more apple trees.

"Yeesh..." I chuckle to myself. "What a flippin' hole in the ground."

I look at the blank sheet again; it's a lot more interesting.

I hum to myself.

Goddess, I'm so jealous of Octavia...

"Twilight?! Yoo-hoo!"

I jump—grinning like mad—my muzzle bouncing over several heads of ponies.

"Hey! Twilight! Over here!"

She's sitting at a picnic table, surrounded by farm ponies.

A half-devoured pie rests on a plate before her.

It glistens like all the apples surrounding us, like her violet eyes briefly do when they look up to see me.

“Oh, Lyra. Hey.” She struggles to smile. There is something weighing on her, and I think it's more than just the farm family's sweets forming a bulge in her belly. “Moondancer told me in her letter that you'd be coming. I'm really glad that you did.”

“Well at least one of us is.” I wince at the backsweat wafting off the multiple workhooves prancing through the apple orchards around us. “Whew! You smell that? Why is Princess Celestia choosing the boondocks of Equestria to raise the Sun at this year?”

“It's not so bad a town, really. The ponies here are insanely friendly, though. But I guess it can't be helped.”

“Heeheehee... You look like you could use a long night's sleep.” I wink and point at her belly. “Or a stomach pump.”

“I can't, Lyra,” Twilight groans. “As Celestia's personal protege, I've been charged with overseeing the ceremony. This was to be my first stop. But at this rate, I dunno if I can so much as stand up—much less interview the rest of the ponies running the show.”

I glance all around us.

Everypony is looking the other way.

I've never once let a magical opportunity go astray.

“Pssst...” I lean towards Twilight. “Perhaps simple ponies could do with a simple distraction?”

“Oh please—!” Twilight's lavender hooves are held together across the table from me. “Anything, Lyra!” she pleads. “You've gotta help me out!”

“Don't worry.” I pull my lyre out. “I've got this.”

I strum every string in succession, then shout before the air.

“Oh my stars and garters! Is that Whinny Nelson over there?!”

To my dismay, the huge family of farmers merely blinks in confusion.

After a beat, I clear my throat and utter, “Oh, also, the apples are on fire!”

Everypony is immediately shrieking and running straight towards the fields.

Soon, Twilight and I are alone with our gasping breaths.

“Now's our chance!” Twilight shrieks and leads the charge.

I gallop after her, giggling.

“Twilight! There you are!” Spike gasps from where he waits in the middle of the road. He gives his mentor a strange look. “Holy guacamole! Did you have enough of their apple treats?”

“Unnnngh...” Twilight gulps something down before it has the chance to rise out of her throat. She smiles sickly my way as we trot towards her assistant. “Thankfully Lyra arrived just in time to save my tail.”

“You should thank Spike too.” I say with a smile. “He told me I might find you here. I had no idea you'd be forced down a gauntlet of pies.”

“Please...” Twilight sighed, her face long. “Don't say that word. It's not like I don't have enough on my plate.”

I trot around to get a better look at my foalhood friend's expression. “Something eating at you, Twilight? Last time we hung out, you couldn't stop rambling excitedly about the latest spell Celestia was teaching you. She's gonna be showing up here tomorrow to raise the Sun, right? Why aren't you chomping at the bit to see her—*erm*—if you pardon the old mare's expression. Hehehe...”

“Lyra, you're always studying about the history of music, right?”

“There'd be something terribly wrong with me if I wasn't.”

“Have you, in your studies, ever chanced upon song relating to the 'Elements of Harmony'?” She clears her throat and further utters, “Specifically dating back to more than a thousand years ago?”

“Ugh... Not this again.” Spike rolls his eyeslits and trots off towards the center of town beyond the bend in the road. “I'll go scout ahead for this 'Dashing Rainbow' pegasus or whoever we're supposed to meet next.”

I scratch my mane and squint curiously after him. “Just what's gotten his spines in a bunch?”

“He thinks I'm overreacting.”

“Overreacting about what?”

Twilight sighs. She's a wealth of knowledge, and yet so much of that is forever a mystery to me. I can never understand her: only admire her. If only Moondancer was here. Together, we might make her giggle.

Her smile is half-hearted as she trots toward me. “Never mind, Lyra. This... This is a year just like any other. We should be happy and celebrate the warmth that's given to us on a daily basis.”

“Hey, works for me,” I say with a smile. “I heard you're going to be at the library in the center of town tonight.”

“Yes. It's where I'm staying during the Celebration.”

“Think you'd mind an annoying, mint-green unicorn knocking on the door and chatting it up about music?”

“Hmmm... I'd love to sit and talk with you again, Lyra. But I've got a lot of work to do.” There is something distant in her face. It draws the smile away just as it draws her near to me for a friendly nuzzle. “Still, it's nice to hear your voice. It's like a song that I'm happy to remember every time you stop by. Things have been so strange lately. Princess Celestia's been really distant, and I can't get her to give me a straight answer.”

“About what, Twilight?”

“Things. Important things. Mysterious things.” She steps back and runs a hoof over her head and sighs, as if the entire universe is weighing in on her horn. “There's no time to explain.”

I gulp and gaze at her in concern. “Not even time for friends?”

At first, she says nothing.

She trots down the road, and only once she's become a shadow does she glance over her shoulder and say with an awkward smile, “Let me just get my work done. Then we'll see what comes next.”

“I'll still drop by the library later!” I call after her. “Do you want me to bring some food and games?”

“Please! No food!” She exclaims back, then practically growls, “And no games! I'm not in the mood for surprises tonight!”

“Alright, Twilight! You can count on me!”

“So, like, you should totally surprise her!” I say with a grin. “Spring this party you're planning

on her like it's a lightning storm!"

A pink pony gasps from across the dessert counter of Sugarcube Corner. "Ohhhh I knew it I knew it I knew it!" Her blue eyes sparkle with electricity. "The first moment I saw her I knew it was a pony who needed to have a surprise welcoming party thrown for her! Is it true? Is she going to be in the library this very evening?!"

"Heehee! Yeah! And she'll likely be there all night until the raising of the Sun at your mayor's town hall."

"Perfect! Not all ponies are into bonfires, y'know. Too many mosquitoes. Bleachk! Eeeheehee! This is so super-duper-perfect! I'll throw an indoor banquet and have all of Mrs. and Mr. Cake's finest treats lined up and ready for the scarfin'! Oooh! Hot sauce! Mustn't forget the hot sauce! It goes great with sarsaparilla, don't you think?"

"Yeah, yeah. We all love sauce." I'm already reaching into my saddlebag. "So how much is this little shindig gonna cost me?"

"Heehee! Nothing!" She grins wildly. "Consider this on the house—and when I say 'on the house'—I really mean 'on the treehouse', cuz that's where the library's built. The pony who decided to build that must have had a thing for termites cuz I swear—"

"You're pulling my tail, right?" I raise an eyebrow. "I'm from Canterlot, you know. If I wanted to, I could afford to hold three banquets and a dance party and still have room left in my saddlebag to rattle at bellhops."

"Hehehehe—silly unicorn! Bells don't hop! They ring!"

"You know what?" I smirk and zip my saddlebag shut. "Who am I to refuse a kind offer, Miss Pine?"

"Pie."

"Whatever. Just make sure you're there on time."

"Wooooohooo!" She jumps and pumps her hoof in the air. "We're gonna party and we're gonna party loud!"

"Mmmmm-heeheehee—" I giggle devilishly. "Somehow, I have no doubt of that."

Spike marches out of a tiny room with a lampshade covering his head.

Less than a minute later, Twilight rejoins the loud and raving party in the center of the library.

She has a burning frown, and it's aimed directly at me.

“All. My. Hate.”

“Heeheehee...” I fall back on my haunches and hug myself. I wink at her. “Love ya too, lavender lumps.”

“Why doesn't anypony get it?!” she grumbles. “Why can't anyone see what this coming day means?!”

“It's the Summer Sun Celebration, Twi!” I scoot over and engulf her in a deep hug. “Come onnnn! Smile! Want me to play the Smarty Pants Song?”

The hairs on the back of Twilight's coat bunch up. “No. *No!*” She hisses and stares worriedly at all of the ponies around us. “You promised never ever to mention the Smarty Pants Song!”

“Heeheehee... But it always made you smile when we were little fillies!”

“Things have changed, Lyra. I don't have time for horsing around—figuratively and literally! There's so much at stake!”

“Yeah? Heehee...” I wipe a tear free and grab a bottle of soda from a nearby table. “Like what?”

She hangs her head and groans. “In less than an hour—when dawn arrives—it will officially be the longest day of the thousandth year, and things that have been set in motion long before history can remember will come into fruition.”

“Heh.” I stifle a burp, wipe my lips, and place the beverage down. “Sounds freaky. Uhm... thousandth year since what?”

“Lyra, have you ever wondered where the Mare in the Moon came from?”

“We've all been taught stories about the exiled princess, Twilight—”

“Her name was **Luna**.”

“Whatever. The fact of the matter is, that's way in the past. What we don't remember has been forgotten for a reason, don't you think?” I smile at her. I can see my teeth glinting in her eyes. “You're getting all washed up over nothing, Twilight. If Moondancer was here, she'd say the same! Don't let a bunch of old pony's tales keep you from enjoying your chance to live in the moment.”

Twilight bites her lip. Before she can respond, there's a loud shuffle of hooves.

Everypony is exiting the library, joining a thick herd that surges towards the town hall on the other side of town.

“Princess Celestia...” Twilight murmurs.

I smile and nudge her with my horn. “What are we waiting for? Let's go and meet your mentor, shall we?”

“Yes... I've missed her so...”

Twilight breathes a little easier. She isn't smiling, but I can see the color returning to her face.

She trots out briskly, and I'm immediately behind her.

Then I stop.

I remember...

“Shoot... Never fails!” I gallop straight towards a far corner of the library. “I'll be with you in a sec!”

I have to shovel my way through a mountain of confetti and a tossed pin-the-tail-on-the-pony poster.

I finally find it, glistening and golden as ever.

“I should just sew you to my tail and be done with it.” I slide the lyre into my saddlebag and trot happily out of the library.

“Okay... Where the heck is the stupid town hall?”

I groan.

The streets are suddenly empty.

All the ponies had cleared out of the library in a flash, and I am completely alone.

I should have gotten a lay of the land instead of setting up the silly party; it's not like Twilight



really enjoyed it anyways.

“Ugh! Idiot!” I roll my eyes and chuckle into the starry night. “Just follow the noise!”

I do just that.

In the center of town, there's a symphonic murmur of noise, giggles, voices, and cheers.

I take my sweet time heading towards the place.

There's something magical about being somewhere strange and unknown.

I could almost write a song about it.

I hum a melody to myself, already planning out the chorus, when something flickers above me.

I glance up and I see the moon—only it's not the moon.

There's something different about it.

“That's weird...” I stop in my tracks. I squint up at the familiar object. “The blemish is gone. Where is the Mare in the Moon...?”

No sooner do I utter this, but four specks of light twinkle around the lunar sphere, as if framing it.

I am filled with so much wonder, I hardly even notice my teeth chattering.

“What... Wh-What?” I shiver and rub a forelimb over a sudden coat of goosebumps. “Where did that come from? It's in the middle of Summer. How...?”

My voice stops.

No.

My voice *is being taken from me*.

I am speaking, but I cannot hear myself.

I cannot hear anything.

Dead music.

It tilts my head up, like a mother introducing an infant foal to the hush of night.

I gaze into the stars.

The stars part ways.

The blackness in the center has wings.

She is coming towards me.

I have fallen to the earth long before her arrival shakes everything around me.

The sound returns, and it is laced with thunder, for she is standing above it all.

Ink black coat.

Onyx wings.

A helm and metal shoes.

Polished silver, like the exposed bones of a diseased goddess.

Eyes of pale blue, carved with the lifeless knife-point of a crescent moon.

Her breath is frigid, colder than death, and it sucks the life out of me.

I can't scream, even when I try to.

I'm just a discarded scrap of refuse, cluttering the ruptured ground beside my fallen lyre and tattered saddlebag.

I gaze towards her, and it's like being swallowed up by a deep abyss.

A sea of ethereal blue taint engulfs me.

I am her first.

She is my last.

There are no words, only a song, something resonating from deep behind her deathly dark nostrils.

It sings of nothing, for she is nothing, and nothing is her gift to me.

I receive it.

I receiveth it, thine reaper of warmth, steward of annihilation until the fading whimper of time.

We receiveth it and become it.

We, vanquisher of the morning light, stern guardian against the pollutants of the indignant

spectrum.

We art one with the timelessness, faithful sage of the eternal yesterday.

Blissful oblivion, we maintain, until the Cosmic Mother wouldst return thy glory to the firmaments.

We shall sing of the songless, as thou wouldst have of thy precious daughter, and keepeth thy glory submerged in the world beneath worlds.

Thy will is ours.

Thou shalt remember bliss.

And we shalt remember nothing.

“Nnnngh—Gaah! Aaaaahh!”

I flail.

Bright light.

Burning.

A pair of forelimbs kicking at the Sun, trying to push it away.

Two faces.

They gaze down at me, alarmed and frightened.

I feel hooves holding me to the alleyway's cobblestone.

“Just relax! We're going to get you to Nurse Red Heart! You're gonna be alright!”

“Where...” A weak voice. So small, so frail. “Nnngh... Where art we?”

“Huh?”

“Dear Celestia, she's delirious.”

I wince, struggle, and whimper. “We... I... Wh-Where am I...?”

“It's okay. Just calm down.”

“So... Much noise...” I'm shivering all over. Something is piercing my head, drilling my horn straight down through my skull with the force of a million burning stars. “So... much.” I sob and choke. “Please... make it stop...”

“What's she talking about?”

“I dunno. She's rambling. Help me carry her...”

“So loud... Make it stop... I can't hear...” I'm sobbing. We're moving. There are tear drops on the ground where chains and ice should be. Everything is bright, too bright. And the noise. “Somepony stop playing... Stop playing the song. It's not supposed to be heard. We must wait for when she returneth—Nnngh...”

My vision is blurry.

All is bells and voices.

“Quick. I think she's going into a seizure or something!”

“What happened to her?! She's all wet, like she's almost drowned or something!”

“You ever seen her before? I thought everypony was hiding indoors while Nightare Moon was about.”

“Nnngh... M-Mother...” My eyes roll back in my head. I cannot find her. I'm so alone. “M-Mother! Do not listen! We... I beg of you!”

I shout.

I scream.

The music's so loud; she's going to hear it.

She cannot hear it.

We mustn't allow it.

“Mother!”

“Oh dear heavens—She's a mess!” A snow-white mare is leaning over me inside someplace.  
“What happened to her?”

“She... Uhm...”

“Well, we... That is...”

“Well?! Where did you find this poor filly?”

“It... Uhm...”

“I don't remember. Do you, Cloudkicker?”

“It was in town, I guess.”

“You guess, Miss Raindrops?!”

“Uhm... Or just outside the hospital? Don't be angry with us, Nurse Red Heart. We're just as confused as you are.”

“This Celebration! I swear to Celestia—they should stop hoofing cider around like party ribbons.” She's peering at me with several instruments, poking me, prodding me. “Tell me, do you feel any pain?”

“I... I...” The world is spinning. “My head. The music...”

“Your head hurts? How about your horn, Miss...”

“**Heartstrings. Lyra Heartstrings.** Will you please turn off the music?”

“I think she has a concussion. Nurse Weaver?! Go fetch some water and—”

“Please, just stop the music. That's all I ask...”

“We're going to make your head feel better. Just try to relax and... and...”

There's a chill in the air.

I shiver and clutch myself.

My eyes focus, and all I see is vapor.

Vapor and lights.

“What is... What just...?”

“Uhm... I'm... I'm sorry...”

I gaze across the hospital bed.

A nurse is reeling beside me. She leans against a wall and shakes her head before looking at me crookedly. “You were suffering from... from...” She winces. “Blessed Haypocrates, what was I doing just now...?”

“I think...” I gulp. “You think I might have a concussion. You said—”

“I'm sorry, can I help you?”

“Uhm...”

“Are you ill? We have a process for checking patients in, you realize—”

“These two pegasi just dragged me in here...” I pointed to one of the two young ponies standing across the room. “I was... in a street somewhere, and they... they...” I stop to gaze at them.

They are gazing back at me, twice as blank. “I'm sorry, Nurse Redheart. But we've never seen this unicorn before in our lives.”

I exhale sharply, my face wrenching. “I... but... Wh-What?!”

“If this is some sort of practical joke,” Redheart grumbles, frowning at all three of us. “I'm not even close to laughing.”

“I... I told you...” I rub my forehead and nearly whimper. “My name is **Lyra. Lyra Heartstrings**. I was going to fetch my lyre.” I gulp and shudder. It's so terribly cold. I hear the music again. It comes and goes like crashing waves, and I'm falling apart piece by piece. “I grabbed it, and I was walking under the moon and...” I hold a hoof over my face. “Oh Celestia, she was *right there*. She was right there and I couldn't do anything. I looked into her eyes. I looked into her eyes and I fell. I fell so far and for so long...” I gulp as I shake all over. The walls melt together to form a blur of noise and tears. “Where was I? Somepony tell me, please...”

I am returned with silence, like a song with no cadence.

Fearfully, I glance across the room.

Everything comes into focus.

Three faces are staring at me.

All blank.

“I'm sorry. Uhm... You are...?”

I stumble into the brightness.

I am dizzy.

I am teetering.

I can't stop looking.

I can't stop blinking.

Ponies are dancing.

Ponies are celebrating.

Fireworks explode like gunshots all around me.

Banners of the sun are being hoisted all across the village.

I am nothing but a shadow of the spectrum, engulfed in noise, born unto confusion.

“Please... Somepony help,” I mutter. I point back towards the hospital from which I have trotted. “There's something wrong with the ponies in that place.” I wince, but continue speaking. “Something's wrong with *all* of them. Their heads are messed up or something. I think... I think there might be some sort of an epidemic or... or...”

I linger in place.

Something's wrong.

Something's horribly, horribly wrong.

“Hello?” I murmur. The pain in my head is replaced by an all-numbing confusion as I gaze at the many celebratory faces bouncing around me. “Uhm... Excuse me?”

Ponies look at me. They blink in alarm. Then they're shoved back into the crowd. The village

full of churning bodies circulates, and the faces rotate back to once again embrace me, and they have the same smile as before... innocent and unblemished.

“My name's **Lyra Heartstrings**. Please, listen. Something's wrong in the hospital. I think that—Hello?!”

The faces are there and gone again. Everytime I see them, they look at me just as stupidly as the first time. It's like I'm being introduced to the same party over and over again. Just like Twilight, I don't like surprises.

“Look, this is serious! Somepony pay attention to what I'm saying! There's something terribly wrong with—Why aren't you paying attention to me?!”

“I'm sorry?” A laughing pony bounces past me. To my horror, it's one of the pegasi who picked me up just a moment ago. “And you are...?”

I almost snarl. “**Lyra!**” I point a hoof angrily at her chest. “And what are you doing out of the hospital?”

Just then, a pale body prances past me. “Enjoy yourselves, everypony!” Nurse Red Heart cheerfully shouts above the noise of the Summer Sun Celebration. “But remember! Safety first! My station's open all day!”

I gawk at her. I can feel my heart beating. It's so terribly cold. The adrenaline does nothing.

“Hey! HEY!”

I bark.

I wave my hooves wildly.

I surf through the crowd and all but collapse against a table full of cupcakes outside of Sugarcube Corner.

Panting, I grab the shoulders of the pink mare tossing samples out to passing celebrators.

“I'm so glad I found you, Miss Pine.”

“Heehee! Actually, it's Pinkie **Pie!** But I wouldn't mind be called 'Pinkie Pine' once in a



while!”

“Heh. My bad.” I smile nervously and squeeze her forelimbs. “Look. You gotta help me. Twilight must be paying me back for the surprise party from yesterday—”

“—because pine smells sooooo goood, don't you think? It reminds me of Hearth's Warming Eve and opening presents! Why, this one time, I was unwrapping a box covered in silver glitter and a baby alligator popped out! Swoosh! Bit me over the head! Heeheehee—Good thing the little fella had no teeth! That's why I named him 'Gummi'—”

“Please—Listen to me!” I all but snarl at her. I bat away a few ponies before they can grab some cupcakes and interrupt this little “meeting” of ours. “Where's Twilight? I gotta apologize to her so she can stop this practical joke. I knew she could organize a Summer Sun Celebration but—ho ho ho hoooo...” I chuckled madly, my lips crooked. “This sort of stuff takes the cake!”

“Mmmmmmm... Cake.”

“So where is she?”

“Huh? Where is who?”

“Twilight Sparkle!”

“Why? Did she do something wrong?”

“Yes. I mean no. I mean not really. Look, I just need to find her and apologize for the surprise party yesterday—”

“You were at the surprise party yesterday?!” Pinkie grins wide. “Cuz that was sooooo fun! I'm glad that I thought it up!”

I do a double take. “The heck are you talking about?! I thought up the surprise!”

“Hmmm... And you are?”

“Lyra!” I shout. “Lyra Heartstrings! The rich unicorn whose friend you agreed to spring a party for 'on the house?”

“Heeheehee... That's a pretty name, miss.” She smiles innocently at me. “But I'm sorry. I've never seen you before.”

I stare at her blankly. My veins are filling with an iciness as cold as her blue eyes suddenly appear.

“Cuz if I had, I would have *totally* sprung a super-duper welcoming party for you too. I wish there were more ponies around town with green coats, cuz green coats are so hard to come by and... and... Hey, where're you going?”

I'm leaving.

Leaving her.

Leaving this town.

Leaving the noise and the brightness and the madness and...

“Unnngh!” I fall back in the dirt road and curl my legs to my chest. “Nnnngh... *Celestia, Please...*”

It is cold.

It is colder than cold.

I can't trot any further.

I'm on the edge of town. The sun is burning high in the sky. I feel as if my legs are made of glaciers.

“Nnnngh... Augh!”

I shriek.

Frozen needles are bursting out through every square inch of my flesh.

I can barely move.

I'm too scared to proceed any further in the direction I've been heading.

So I crawl.

Like a lame little foal, I crawl.

I inch my way back towards the heart of downtown.

Slowly, the frost in my veins melt away.

It is still bearable, but the agony permeates everything.

And the noise and the music and the tears...

“Somepony... Anypony...”

I whimper. I sob. I climb up and break into a desperate gallop.

“H-Help me!”

“What's wrong with her?”

“Did she have too much cider?”

“Heheh... party animals will do as party animals do—”

“Please!” I pounce on the first pony I see in downtown. In her eyes is the reflection of a hyperventilating unicorn with a disheveled mane. I want to jump in those pools and drag her out, but she keeps shrinking away from me. “You've got to help me! My name is [Lyra Heartstrings](#)! I have a family in Canterlot! I gotta get to them! I gotta get to somepony who remembers me!”

“Hey! Relax! You need help, we can find you a pony who can... who can...” The pony suddenly teeters, her eyes turning thin. There's a vapor of cold mist between us, and she's already murmuring, “Nnngh... Whew. Too much sun.” She smiles weakly at me. “I'm sorry. Can I help you?”

“What's wrong with everypony?!” I shove her back and angrily growl at the many equines circling me in the street. “Is something stuffed in your ears?! You're all sick! I swear!”

“Did somepony say that they're sick?”

I spin around with a hopeful breath. My heart immediately shrinks. “Nurse Red Heart...”

She squints at me from where she stands in front of the hospital. “I'm sorry, have we met? Did somepony send you to meet with me?”

I backtrot away from her, but nearly trip over something. I tumble into a tiny bundle of purple scales. “Ooof!” I snap out of it, and gasp for joy. “Spike!” I lift the purple whelp with two forelimbs and grin madly in his face. “Thank Celestia I found you! Spike, you gotta help me find Twilight! Something's horribly wrong and maybe she can help! She's good at magic spells and stuff! Where can

I find her?”

“Uhhh... Uhh...” He stammers, struggling to hold a sun-colored candy-on-a-stick in his grasp. “Twilight Sparkle's at the library with her new friends. But why would you want to speak with her?”

“Why else?! If anypony can understand what I'm going through, it's her! I haven't seen her in... in... well, *dozens of hours!*” I gulp and exclaim, “Hasn't she asked where I went off to? Where I've been all this time?”

Spike's green eyeslits bounce all around the scene. He bites his lip and nervously squeezes forth, “Uhm... ma'am? Until today, Twilight's only had one real friend, and she's off doing studies in Canterlot.”

I let forth a shuddering breath. “Moondancer,” I whimper, like a kitten. “But... But what about me? What about **Lyra**?”

“I've been with Twilight literally all my life,” Spike says with a nervous smile. He avoids my gaze. I can feel a twitch of fear surging through his scaled body. “She's... uhm... She's never mentioned no '**Lyra**.’”

I gaze blankly at him. He drops to the floor with a grunt. I'm looking around. Nurse Red Heart is off talking to another pony, as if this scene hasn't even happened. The mare I grabbed earlier is gone. No single pony is looking at me.

I feel my heart racing a mile-per-minute. The blood rushing to my head is almost drowning out the music. Almost.

“Well, maybe you're just—” I turn to look. Spike has waddled off, completely ignoring me. He's already several yards away, gawking and clapping at a magic act along with several colts and fillies. “...delirious.”

I start to hyperventilate. Every time I close my eyes, I see something beyond the darkness, a place where songs go to die. I feel as if I'm headed there too. The gravity tugs at me, so I defy it by breaking my hooves into a frenzied gallop.

I practically fling myself against the wooden door of the library.

I pound on it.

I scrape against it.

I can't stop panting. I feel like I must outrace something, but I don't know what.

Finally, the top half of the door opens. An obstinate looking mare with an orange coat and white freckles is glaring at me.

“Uhm... Can we help you? Reckon you do know this here's a library, right?”

“Where's Twilight?!” I lunge towards her. The mare jumps back with a start, her hat nearly falling off. “Where is she?! I have to speak with her! It's urgent!”

“Uhhhh... Missy, have you looked at yerself in the mirror lately? Yer ten bushels of 'messy' in a ten pound sack. I think somepony should lay off the cider. Heh—I can't believe I'm hearing myself say this.”

“Applejack?” A voice murmurs from the deep recesses of the treehouse. My heart instantly leaps. “Who is it?”

“Eh, some mindblown unicorn, Twilight. I think she's done a tad bit too much celebratin'.”

A blue pegasus floats by the foyer. “Hah! There's no such thing as too much celebrating!”

“Oh will you two cut it out?” Twilight Sparkle giggles as she trots into view. “This is going to be my new house. Let me take care of this.”

“Ya sure, sugarcube? I don't think she's right in the head.”

“Element of Magic, remember? Hehehe. I think I'll be more than okay.” She brushes the farm filly aside and smiles at me. “Now, what seems to be the problem—?”

“Twilight!” I grasp her hooves, almost yanking her over the bottom half of the door. Something is twinkling in her eyes, until I realize it's the reflection of my own joyful tears. “Thank Celestia! I've been looking all over town for you! You were right! Something crazy is going on! Thousandth year or not, you were onto something! I can't explain what's happened to me, but it's suddenly like I'm not here! But I am here! Everypony's ignoring me! Not just them—but Spike too! At first I thought it was a joke, but now I think it's something else! Please, you've got to help me! If you can't, then maybe the Princess can! I think it's... uh... it's some sort of degenerative brain disorder or some crud. I remember reading up on it once in a copy of Canterlot Health Monthly. If... If we get all the ponies checked, th-th-then maybe we can—I dunno—figure out what's wrong and get them all cured! They owe it to you after all the preparation you did for the Celebration after all! And I'd be more than willing to... to help... help...” The warmth left my voice, like a song interrupted. I gulped a painful lump down my throat and searched for answers in the blank canvas staring back at me. “Twilight...?”

“You... You sound like you've been through a lot,” she says. Her voice is placid, like pond water that not a single pebble has been able to disturb. I stand upon the brink, looking in, but I can no longer see myself. “But you have to start over from the top. Calm down and speak slowly. I'll do

anything I can, Miss..."

It's too cold for me to melt. The only thing that cracks is my voice. "L-Lyra..." Something has died, and I suddenly realize I can't bury it. "I'm... Lyra. *Your Lyra.* Your **friend**. Twilight, why don't...?" I stumble backwards from the library. I'm a limb cut off from the tree, forever a lost element. I try to speak, but all that comes out are breathy palpitations. I see her in the doorway, and yet she's squatting on a sidewalk of Canterlot, two blocks from my house, having tripped after trying to read a book in mid-trot. I shuffle up towards her, the first unicorn my age that I've seen since we moved from another district, and I pretend to ignore her tears as I pick up the book for her. We talk about things. She likes magic. I like music. Someday soon, we both meet another unicorn who likes playing "pretend," and thus begins an unwritten chronicle of adventures just outside our homes.

*Our homes...*

*Mom.*

*Dad.*

Something else has died, and I wish it was me.

"Please, let's just talk—Wait!" She reaches out for me, but I am gone.

"Listen to me! Look at me! Please! Somepony! Anypony!"

There's a mad unicorn running through the streets of some backwater town.

I hate her.

I don't want to be around her.

She follows me like a tune that will never leave my head.

I want to rip it out.

I want to rip her out.

I want to rip her asunder.

"Please! I beg you! Pay attention to me!"

I am surrounded by laughter.

I am surrounded by dancing.

Everywhere I turn, the chorus gets louder and louder.

I can't even shut it off with violence or flame.

“My name is Lyra! For the love of Celestia, please! Listen to me! I am real!”

There are eyes, and then there are no eyes.

The only thing constant is light, and soon that is swallowed by an all encompassing darkness.

“I am real!”

I woke up, accompanied by my own yells. A wall of trees resonated with my voice, echoing my agony beneath the stars of the night. I flailed—soaking wet—rolling over leaves and grass in

pitch-blackness, until the moon found me. Even then, I couldn't stop making noise. One million invisible forgotten creatures screaming in the night: and I was one with them.

When I paused for breath, I realized that I wasn't where I last was. This wasn't my cellar. The lanternlight was gone. The sound stones had disappeared. I was in the middle of the forest, surrounded by the bright, looming bodies of trees. And the "*Threnody of Night*"...

It had been replaced.

"Nnnngh—Celestia!" I gripped my skull and gnashed my teeth, plowing my muzzle through the damp earth. I was crawling over with moisture, but it wasn't my sweat. What was this mess? What hidden ocean had I emerged from? And this tune... this *new and infernal tune*. "Dear Celestia, no," I whimpered. "Not another elegy. Not an **eighth!**"

I stumbled up to my hooves, only to slip immediately into a huge puddle. My body screamed. I was freezing again. This was ten times worse than Everfree, and what's more: I was *naked*.

My limbs were the tendrils of a numb ghost; I floundered for a hoof-hold. By the time I entered a swift trot, I couldn't tell which way I was going. All I saw was an endless sea of trees, all shining in the pale moonlight like bright femurs planted in the ground: just as sterile and lifeless. It was with miraculous luck that I stumbled onto a dirt path, and from there I knew where to go. As I stumbled along, a trail of moisture dribbled off my coat and stained the ground behind me. What was all this? Where had I been?

I found the cabin and immediately flung myself through the door. It took three petrifying minutes to summon enough nerves in my limbs to start a fire. When I did, I didn't bother with subtlety. I flung ten whole stakes of lumber onto the blaze and planted myself before it, drowning myself in a sea of blankets.

There, upon the hearth, I quivered through the agonizing night. There was no way I could sleep, no way I could rest. The trembles shook my body so hard, I feared that my spine would rattle out through my skin. I prayed for the daylight to come. I was tired of this darkness. I was tired of this waiting and waiting, of fighting my way through nameless songs in a futile attempt to find a purpose to my solitary pestilence.

When the gray haze of morning wafted in through the window, I took a look at myself. There was still a sheen of moisture. It had no color, no odor, and—to my daring taste—no flavor. I could only guess that I had been soaked in none other than pure water. But why?

What had happened in the middle of the instrumental? Why had I been relocated to the middle of the woods? Was this the purpose of the *Threnody*? Was this what all of my work had promised me? Was this what unraveling the *symphony of Princess Luna* had in store?

It wasn't until noon that I dared to go outside. I trotted forlornly into the cellar beneath my shack, as if afraid of the evidence I was going to find. I discovered nothing: no footprints, no scrape marks, no signature at all to suggest what may have dragged me out into the darkest folds of the night. I found my lyre where I had left it, my sound stones—no longer enchanted. And, of all things, I found



my hoodie... lying perfectly dry and deflated on the floor... where my body had collapsed halfway through performing the latest instrumental.

At least, it *was* the latest instrumental. Now my head was full of something else, something terribly, damnably new. It filled me with more fear than the “*Prelude to Shadows.*” It chilled me to the bone far more mercilessly than the “*Moon's Elegy.*” I already absorbed enough into my memory to compose the first ten cords if I wanted, but I couldn't allow myself to do that.

“But if you're all about trying to discover these mysterious tunes, what's stopping you from composing this new one?”

“Maybe because I'm sick of going on a wild goose chase, only to be awarded with fainting spells, freezing blood, and migraines!” I snarled, slapping the dusty books down onto the library table and fumbling to yank my notepad out of my saddlebag. “Maybe because after thirteen Goddess-forsaken months, I can't help but ask if it's worth it! It's not like I'm making any progress! It's not like I'm—Nnnngh!” With an angry shriek, I tossed the notepad against the wall and slammed my hooves into the nearby bookcase with loud punctuation. “It just feels so **pointless!** Why do I even bother trying?! Why do I even bother...” I stopped in mid-sentence, for I realized I was not the only one trembling. I glanced to my side.

Spike stared back at me, nervously toying with the end of his tail. Upon receiving my glare, the library assistant gazed away, as if guilty for not relating to this infernal unicorn's frustration.

My heart sank. I remembered the day Twilight Sparkle first showed him to me, a young hatchling fresh out of the egg, a gift to the Princess' new apprentice as much as he was a gift to the very notion of life. I again saw a tiny little whelp who once dangled—confused and frightened—from my forelimbs in the middle of the Summer Sun Celebration. Existence is too precious a thing to have attacked something so sovereign not once, but on two separate occasions. I immediately deflated, calming myself with a deep breath and smiling as genuinely as I could the youngster's way.

“I'm sorry. You... You don't deserve to hear me go on like that. You're only trying to help me. It's just that I'm so frustrated and my head hurts and... and...”

I shuddered. My eyes closed on their own. Once again, the darkness was so familiar, the bitter black birthplace of black songs. They had shaped me for the better, now that I think about it. They had chipped away the sour edges of the unicorn I used to be. If I had the ability to reverse time, I don't know if I would want to anymore. I'm not nearly as proud of the filly I once was. I'm constantly endeavoring to discover the mare I someday wish to be, so that what emerges from this amnesiac prison is something worth being proud of, something worth being remembered. But on the fringes of

that darkness, I see the same unicorn shivering—by herself—before the ashes of a dying flame. And I wonder, in over a year of trial and error, have the things I've gained outweighed the things I've lost, or would I forever lose? Just like the words slipping, unguarded, from my trembling lips...

“I'm just so alone,” I murmured. I couldn't help it. I didn't want to help it. “I'm just so alone, and it's so hard... it gets so very hard, trying to do this research. Even with all the help in the world, I'm on my own. This is my symphony alone to discover, and I have no pony else to turn to. Though it's as if opportunity is knocking everywhere I look. I... I'm not sure if you know what it's like to be so cold and yet surrounded by so much warmth. It's... It's *trying* sometimes, and I apologize. I apologize for snapping. You're young and you're loved and you're blessed to have a home. You don't need to hear any of this.”

I sighed, bowing towards the books, the holy relics of forbidden languages that I was forced once again to peruse.

Then Spike's words melted through the veil, startling me. “Actually... uhm, ma'am, f-forgive me for saying so, but I kinda-sorta do understand.”

I glanced curiously towards him. I was silent.

He looked like he wanted to be as well, but could afford it even less than I. “I know that I'm loved. I know that I have a home. But that doesn't change what I am.” He smiled bashfully. It was a forced thing, and he wrung his fingers over the edge of his tail, as if struggling to produce the words. “I'm a dragon, a purple magic whelp. Even Celestia herself has told me that I'm the only known one of my kind. I'm... I-I'm really thankful that Twilight Sparkle and so many other ponies look after me. And I know that they care for me a lot. But... But I can never make them understand what it means to be what I am. I'm not sure if I can ever learn everything that there is for me to know about myself—or about dragonkind, for that matter. But, that's not gonna stop me from trying to find out. Maybe not now, but perhaps when I'm older. I'm gonna give it all that I've got. And though I know that Twilight would gladly try to help me, I really don't think she can, y'know?” He sniffled slightly, but his ensuing grin was braver than anything I could ever muster. “Sometimes, though, I think it's okay to be alone. If we needed other ponies to discover ourselves, then—well—we just wouldn't be ourselves, now would we?”

I smiled painfully his way. I stretched my forelimb out and rested it on his purple shoulder. “Spike, I have no doubt that you will find yourself. And if what you discover is anything nearly as genuine and sweet as what's standing before me right now—well—I wouldn't be surprised.”

Something was bridged between us. I was thankful for it, because whatever tears had almost begun welling up in his eyes very swiftly dried. “Twilight always tells me that 'I should be true to myself.' I used to think it was a bunch of sappy hoopla, but I think it was her way of telling me that there comes a time when we can only help ourselves. It may be kind of scary to face challenges in life alone, but... well... things would be boring otherwise, don'tcha think?”

He giggled at his own attempt at a moral. I was confused at first, until a part of me—the portion that was thirteen months older than the other half—very easily understood this child's statement.

“Yes,” I murmured delicately, smoothing back his spines and giving him an affectionate smile. “Yes, it would be very boring indeed.”

“So... Uhm...” He cleared his throat and attempted to reattach the conversation to the dusty tomes resting in front of this moody unicorn. “Ancient Moonwhinny. Heh. Think you need any help with the translation? I've got an antique lexicon somewhere on the other side of the library.”

I knew what would happen as soon as he walked away. “No. I mean... if you'd like, just hang out here for a little bit longer,” I said quietly. I took a deep breath. I fidgeted with my hoodie's sleeves while my eyes searched a distant, cold place, dense and sacred. “Some of us are alone by choice. Others...”

There was a knock on the treehouse door.

“Come. Come and enter, stranger or friend. For I have brews for all ills contained within.”

With a deep, wooden creak, I entered the zebra's household. I immediately lowered both hoods from over my horn and spoke bravely into the freezing air. “Are you Miss Zecora?”

“Yes, yes,” she murmured while perusing several scrolls mailed in from her homeland. “In the households of Ponyville, my name goes about. My medicinal remedies you've heard of, no doubt.”

“Well, I wouldn't know a thing or two about that, but some pony sent me to give you something.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. These things were found lying in the middle of downtown, and nopony around these parts has ever been known to own them. We figured they belonged to—well—the only resident mare who wears her mane in a mohawk, if you catch my drift.”

“I'm afraid you have to be more clear,” Zecora rolled her scrolls up and gave me a suspicious glance from across the wooden atrium. “Just what curious things do you bring here?”

“Eh...” I nonchalantly unwrapped a canvas bundle and held a pair of drums up for her inspection. “Do these mean anything to you?” I bore a poker face. I waited.

For a moment, I could have sworn the stripes in Zecora's coat had paled over. Her mouth fell

agape, and she shuffled slowly towards the items in my possession. A murmur escaped her, undoubtedly a flimsy thread of her native tongue. Finally she swallowed and exclaimed, “Sundried snares, vestiges of a Zebraharan soul. By the shadows, I've not seen the likes of these since I was a little foal.”

I squinted knowingly at her. “So I was right. They do have 'zebra' written all over them?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” she stammered, holding a hoof up to her chest. “Of their value to my kind, I do not jest.” Something melted across her face, a sweet smile forged by a dozen memories all flashing across her blue eyes as she stared at the drums and past them all at once. “My siblings would play the drums for me when I was but a child. Just thinking about it now makes my spirit feel young and wild.”

“Yeah. Nostalgia will do that.”

“But their presence here truly baffles me,” she stated with a confused expression. “To think that a pony could stumble upon them so casually?”

I glanced towards the far ends of her workstation. A wooden engraving lingered before my eyes, like a warm sunset too far away for either of us to taste in that cold domain. In truth, I had made the drums—just like I had built all of the tools, both conventional and unorthodox, which were presently hanging along the walls of my cabin. Sometimes, half of being alone means struggling to find the purpose in being alone. Standing there, nearly freezing to death in the presence of such a secluded zebra, I had discovered something far more sacred than a forgotten song.

“Well, stranger things have happened,” I flippantly mused. “Whatever the case, no pony in town wants them. Seems only fitting for them to be yours.”

Zecora bit her lip in a sudden pensiveness.

“What's wrong?” I pretended to ask. “Oh, right. The ponies in town say that you're a shaman. Lemme guess, your order forbids you to play music or something?”

She fidgeted slightly, though she couldn't tear her blue eyes from the wondrous instruments of her use. “I must solemnly admit my dismay, for I have been committed to work and not to play. Why else would I be working in a faraway land if not to seek the mysteries of the world so that I may understand?”

“Miss Zecora, I shudder to think that a seeker of knowledge forgets to also be a seeker of the self.”

She said nothing to that. She sadly hung her head.

However, I was smiling. “Well, if you're not allowed to play something so dear to you...” I shuffled over to a wooden stool and plopped myself down. Miraculously, the shivers had stopped, so that I embraced that precious moment with a pair of hooves hovering deliciously over the twin snares. “Is there any harm in letting someone else give it a shot, so that you can at least enjoy listening to it

again?”

She gawked at me as if I was on fire. “You mean to tell me that it's true? That the art of Zebraharan percussion is housed within you?”

“Hmmm... It must be if it can make you force your own rhyme that blatantly to believe it.” I winked at her and motioned towards another stool. “Have a seat. No good song is ever meant to be listened to alone. Even a shaman can afford company once in a while, right?”

She smiled, and the moisture in her eyes was like that of an enchanted young filly's. Zecora squatted across from me, her face eager and bright, just as I began my rendition of a ritualistic chant that I had researched long ago—accompanied by a drumbeat that I had mastered with enough time, patience, and solitude. The two of us converged, lonely souls in the middle of an alien cold, to indulge in the beauty of something that was lost to both of us. And though we may not have made any progress, we reminded ourselves—ever so briefly—of just what progress is meant to serve.

Someday, I will cure this curse of mine. Maybe it will take picking up the pieces of the “*Threnody of Night*.” Maybe it will take piecing together the bits of this new song in my head. Maybe it will involve tackling the elegy after that, or ten more elegies, or a thousand. Suddenly, it no longer matters how long the road ahead of me is. I have friends in waiting on either side of me, and though they don't know my name, I see and hear my spirit reflected off them—off their warmth and sincerity. The thought of their eyes looking at me, and one day not losing sight of the thing that holds my soul: that is a goal I shall pursue with joy, for what other impetus is there to pierce the freezing depths of this universe?

In this life, I am guaranteed to have at least one friend.

So long as I am true to myself, then I can be true to everyone.

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## Background Pony

### IV - “Symphony of Solitude”

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by shortskirtsandexplosions

Special thanks to: [Seattle\\_Lite](#), [TheBrianJ](#), [Laichonious](#), and [Gamestop](#)

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