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The Longest Journey

Chapter 4 - The Unwise Elder

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The door closed behind Warden, sealing both the seducer and the scent of his recklessness away. The slick feel of perspiration tainted the cleansing he had received nearly half an hour prior. He reached for a towel lying on a counter, sopping up the pungent moisture from his face. No matter how hard he rubbed and wiped, the intangible reek of idiocy and second-thoughts remained. He dropped the towel back on the counter, unsatisfied with the filthiness of his consciousness despite the cleanliness of his body.

Heavens above you're overreacting, Warden. You needed this!

Warden noticed the guard observing him, an exasperated look painted on his face.

"Don't give me that look, I don't need you judging me. I did nothing wrong!" Warden snarled at the lunar guard.

"Ah, yes sire. I will have a chambermaid pick up that towel at once." The guard rolled his eyes as he trotted over to the bath hall door.

The knight walked over to the wooden double doors, his steps wavering and unsteady.

What does it matter? I got what I want, a little fun!

Warden stood immobile in front of the doors. The past hour flashed through his head, accompanied by a knot twisting in his stomach and a lump in his throat. He had let out all the tension that had built up over the course of his life, but in a way that only compounded new stresses.

What does it matter?

Warden pushed through the double doors, walking into the corridor beyond. The clapping of his plated hooves echoed throughout the silent hall, with only the guard ponies and himself to hear it. The knight's chest was a whirlpool of fire and ice; the burning need to do *something* wholesome battled with the cold, bleak desire to simply sit on the floor and think. Warden sighed as he rounded the corner, obscuring the wooden double doors from sight.

All was silent, save for his hoofsteps. His shadows danced mockingly in the flickering light of the lamps that illuminated the corridor, laughing at him with twisted smiles. The thumping of his heart seemed to bounce off the walls, filling his world with the quick and rhythmic pulse of his being. The knight's march slowed into a crawl as he approached the next corner in the passage. Around that corner was the door to the grand hall, and in that hall was the one pony who trusted him most.

What's wrong with me... why did I do that? And with her secretary of all ponies!

The knight snorted.

I just needed a little fun, that's all. I'm nopony's lover, who am I hurting?

Warden realized that he had stopped in the middle of the hall, shaking where he stood.

"By the moon and stars, snap out of it!" He shook his head with a snarl. With a deep breath, Warden continued onward with his journey, only to bump into his destination as she rounded the corner.

"Oh! I apologize Warden! I was just coming to see if you were alright," Luna said as she collected herself.

"Ah yes, it's quite alright, Princess. I'm sorry for taking so long, it's been a long time since I've taken a, uh, a good bath," he replied, his heart racing.

"It's good to know that you're settling back in nicely. I do hope you will be staying here with my sister and I, yes?" she asked. He struggled not to wilt under her benevolent eyes.

"Yes, yes I had planned on staying. I've been travelling far too long just to just stop for a visit."

"Yes, I would like to speak to you about that. My sister has allowed me to turn in early from that... gala," she said with an almost disgusted edge to her tone. "Let's have

some tea.”

Princess Luna’s private room was no less lavish than her guest rooms, however the chaotic piles of books, maps, and various charts lended the space a more personal feel than the others. An astrolabe rested on a desk, alongside several pieces of parchment and a set of quills, while a stack of reference books sat on the floor not far from there. Her bed was an unmade mess of books and twisted sheets, which was only added to as she flicked her royal garments off onto it with a contented sigh.

She beckoned him out onto the balcony, cool night air lazily flowing into the room. A small table with a pair of cushions was set up under the night sky, giving the cosmic theatre’s audience a place to sit and enjoy their tea. A chambermaid brought the princess and her cohort a platter with cups and a kettle, after which she bowed and exited the balcony.

“You’ve come back after one thousand years, Warden,” Luna began as she poured them both a cup of tea. “I don’t think you understand how wonderful this is! My old guard, my oldest of friends!”

“Ah, yes! Yes, it is very relieving to finally be home, Princess.”

“Please, call me Luna, you know better than to use all that formality with me in private.” She gave him a sly smile which faded as she sank deeper into thought.

Warden swallowed at that, nausea lightly stepping around in his stomach.

“So, how have you been since you’ve, ah... returned?” he asked, aware of how sensitive the subject of her exile may be.

“It was difficult at first, I will admit. Much has changed in one thousand years, so understandably it took some time for me to reacclimate to this new world.” She cleared her throat with a sip of tea. “There is the work and ruling aspect of it, of course, but it is just so wonderful to be amongst my subjects again! And so many of them love my night as well! It is good to be back, and it is even more splendid to have my most loyal of subjects here with me again.”

“I’m glad to hear that things are returning to normal,” Warden said, forcing a smile.

“As am I, It is most joyous to have my cohort with me once more!” Luna smiled from ear to ear, while a chill ran up his spine.

“Your nights have been beautiful recently. All the years with you away have left the sky so dull,” Warden said, filling the noiseless air. A blush crept up on Luna’s face, but the moonlight wasn’t bright enough for Warden to see it.

“It is good to see that some do appreciate my night. I was blind to that so long ago...” she trailed off.

“And you see it now, that’s all that matters. Past mistakes are what teach us,” the stallion remarked.

“Indeed.” Silence reigned once more as the princess and the knight basked the in glow of a trillion far off suns. The sounds of the gala could be heard even up on the balcony, laughter and classical music reaching up to make the night all but completely quiet.

“Warden Ironwall,” Luna said softly, her gaze still fixated on the skies.

“Hmm?”

“Ironwall. Why is that your name when you were born a farmer?” She turned to him, an inquiring look in her eyes.

A small smile grew on his lips. “Well, my father was one of three brothers. His father and his two brothers were all in service as mobile guards, travelling between the cities and observing the local security. They aided when needed, but otherwise they simply watched and took notes. My uncles were killed in a riot, causing my grandfather to retire and for my father to abandon his job for something a bit calmer.”

“Really now? I had not heard the name Ironwall until I met you, and I tried to know all the ponies who served under my sister and I!”

“Heh, you can’t know all your servants by name, Luna.”

“I suppose not,” she admitted with a short giggle. “Your uncles and grandfather were wandering soldiers, more or less. I assume you shared a similar fate whilst I was gone?”

“That I did, I think I’ve seen every sight the world has to offer at least twice,” he said.

“I can tell, I’ve never seen such a young stallion like yourself look so beaten up and tired,” she grinned playfully at him.

“I’m at least a millenium old, not exactly young,” he laughed. “But I’m exhausted,

it's so good to finally be able to sit and relax for once. I sure feel like an old stallion, even if I don't look like one."

Luna's beaming face shifted to one of intrigue. "Indeed, that has left me wondering. You are an earth pony, Warden, how in Equestria are you still among the living?"

"I don't have an answer for you, but if I were to guess, then magic. Maybe some wizard enchanted me when I wasn't looking?" he replied with a wry grin.

"And what makes you say that?" Luna raised her brow with a slight grin.

"I can't think of anything else it could be."

"Hmm, it looks like I will have to take some time and examine you. Ponies don't simply obtain supernatural longevity for no reason." She furrowed her brow at him, inspecting him like an engineer would a recently finished piece of machinery. He watched her eyes rove over him carefully, trying desperately not to let his resolve crumble under the scrutiny.

"As you wish, Luna. As you can imagine, I'm rather interested as to why I'm still alive, as well." A silence passed between them, a silence that she spent lost in thought, while he fidgeted in his seat.

"Well, you can take all the time you need to settle in. Will you be joining me for the night court once more? We're not holding it tonight, obviously."

"Yes, I would gladly." Warden took a sip of his tea. His mind wandered, the memory of Sun Drop cropping up once more in the knight's thoughts. Nausea sneaked into his gut, forcing him to put down the cup with a wry look.

"You look rather ill, is everything alright, Warden?," the princess asked, her brow raised in concern.

"Ah, yes, I'm fine. My stomach is a little unsettled after today's events, that's all. It's been a long while since I've had such strenuous exercise!" He forced out a laugh from his quickly drying mouth.

"Well alright, if you need anything you know I will help you, and of course the servants can fetch you anything you want. I'll be sure to let Sun Drop know that she is to take special care of you. I trust that she can make you feel very much at home here." Luna said, trying to sound reassuring.

"Yes, thank you, Princess. It's late and I feel I should sleep," the knight spoke as

he rose from his cushion.

“As you wish, Warden Ironwall. Tomorrow night I intend on listening to the stories I’m sure you have to tell,” Luna stated as she stood with him, a warm smile on her lips. “Speak to my attendant, she will show you your room. You’ll find your packs there and everything prepared for you.”

The stallion’s eye twitched at hearing that name. “Thank you, Luna. I appreciate your hospitality.”

“Oh it’s nothing, you are my oldest friend after all!” she laughed, embracing the old knight.

He followed his princess to the nexus doors, bidding her a good night as he let himself out.

From her desk piled high with papers and log books, Sun Drop looked up at the scarred warrior. A hungry grin dominated her expression, but she only got a tired look in response.

“What’s wrong big boy? Did I tire you out?” she inquired, her voice low and smooth.

“Don’t toy with me. Which room is mine?”

Her smile shifted to a disappointed frown. “The same room you... bathed in. Your things are in there.”

“Thank you,” he said curtly, moving towards the door.

“Goodnight, soldier.” Her grin returned, making Warden emit a throaty sigh.

Closing his door and obscuring Sun Drop from sight, he lumbered lazily over to his bed, the memory of what he had done in it once more asserting itself. The exhausted wanderer collapsed onto the soft, round mattress, letting it absorb his aching body.

I’m a fool.

Warden rolled onto his back, gazing up at the starry ceiling with its constellations glaring down on him.

Papa, you wouldn't be proud of me.

His eyes surrendered to the fatigue that gripped him, letting sleep come swiftly.

A gentle breeze blew over Celestia and Warden as they watched the sun ascend over the distant mountains, its primordial flame illuminating the world and all its people. The knight handled his cup less than gracefully with his mouth, drinking in the hot tea and letting it warm his throat and gut. He set the it down, hoping the liquid would quell discomfort in his stomach and mind. Silence ruled the two as they reacclimated to one another's presence.

Warden glanced at Celestia, before letting his gaze rest once more on the horizon. "It is good to be home."

"It's good to have you back." She smiled at him warmly. "I can imagine you've had an exciting life."

"That's one way to put it, it had its ups and downs for sure. But you know what? It's good to finally have an amazing bed to sleep on," he said, smirking at the idea. "It sure beats sleeping on the ground or a pile of boughs any day."

Celestia let out a jovial laugh at the remark. "I'm sure you have many stories to tell, I would like to hear those at some point, if you don't mind. You've been out and about in the world, it would be interesting to know what you've occupied yourself with all these years."

The aged stallion sighed with pleasure, momentarily lost in the memories. "You sure missed out on a lot, Celestia. Why I didn't spend all that time sitting around and relaxing still eludes me, though."

"You wouldn't have been entertained by that for very long, Warden. You always kept yourself working when you were here!" She laughed at the fond memory.

"Perhaps, but back then I didn't really understand the idea of delegation," he chuckled. "Now I realize ponies can do things for me! Go figure!"

"A long life has blessed you with wisdom. You never struck me as the sagely kind before you left." The alicorn laughed lightly at her own joke, taking another sip of her tea.

"I suppose so, it's been a long life indeed." He emptied his cup and set it down on

its little plate.

“Indeed.” They both nodded in understanding, still maintaining their gaze on the horizon, the sun having almost cleared it now.

“It’s good to see her again,” Warden said, breaking the silence.

“My sister was practically vibrating with joy when she came to me after lowering the moon earlier this morning, few things make her that excited. I can safely guess that she is glad to see you,” Celestia smiled, finishing off her cup and placing it gently back on the plate.

Warden’s stomach twisted into a knot, but he still grinned back at her. “I’m her oldest friend, I hoped she’d have been at least be mildly interested in my return.”

“Her old friend, we all thought you were dead! I can’t imagine why you’d think she’d be anything less than thrilled to see you,” the princess said, turning her gaze to him.

“I... have made mistakes. Recent ones, in fact. I don’t know how she would feel if she were to discover them.” The knight barely whispered as he hung his head.

“We all make mistakes, they are a portion of the components that make us our own selves. She and I have lived far too long to let mortal misjudgements and accidents grate us. Well, her not as much as I, anyway.”

“Perhaps. I am not one to talk of these things, usually.”

She eyed him, a knowing look on her face, “Then why did you bring it up?”

The warmth of the early morning sun seemed to grow in strength, causing a bead of sweat to roll down the back of Warden’s neck. Celestia watched him with the face a sympathetic mother would give to a child who had been bullied in the schoolyard.

“I’ve lived too long with some of these burdens, and I only make more for myself. To be honest, home is not what I thought it would be.” Warden whispered at the end.

“You know my sister and I will do everything within our power to make you feel welcomed. Just because you were one of hundreds of guards back then, that doesn’t mean I didn’t watch you grow. It is not wise to keep your bad feelings inside. You need to let them out, you need to talk.” Celestia reached across the little table and gently placed her hoof on his drooping shoulder. Warden looked up at the goddess offering him her ear, receiving a soothing smile as a reward. He swallowed, looking back down

at his teacup.

“You’re right. I... I think I’d like to tell you what’s bothering me,” he quietly admitted.

“I will listen,” Celestia cooed, warming her composure for the flustered knight.

“Last night I...” he trailed off.

“You what, Warden? You don’t have to be afraid, you can tell me.” She softly encouraged him.

He inhaled before continuing. “I had... relations with Luna’s night attendant.”

The princess blinked in surprise. “Well, that was the last thing I expected to hear from you.”

“Oh I’ve done other awful things, war and violence and such.” He shifted his dry tongue in his mouth. “But this is eroding my sanity, and I just don’t know why.”

“I think you know why. My little ponies will do what they will, it is in their nature to have a little fun.” Celestia smirked at him before putting on a more serious air. “You have committed no crime against the law, but you seemed to have wronged yourself in your own eyes.”

“Not myself,” Warden uttered, heat rising in his face.

“Then who?” The solar sister looked him in the eye, only to see a tired, defeated look staring back.

He said nothing.

“Warden--” she started, but seeing the once proud knight hang his head dejectedly made her pause.

“Say no more, this subject does not sit well with me. I came home, searching for completion, for an answer as to why I am here. I only have more questions and these emotions I don’t fully understand. Thank you for listening.” Warden bit his lip, unable to look her in the eye in his moment of weakness.

Celestia straightened in her seat. “You are always welcome, I will be your ear if you need it.”

“As will I, should you ever. A thousand years has taught me to be a good listener

when I have to.”

“Then why did you cut me off just then?” She said with a silly grin.

Warden gave her a deadpan look before they both sputtered into laughter.

“I have duties to attend to,” she said, letting her laughter peter out. “It was good to speak with you, Warden. Why don’t you take a walk around the barracks and training yards? I can imagine you’re eager to see how the guard has maintained itself since your departure.”

“Not a bad idea, hopefully everything will be to my liking,” he nodded, rising from his seat.

“Perhaps they will be,” Celestia smiled, looking to him with warmth in her face, “Think about what troubles you, the answer is in there, you will understand in time.”

“I know you’re right. Enjoy your day, my princess.”

He bowed to her, and strolled off towards the guardhouse.

The soldier’s courtyard was a wide expanse of paved stone and training paraphernalia. A thick and towering structure loomed over the grounds, casting its shadow over where guards would practice the use of their weapons and their bodies. Pony-shaped wooden dummies lined one end of the area, some being beaten on mercilessly by training soldiers, while a rack of weapons ranging from spears to blades one would attach to their hoof plates stood off near the barracks.

One group of stallions was sitting on some crates, polishing their armor and bantering heartily under the shade their home provided. As Warden approached, one looked up and gestured to him. The others noticed his armor, but were unsure of how to react to the strangely dressed individual stepping calmly towards them. They were silent as Warden stopped in front of them, eyeing them over quickly.

“I am the night’s cohort, Warden Ironwall. I was just taking a walk through the barracks here. Your commanding officer wouldn’t happen to be around, would he?”

The guard who had spotted him first narrowed his eyes at the newcomer, “Night’s Cohort, huh? What’s that exactly?”

“I am the personal protector, servant, and counselor of Princess Luna.”

“Is that so?” a voice came from behind him.

It was none other than the commander, looking at him with a poignant glare and flared nostrils.

“I was looking for you, Red Tide was it?”

“What do you want, *criminal?*” the crimson stallion clad in silver armor sneered.

“I came to see if I could inspect the guard and its equipment,” Warden stated, his face remaining neutral.

“Inspect my guards? I’ve seen you fight, but what do you know about training stallions?” Red Tide blurted, spraying a mist of spittle.

“I’ve spent the last thousand years fighting wars and training soldiers all across the land. I watched war evolve and fall into obscurity,” he took a step forward, bringing his face close to the commander’s. “I have a talent for war. That is how I became praetor all those years ago, long before your father’s father’s *father* was even conceived.”

Red Tide stared, then burst into laughter. “Oh this is rich, great! Just who the buck do you think you are, coming into *my* citadel, inspecting *my* guards and acting like you’re some sort of god?”

“I’ve said it before, I am the cohort of the night, Warden. If you have so much trouble believing who and what I am, go ask one of the princesses. Now, may I please take a look at your soldiers?” he asked with exasperation.

“Yes, fine. Stallions! Inspection! *Now!*” Red Tide called into the barracks somewhat reluctantly.

In strikingly little time, guards marched out of the structure in single file, fully armored and ready for combat. They stood in line, alert and ready for whatever awaited them.

Warden paced up and down the line, numbering around fifty guards. His eye leapt from chinks in their armor, to those who stood with poor stance. He noted the build of each soldier, and how the armor had changed, to his surprise, very little since his days as praetor. The knight stopped in front of one particularly large stallion, about as large as he, and looked him in the eye.

All Warden did was stare, seconds ticked by, his one good eye boring into the soldier’s face like a mining drill. The guard remained steadfast, looking past him as if he

weren't there.

"Boo!"

Only the guard's face flinched, he otherwise remained immobile.

"Very good. What is your name, boy?" Warden inquired.

"Shining Seas, sir!"

"Shining Seas..." Warden trailed off, still looking in Shining's eyes. "What was the last thing you've killed, soldier?"

"I have not killed, sir," he answered his voice faltering slightly.

The ex-praetor pulled back, humming to himself.

"None of you have killed a living, thinking individual, have you? Raise a hoof if you have," he shouted out to the line.

None of them raised a hoof.

"Huh, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. There hasn't been a decent war in what, three hundred years?"

"Three hundred and seventy two years," Red Tide muttered in the background.

Warden turned to the commander, passing him by. "The guards look good, in shape, though I'm puzzled as to why there are so many off duty at once. That's your concern though, not mine. I'm off, Red Tide, enjoy your day."

"Yes... You too, Cohort," the commander practically spit his name.

Warden left the courtyard with a dark smirk on his face.

"A nap would be nice now, perhaps some lunch."

A gentle hum resonated softly throughout the interior of a hoary cave. Small motes of frost fell from icicles that hung off the ceiling, and the metal lined walls of the cavern warmed ever so slightly as the breath of life swam through its star-forged skin. The panels that adorned the two lower thirds of the room were without detail; they seemed to serve no purpose other than to make the floor and walls flat.

The square room lacked decor or furniture of any kind, save the ornately forged

throne that lay in its center. Cyan crystals studded the reflective surface, emitting an ethereal glow that dimly illuminated the room. The metallic surface of the throne shone like chrome, with a wavy texture not unlike the surface of a lake. Heat slithered throughout the throne's core, warming the exterior frost until it crumbled off in sheets.

Upon this throne sat a strange figure, shrouded in a cloak of furs. The emaciated creature had the hides of northern beasts draped across his bony shoulders, protecting thin arms and twig-like legs from the cold. His withered hands were clad in warm leather gloves, and oversized tattered boots covered shriveled, cold feet. Over the being's pale and wrinkled head, was a fur hood with two holes in the top. Out of these holes poked antlers not unlike those of a buck, lightly crusted with a rimey frost. This dusting tumbled off as the figure jerked to life, eyes opening and awareness flooding his mind. The creature gasped, sucking icy air into his neglected old lungs. He exhaled, a thick fog rolling out from his hair covered lips.

"It is supposed to be dead," the thin man said, his voice deep and rough like gravel churning in the flow of a stream, "*Hlidskjalf*, show me where darkness still resides."

Around the throne, the metal floors fell away, only to be replaced by a miniaturization of the world's topography. The chair seemed to zoom through the air, penetrating cloud cover and crossing vast distances over the world in a mere moment. The withered man's perspective fell over Canterlot, slowly flying in closer. Over the streets of the ivory city, the view spotted a scarred and beaten stallion, garbed in old armor.

"This is where darkness lay? In a tired old horse?" he barked.

Silence.

The old man stroked his long beard.

"I was just getting used to the quiet, too," he sighed, "well, let's see what becomes of him."

End of Chapter 4

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Chapter 5 (coming soonish)