

My Little Alicorn

*A "My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic" fanfiction
By InsertAuthorHere*

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Chapter Ten

The march back to Celestia's room went without incident. In fact, not a single word was spoken between the two. The filly was upset at Luna interrupting her latest attempt to make friends, and the less said about Twilight's current state of mind, the better.

By the time the two had stepped inside the room, Celestia could take no more. "Twilight, is something wrong?"

"Oh...it's nothing." Twilight turned towards the door, desperate to escape this awkward situation. "I...I have a lot of work to do. If you would excuse me..."

The princess jumped off of Twilight's back, landing on her bed with all the poise of a trained athlete. "Twilight, I have not lasted all these years without recognizing when a pony is troubled. Is there anything I can do?"

Twilight's lower lip was so deep into the top of her mouth that they two halves threatened to merge completely. "I can't tell you."

Celestia's eyes narrowed into thin slits. "Do not make this difficult, Twilight Sparkle. As your mentor *and* ruler, I demand that you tell me everything!"

"I can't!" Twilight gasped. Celestia reared up in surprise at her student's anger. "If I do, you'll kill one of my best friend's families!"

The unicorn squeaked and covered her mouths as she realized what she had just blurted out. Celestia, meanwhile, looked more horrified than anything else. "W-What?!"

"I-I-I said too much!" Twilight sobbed. "I should never have talked to you! I wish I hadn't even gotten into this crazy mess! I could have stayed stupid and happy and never knew one my best friends actually hates me and-"

“Are you talking about Pinkie Pie?”

Just about every nerve in Twilight’s body decided to shut down at that moment. The unicorn stared at her mentor, her jaw so slack it threatened to separate from the rest of the body entirely. “Wh-What? You mean you knew the whole time?”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t? I’ve known about the Pie Clan ever since it came into being.”

“Th-Then why didn’t you say anything?!” Twilight gasped. “Why string me along for so long?”

“I was NOT ‘stringing you along,’” Celestia reprimanded. “I honestly did not think you would learn that much about..him. Frosty Gaze’s thesis made no mention of Kuchen’s family, and I certainly wasn’t going to tell you something like that. If Spike hadn’t misread your intentions...”

“B-But that’s not it! Pinkie knew the Elements wouldn’t work, but we ignored her! And she apparently knows about long-gone opera houses! And just now, she told me how you were going to kill me and bury everything I’ve ever worked on in the basement of the Canterlot Library because apparently I’m insane but I’m not insane right I mean OH SWEET YOU I AM CRAZY!”

“TWILIGHT SPARKLE!”

Twilight immediately stopped panicking and fell to her floor, huddled like a small child. Celestia leaned over the side of the bed, her eyes still locked onto her student. “Now, tell me everything Pinkie said.”

Canterlot’s Central Park was one of the most luxurious parks in the whole of Equestria. After all, if you had to make a piece of greenery to surround the famed Yet Another Celestia Statue, one would make sure it was befitting the country’s capital. The spending evergreen trees, the fresh mowed grass, and the numerous cobblestone paths all added to the area’s grand charms.

All of this was lost on one particular pony. The pink mare from Ponyville had sequestered herself onto a park bench, content to just sit there until she starved or froze to death, whatever came first. Around her walked scores of ponies, hurrying about to enjoy what could be the last day before Luna banished the sun forever. Only a few of these everyday folk gave the pony a brief glance before continuing on their merry way. The large trees also gave Pinkie some cover from any pegasus that might come looking for her.

The loneliness suited Pinkie just fine. It gave her plenty of time to reflect. *My friends saw everything. Twilight’s probably running off to tell Celestia everything. They’ll haul my whole family to a dungeon somewhere, and me with them.*

"Now that's not how I taught you to talk, Pinkie."

The voice rang out from seemingly nowhere, but was more than enough to send Pinkie catapulting onto her rump. Her eyes darted about, but saw no pony besides the usual Canterlot ones. "Wh-Who said that?" she said in a hushed tone.

"Oh, Pinkie! How could you forget me?"

The pony's eyes burst wide so violently they threatened to swallow the pony's entire face. "Gr-Granny Pie?"

"The one and only!"

"B-But you passed away years ago!"

"Since when has this been a problem for this family? I'm in your head, silly filly!"

Pinkie shook her head violently, hoping to break loose whatever illusion was bringing her grandmother back from the dead. "Please, get outta there, granny! I already had one scary voice in my head today! I don't want *another!*"

"Well, that's too bad! I'm here now, and you're gonna listen!"

Pinkie flinched back in the bench, ears and eyes drooping from her own mental scolding. "Sorry, Granny Pie."

"Now, what is all this silliness I'm hearing about you not telling Celestia anything? The Princess of Equestria is in trouble, and all I hear my dear Pinkie Pie blabbering about is how the same pony that raises the sun every day is going to kill us all?"

"B-But Dad always said..."

"Your Pa was a right old sort, always worrying if you were getting too carefree or undisciplined. I mean, that's why you couldn't block his voice out, or any of the other Pies that listened to him. What he never got was, he was the one letting that little voice control his life. I mean, we listen to it, and we're perfectly sane, right?"

Pinkie's eyes narrowed into a dull, unbelieving expression of discontentment. "Granny, I just yelled at my best friend. How is *that* sane?"

"And how do you think she feels right now?"

"I...I...I don't know..." Pinkie's voice began to crack as she continued speaking to herself. "I'm

such a stupid pony.”

“You’re only a stupid pony if you don’t apologize.”

Pinkie sniffed and wiped away a small tear. “Y-You’re right, Granny.”

“PINKIE! TWILIGHT!”

Pinkie Pie zoomed from the bench, hiding under a tree. Above her was Rainbow Dash, slowly flying over Canterlot while shouting for the two missing ponies. *I can’t let them catch me first! I have to see if Twilight will forgive me before I do anything else. Now, what does the master of Hide-And-Seek do?*

Her eyes locked on a nearby manhole cover. She smiled as, for once, her ancestor’s memories actually served a good purpose. *Princess Celestia showed Kuchen all the emergency tunnels that ran through Canterlot! All I gotta do is follow one and BAM, I’m in the palace! What could be simpler?*

“And that’s everything she said,” Twilight whispered.

Celestia was understandably quiet. Kuchen was a sore subject, to be sure. And yet, the despair in Twilight’s eyes was too much to bear. *She needs to know what really happened.*

The filly pointed a hoof at one of the bookshelves. On it sat a series of large, leather-bound tomes. The princess’ hoof was centered on one in particular, a faded brown book with frayed edges and yellowed pages. “Twilight, can you bring me that one? I need to tell you something.”

The unicorn slowly nodded in agreement, her eyes still locked on her mentor. The book slowly floated off the shelf, flew over Twilight’s head, and opened up in front of Celestia. Carefully, the filly alicorn flipped through the pages, searching for the appropriate index. Twilight, however, was not as patient right now. “What is this?”

“Did you really think you were the first pony I mentored?” Celestia shook her head in mock disapproval. “No, I’ve had many students over the years. Who do you think first taught unicorns how to use magic? Or trained Star Swirl the Bearded?” She turned her head. “At least the second one. Stupid first one stole my lunch...”

“Huh?”

“Oh, never mind. In any case, I’ve always found time to help teach some of the most talented and gifted ponies in Equestria. They weren’t always skilled in magic, of course. Some became

diplomats, others scientists or generals, and even a few artists and writers from time to time, but I had a hoof in teaching all of them. I like to keep a personal record, something to remember them by even after history has forgotten them.” The princess looked out the window with a forlorn expression. “I just wish they would stop forgetting them so quickly, sometimes.”

Finally, she stopped at the appropriate page. On it was drawn a picture of a pony the unicorn had never seen before. Twilight leaned over to catch a glimpse, only to be stopped when Celestia’s hoof rested itself on her snout. “Now Twilight, before I tell you all this, I want you to promise me something. Nothing I say can leave this room. I have spent a long time making sure *everypony* forgot who Kuchen was, and I would hate to see all that hard work go to waste. Understand?” Twilight nodded in agreement. “Very well.”

Celestia’s leg moved out of the way, and Twilight caught her first glimpse of the deranged sorcerer himself. And...he looked absolutely normal. There was no disfigurements, no fanged teeth or enormous eyeballs or drooling expressions. Were she not already acquainted with his dark deeds, she would have mistaken him for just some other pony. Celestia caught her student’s surprise rather quickly. “I know what you’re thinking, and yes, this was drawn before he truly went insane. Although, looking back, it was rather hard to tell, even back then, that he was ever right in the head. But it was the good kind of crazy...”

Just over five hundred years ago, Canterlot’s cobblestone streets were bustling with activity. Hundreds of ponies trotted and cantered down the alleys and byways of the capital city, while merchants peddled their wares in the central marketplace. The weather was the very picture of perfection, as it always was in a city that was 95% populated by unicorns. Which was wonderful, since the Summer Sun Celebration was forthcoming, giving everypony, noble and beggar alike, a reason to celebrate.

All activity in the East Quarter ceased, however, when a retinue of Royal Guards came marching down the street. And in the middle of their procession, nearly hidden beneath a shade-providing umbrella, was Princess Celestia herself. The common folk quickly bowed in reverence, something that only slightly irked the princess by this point. It was not like there was an actual purpose to her journey this day, either. She was merely wishing to see how her subjects were doing, especially with the festival coming ever closer. Granted, she could do without the umbrella, but her guards insisted that the sun she controlled was going to burn her unless she was protected at all-

“HOLD, YOU PUNY MORTALS!”

Everypony froze in midstep at the echoing, high-pitched squeal from the rooftops. There, standing on top of the local bank, was a small pink unicorn colt. On his sides sat a pair of hoofcrafted wings, obviously made of cloth and twigs. And standing next to him was a very

humiliated blue pegasus colt, almost wishing he could just bury himself in a cloud and wait for this to be over.

A member of the guard's face fell in alarm. "S-Stormwind? What in Celestia's name are you doing up there?" He quickly turned to the princess. "N-No offense, your Highness."

"None taken," Celestia replied.

"He-Hello, father," said the pegasus. "Listen, Kuchen and I were..."

"WE ARE GOING TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE!" the pink colt bellowed. "TODAY, A UNICORN IS GOING TO PIERCE THROUGH THE HEAVENS THEMSELVES AND ASCEND TO TRUE GREATNESS!"

Stormwind rubbed his forehead with one hoof. "What did we say about the shouting?"

Kuchen turned to his partner, giving him a very annoyed glance. "I thought we went over this, Stormy. The bigger the presentation, the more ponies will watch. We want to go down in history, right?"

"As heroes, not corpses!"

"I have heard enough, boy!" Stormwind's father shouted. "Princess Celestia, with your permission, I would like to head right up there and give those two a lesson they won't forget."

The princess nodded. "Of course, Captain."

"FOOLISH PONIES! You shall bow before the might of Kuchen, the winged unicorn!"

Before Stormwind could catch him, Kuchen took a few steps back, leaned forward, and made a running gallop towards the side of the roof. The very moment his front hoof touched the last tile, he leaped forward, his hooves outstretched in an attempt to catch as much air as possible. His horn glowed with frightening intensity, his magic powering the frantically beating wings.

Unfortunately, all his little adventure served to prove was the unbreakable law of gravity. The wings tore apart mere moments after liftoff, sending the screaming colt falling to the ground. Stormwind's father turned about in midair to catch the foal, but fortunately for him, something large managed to stop his fall, before buckling forward in the mud.

It was right about then that Kuchen realized just what pony he landed on...

"Wait...he *crashed into you*?" Twilight asked incredulously.

"Landed on my back is more like it," said Celestia. "Thankfully, he wasn't hurt. It turns out my body is the perfect cushion for mischievous little boys and their suicidal games."

"B-But what does that...?"

"You're the one who wanted to know about him."

"I-I mean, how does 'falling on the princess' equal 'becoming her student?'"

Celestia shrugged. "I was getting to that."

It didn't take long to apprehend the two colts, or to discern where the pink one lived.

The Torte Family Bakery was a long-established fixture in this neck of Canterlot. Even before the princess had arrived, there was a line stretching clear out the door for today's sale: a custard pie for one silver bit. The minute somepony saw the royal procession, however, the small bakery became the bustling center of activity for half the city.

Princess Celestia brought up the front, her coat still stained a splotchy brown from her latest encounter with dirt. Kuchen lay across her back, held down by the princess' magic. Stormwind was equally held down on his father's backside, the princess' power being great enough to restrain two little ponies at once. Both wore faces that clearly expressed their impending doom, whether it be at the hooves of their princess or their parents.

The bakery's inside was a simple affair. The wooden counter was splintered and worn with age, not helped by the various hot pans and tins that regularly graced its top. Through a large window in the back, a pony could see the actual kitchen, where at least four other ponies were scurrying about preparing the various breads, pies, cakes, and other delicacies for the day's patrons. Out front, a teal Earth pony was busy helping the customers, striking up a friendly chat whenever possible, while a filly of about the same age as the two colts was busy cleaning a flour spill in one corner.

It didn't take long for everypony to notice Celestia. The pony behind the counter was especially aghast when he saw just whose colt was draped across her back. "Y-Your Majesty!"

"Are we speaking with Mr. Torte?" the princess said, her voice about as blunt as a wooden club.

"Y-Y-Yes?" The Earth pony fell to the floor like a sack of dried potatoes. "H-How can we help you on this most blessed day?"

The Captain stomped over to the cowering stallion. The moment the two locked eyes, their very demeanors became far harsher and more confrontational. It was obvious the two had butted heads on more than one occasion. "Your oaf of a son just assaulted Princess Celestia! And what's worse, he got my own darling boy involved with his criminal activities!"

The baker sprung back to his hooves, baring a set of rather unhygienic teeth. "Captain Ice, I would hardly consider your boy darling! In fact, my own son never got into trouble until he met that undisciplined runt of yours!"

"RUNT?! Stormwind's instructors have all praised him as the greatest young flier in Equestria! Your son, on the other hoof, is a common baker!"

"At least he will grow up to be something productive, rather than waltzing about like a pompous, overweight buffoon!"

"SILENCE!"

The entire building shuddered and rocked with Princess Celestia's voice. Everypony screamed and fell to the ground in mortal terror as a few pieces of the roof came tumbling down. Celestia placed a hoof on her mouth, feeling rather ashamed at causing undue property damage. She had forgotten just how far the Royal Canterlot Voice had fallen into disuse the last few years. Once she was sure she wouldn't have to be rescuing everypony today, she removed her hoof and turned her attention to the two. "Mr. Torte, earlier today, your son tried to jump from a roof." She motioned to the broken wings on Kuchen's back. "He seemed to have thought these would allow him to fly."

Torte angrily walked to his son, about as angry as a dragon finding a thief in his hoard. Kuchen tried to shrink back, but the princess' magical grip was impenetrable. "Kuchen...is this true?"

"Well...Well..." He glanced back at the princess. She, in turn, gave him a look that said if he didn't tell the truth, she was going to feed him to a manticore. "Yes. I...I thought it would work this time."

Princess Celestia raised an eyebrow at this. "What does he mean, 'This time?'"

"My layabout of a son thinks he's some kind of genius inventor. Two months ago, he tried to build a sub-something or other!"

Kuchen scoffed. "It would have worked if I kept the window closed."

"And before that, there was that spinning stick of his!"

"You mean my helicopter?"

Torte pointed a hoof right at Kuchen's eyes. "Listen here, young pony! You are a baker. Your father is a baker, and his father was a baker, and his father's mother was a baker." He pointed his raised hoof to his flank, which bore a picture of a sponge cake. "You see this cutie mark? One day, you will have one just like this on your own side. Ever since the invention of the cutie mark, every Torte has had a pastry on their side."

"W-Well, what if my special destiny does not involve bread and pudding?" Kuchen whined. "I want to be a scientist!"

"Um...do you really need us here?" asked Princess Celestia.

Torte made no move to acknowledge the princess by this point. "In the name of all that is good in Equestria, why are you unable to learn your place in this world?"

"JUST A MINUTE!"

The kitchen door came crashing open with a heavy buck. A bright pink unicorn waltzed out, her eyes burning with intense anger and rage at the Earth pony. "What's all this I hear about our boy and baking?"

"This is none of your business, Toffee!"

"That's my son you're talking about, you dumb oaf! That colt knew how to read before he could walk! He's far too smart to be stuck here running a bakery just because his father's brain didn't work right!"

"And just what do you have in mind for him? We can't afford to send him to school, and even if we could, he'd just drive everypony in there bonkers!"

Finally, Princess Celestia could take no more. She let out a loud cough, immediately drawing everypony's attention back to her. "My apologies, but we seem to have wandered into a domestic dispute. We merely wish to drop off your son."

She turned back to the still-terrified pony on her back. "By the way, we would be most interested in seeing some of your work. Some of the experiments sound...intriguing."

Kuchen's eyes lit up in wonderment. Princess Celestia, the most powerful pony in Equestria and an actual goddess, had actually complimented his work. Granted, he would have been much happier if she hadn't floated him off her back just then, right into the hooves of his waiting parents.

The Captain turned to his own, equally scared son. "And just wait until I get home tonight!" Stormwind cowered beneath his forehooves, enjoying the feeling of an untanned hide while it lasted.

Her business concluded, Princess Celestia and her entourage walked out of the bakery. The alicorn only stopped briefly at the doorway, looking back inquisitively at the still-scared colt. Perhaps something really could be made of him...

Twilight sulked. "And that was it? He didn't have to get dragged to some big exam at eight in the morning and traumatize himself and his parents for life? He just became your student after smashing into you?"

"Oh, of course not," Celestia said with a wave of her hoof. "I was just curious about what the lad had thought up. Most of his plans were based around machines, and being quite young, most of them were either impossible or impractical at the time. But then there was something else..."

"And you say a child drew this?"

Starsign, Guildmaster of the Canterlot Astronomy Guild and great-great-great granddaughter of Keysore, stared in astonishment at the crude piece of parchment before them. A black circle was drawn on the paper, obviously representing the moon. Outside of the circle, four black specks were placed in near-perfect position in relation to the stellar objects. Princess Celestia pointed a hoof at the four specks. "Do you see these stars here?"

"Y-Yes, those," Starsign mumbled. "So far, you have stopped every attempt to name them. And they do not subscribe to the same pattern as the rest of your night sky. We...We have been ignoring them for the last hundred years or so."

"A costly mistake," said Celestia. "If you would compare this chart to one of your own, we can assure you there is a significant difference."

Starsign quickly responded, levitating up one of the most recent charts with the four still there. Sure enough, the stars on Kuchen's drawing were closer than those on the official records. "It appears this child has made a mistake."

Celestia shook her head. "There is no mistake, I can assure you. The stars are drifting closer to the moon."

Starsign's jaw dropped. "Wh-What?"

"We just needed to confirm some things." Celestia rolled up the parchment and floated it into one of her attendant's saddlebags. "If you will excuse us, we need to finish some business."

Back in what was her sister's office, Luna paced back and forth, dictating a letter to her assistant. "And furthermore, Mayor Firebrand, I can assure you that the Equestrian Government is doing everything in our power to lower the cost of food. However, this season has been particularly rough, and until the incidents regarding Trottingham's grain supply and Fillydelphia's reconstruction have been resolved, our hooves are financially tied. We shall keep you informed of any developments in the situation. Signed, Luna, Princess of Equestria, Steward of the Moon, and Mistress of the Heavenly--"

"Um, your Highness?" Ruby interjected. "C-Can you maybe shorten your title a little? There's only so much room on the page."

Luna sighed. "Very well. Signed, Princess Luna of Equestria."

Ruby finished her writing with a few quick strokes before wrapping the parchment together. Luna floated the royal seal off the desk and stamped the letter closed, silently prompting Ruby to throw the thing into her bags for mailing later. "Well, that is another task complete. How far along are we, attendant?"

Ruby glanced over another, unfurled scroll. On it was a long, long list of duties Luna wanted to finish before the night began. "Well, so far we've complained about children's books to the Educational Department, reviewed enlistment numbers for the military, paid an invoice for grain from the Griffon Kingdoms, and just now we've responded to the Mayor of Manehattan's concerns about food prices."

Luna smiled and nodded, silently congratulating herself on yet another small victory. Feeling more than a little smug, she turned to Lofty. "And you, child. Are you finally impressed with the outstanding work that goes on here?"

Lofty shrugged. "I guess."

Luna's mouth turned into a heavy frown. "You guess? We just answered the desperate pleas of half of Equestria. How is that unimpressive?"

"But you didn't really do anything."

"Did not do anything?" Luna could feel frustration welling up inside. "I just composed a string of

official responses. Soon, the ponies that read them will enact the policy changes, which will make Equestria a nicer place to live.”

Lofty was quiet for a few seconds. “But you didn’t *do* anything. You just...stood there and talked.”

Ruby quickly trotted to her daughter’s side, giving her a gentle pat on the back with one of her hooves. “Princess Luna is, well, a princess. You see, Lofty, when you become a princess, there’s a whole lot of rules that say what you can and can’t do. And Equestria is a big place, so she can’t be everywhere at once. That’s why she asks other ponies to help her with her work.” She flashed a smile at a rather miffed Luna, the kind of smile that screamed *please-don’t-kill-me-because-of-what-my-daughter-said*.

“That...is a rather accurate statement,” Luna replied. “And so you see, Lofty, that being ruler of all of Equestria is...”

Their conversation was interrupted when something began shaking underneath the floor. Before anypony could react, the royal carpet was thrown aside by an opening trap door. A lone pink pony, Pinkie Pie, emerged from the darkness below, covered in dust and cobwebs but otherwise unharmed. “Phew! I gotta tell Princess Celestia to get those things cleaned. No wonder nopony’s used them in five hundred years!”

All three of the other ponies took a few steps back, eyeing the mass of pink fur with surprise and alarm. Pinkie quickly realized she was being watched, and smiled accordingly. “Oh hey, Princess Luna! I was wondering, could you tell me where Princess Celestia and Twilight are? I...I have some secrets I gotta tell them. *Secret* secrets!”

Luna took a moment to compose herself, wiping a few stray specks of dust off her face with one fetlock before addressing her guest. “Miss Pie, I was under the impression you had left for Ponyville earlier this morning. Why are you back here? And more importantly, why are you tunneling underneath Canterlot Castle?”

“I didn’t want anypony else to see me, DUH!” Pinkie said with an exaggerated gasp. “But we’ll sort out the small stuff later! Right now, I need to talk to Twilight and Princess Celestia! I may have told some *teensy-weensy* lies yesterday, and-”

Luna’s eyes narrowed in a flash. “Miss Dream, Lofty, leave the room.” Her attendant was stunned, but nonetheless grabbed her filly by the tail and dragged her out of the office without a moment’s hesitation. Once she was sure there was nopony listening through the door, Luna continued. “I assume this has something to do with your...immunity to whatever happened to the others last night?”

“Y-Yes,” Pinkie sighed. “It’s not like I wanted that to happen, but it’s just who I am. All the Pies

are immune to those spells. Well, except for the one that lets him talk through your brain, cause hey, we're all just a bunch of puppet ponies until he can return! But since that didn't work out, I guess we're immune to that, too!"

Any other pony would have been too bewildered or incensed to make heads or tails of what Pinkie Pie was rambling about. Luna, on the other hoof, could already see where the pieces were leading. "I take it then that you are a descendant of this 'Kuchen?'"

"Um...yes," Pinkie nervously answered. "That's why it's so important that I talk to them! Especially Twilight. I did something really bad to her this morning, and I have to..."

"You lied to me."

Pinkie's voice froze in its tracks. "What?"

"You said you dodged the spell when it was cast last night, but instead you were naturally immune. And furthermore, the same pony that created that spell is...in your head, you said?"

Pinkie shrank back. She had expected coldness from Celestia, but somehow Luna's gaze was a hundred times worse. "Well...yeah. I mean, every Pie knows at least a little about him. We even know a little bit about what kind of spells he used. That's the other reason I have to find them! I can help Twilight find a cure!"

Luna's eyes narrowed, as a terribly familiar echo intertwined itself with her voice. "So, you deliberately withheld evidence that could have helped my sister, lied to your princess, lied to your friends, and then broke back into the castle?"

Pinkie could feel her doom approaching, but was far too scared at this point to run. "Oh...yeah, I guess I did that. No hard feelings, right?"

A few weeks passed since the incident, and Kuchen's lot in life was no better.

He had sent a few of his designs to the palace. Most of them were scribbles, and even he knew more than a few were impossible, but Princess Celestia had asked to see them. He also didn't have Stormwind to play with anymore, ever since his father shipped him off to the Military Academy. Kuchen had thought about going there himself, but a scrawny peasant unicorn with no magic wasn't an ideal candidate for recruitment, so he found himself passed over time and again.

As the days passed, and the pain in his hind quarters ceased, Kuchen's life pretty much returned to how it always was. By day, he's help in the bakery, whether it be delivering to

customers or helping one of the staff's fillies, Milky, clean up the shop. By night, he'd read through the books he "borrowed" from the local magic schools to study things such as astronomy, astrology, telekinesis, craftsponyship, and even a few courses in how to behave in social gatherings. He had no idea how you levitated your teacup was so important.

Then one night, everything changed. Kuchen and his parents were busy closing up the shop, and were almost ready to head upstairs for the night, when they heard the loud knock on the door. Torte groaned and started back to the door, shouting, "We're closed! No special orders today!"

"We believe you will have time for us, Mr. Torte."

Torte and Toffee gasped in surprise at the voice. It was the same warm, smoothing voice that had graced the bakery only a few weeks prior. Even Kuchen was shocked to hear that pony again. Gripping the handle with his mouth, Torte pulled the door open, revealing Princess Celestia and a few of her guards. Thankfully, however, Stormwind's father was nowhere to be seen.

All three ponies went straight to the bowing position. "H-How can we help you, your Majesty?" asked Toffee.

Princess Celestia took a few steps into the bakery, her guards immediately fanning out around her in case somepony came at her with some sourdough. Celestia's eyes locked onto the cowering parents. "We wish to speak to you about your son."

Even in the midst of his growing panic, Torte managed to eyeball his son with a gaze capable of peeling paint. "Wh-What did he do this time?"

"It is not a question of what he has done, but what he can do, given the proper training and motivation." The mother and father pony simply looked at each other in stunned confusion. Celestia sighed before continuing. "What we mean to say is that your son appears to have a talent for scientific inquiry and study. However, without an actual education, we fear his natural abilities may go to waste."

Toffee's right eye twitched the princess' speech. "...We beg your pardon?"

Princess Celestia stifled an agonized groan before wandering over to the absolutely mortified colt. "Kuchen, we would like to enroll you in one of our academies in Canterlot. Work hard, and I am certain you will find your true calling within the scientific community."

The pink colt couldn't believe it. One minute he was afraid his head would be stuck on a pike

outside the city gates (whatever that means), and the next he was inside Canterlot Castle, standing next to the princess herself. The guards surrounding the two were a little intimidating, flashing their wings if Kuchen so much as glanced at Celestia, but other than that it was one of the most exciting times of his life.

The procession stopped at a large study, complete with a fireplace and everything. Books and scrolls were already piled up, ready for the eager student to look them over. The guards bowed to their monarch before closing the doors and returning to their normal duties. By the time Celestia had lit the fireplace, Kuchen was practically biting his hooves in anticipation. “Wh-What will be our first subject today?”

Princess Celestia, satisfied that the fire was officially roaring, made her way over to the great pile. “Let us begin with an assessment of your skills. We understand you have had no real school experience, so it is important that we know where the instructors and tutors are to begin with you.”

Kuchen couldn’t help but feel more than a little deflated by Celestia’s remark. “In other words, I am too far behind.”

“It is nothing to be ashamed of, Kuchen. Most ponies never even have the chance to attend a university, much less devote themselves to a course of study. We have been trying to make education easier for ponies across Equestria, but so far progress has been...slow.” It would do the colt no good to hear how the aristocracy kept subverting or killing her proposals, all because they were afraid the lower classes would rise up or some nonsense like that. You could only terrify so many ponies into submission at a time, after all. “That is why we have brought you here tonight. Your year at the academy begins in a few weeks, and we must bring you up to the correct level before you begin attending.”

Kuchen pawed nervously at the ground. “W-Well, when you say it like that, I guess it is all right.”

Celestia gave as friendly and cheerful a smile as she could. “You are going to go far, my little pony. Just remember to work hard and keep up in your studies, and there will be no limit to what you can accomplish.”

“...Wasn’t that the same pep talk you gave me during my first lesson?” asked Twilight.

“Well, yes. It’s an old one, but it still works.” Celestia grinned and rolled on her back, shifting into the warm memories of Twilight’s tutelage. “I can still remember you coming to our lessons, fretting about some upcoming exam or homework assignment like it was an army of Parasprites marching down on you. Those first few weeks with Kuchen were much of the same, only with less patience and more...well...”

Twilight eyed her quiet mentor suspiciously. "Princess?"

Celestia rolled back onto her belly, looking about as shy as an introverted bookworm at a frat party. "You have to understand, Twilight Sparkle. Things were much different back then. The language was much less formal, and the Royal Canterlot Voice was no longer the preferred way of speaking princess-to-subject, but there was still plenty of protocol to observe. Things like that have a tendency to separate oneself from the rest of the world. Perhaps that was why I threw myself into them after what happened to Luna."

Twilight moved a hoof under the book's cover. "Princess Celestia, it's all right if you don't want to continue. I'm sure if I read through enough books, I can..."

Celestia's hoof stopped at Twilight's lips. "No. I promised you I would tell you everything about what happened, and I will."

The filly cleared her throat before continuing. "After a few weeks, Kuchen was well enough to start attending actual classes. He was sent to one of the best boarding schools in Canterlot, and after a few false stars, soon found his true calling..."

Kuchen didn't walk into Celestia's study so much as he bounced. The princess, already seated on one of the palace's red cushions, stared at the sight in confusion. "My student, may I ask just what you are doing?"

Kuchen landed simultaneously on all four hooves, a proud grin on his face. He twisted his back side towards the princess, showing his last acquisition. "I finally have my cutie mark!"

Celestia jumped to her hooves and walked up to the colt. Sure enough, his once-blank flank was now adorned with a cutie mark: a four-pointed star floating over a book. "That is...a very strange mark. Tell us, when did it appear?"

"During Magic class! I was sitting there, learning about Clover the Clever and the creation of the Resonating Heat library of spells, when it suddenly appeared!"

Celestia raised a dubious eyebrow. "Really? Because we have never heard of anypony earning their cutie mark through...studying."

"B-But it is the truth!" Kuchen bellowed.

Celestia wanted to push the issue further. A mare of her impossible age had heard every fib and lie ever conceived by pony minds. Unfortunately, their studies and workload came first.

"Very well. No matter how you earned it, we are glad that you have finally found your special talent"

And perhaps, *she thought*, this will help my own plans.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "What plans?"

Celestia was quiet for a short while, her mind weighing the pros and cons of telling her student the stupid, stupid thing she tried to do five hundred years ago. Nonetheless, the truth eventually won out. "Do you remember the prophecy of Nightmare Moon's return? What did it say about the stars?"

"That on the longest day of the thousandth year, the stars would aid in her escape."

"Do you know how those stars got there in the first place?"

Twilight shook her head. "I just thought they were part of the night sky. You know, like the other constellations and stars."

"It's not quite that simple," Celestia said. "When I first...banished my sister, I never intended for it to be permanent. I knew enough about Nightmare Moon to realize that her own power was mostly the same as Luna's, only multiplied a hundred times over. My attempt to use the Elements failed to purify Luna, but it did weaken that monster enough that she couldn't escape. Still, I knew she would try over and over again to bring herself back to Equestria, and sooner or later she would succeed on her own. That was why I put those stars there."

Twilight's jaw almost crashed through the floor. "Y-You mean *you* released Nightmare Moon?"

"In a manner of speaking," Celestia continued. "I put the stars there, and Nightmare Moon took the bait. She used what remained of her power to draw them towards her, knowing that eventually they would be close enough for her to form them into a Focusing Circle. With that, she could easily channel all of her power, breaking free from the moon and returning to reap her revenge. What she didn't know, however, was the exactly halfway through the process, the stars would be at just the right position for somepony down here to help spring her out."

"Th-Then that was what this was about?" Twilight gasped. "That was why you made Kuchen your student? You were using him to try and free Princess Luna earlier than the prophecy had said?"

"Of course I was!" Celestia snapped. Twilight took a few steps back in alarm, and the princess quickly cooled herself down. "I knew that Nightmare Moon would not be at full strength when

she returned, and even with my help she would have exhausted herself trying to break through my barriers. That would be my chance to finally destroy whatever it was that had possessed Luna, and perhaps even bring my sister back.”

“And he agreed to all this?”

“Well...no,” Celestia said. Her eyes drifted to the left in sheepish embarrassment. “You see, I had tried to keep what happened to Luna quiet. I knew I would be able to save her some day, but if everypony immediately connected her to Nightmare Moon, it would make things more complicated. It...obviously didn’t work, especially after that spectacle when she first came back, but back then nopony knew there had ever been a Princess Luna. Nightmare Moon was a separate beast entirely, a monster that sprang up one night to gobble up foals. So, if everything worked out, I could have Luna back, we wouldn’t need to find ponies that could use the Elements, and everypony would be happy.”

Her face fell. “It was a stupid plan. I knew that the Elements of Harmony were the only way to truly have my sister back, not the jealous, twisted wreck she became before the dark powers possessed her. But you have to understand, it had nearly been five hundred years. On their own, that many years would be insubstantial, but I was so worried that I would never see Luna’s wonderful face again...”

Celestia’s door slammed open, revealing a perplexed Pinkie Pie trapped in a dark blue aura. Before Twilight could shout her friend’s name in surprise, the pony was thrust inside the room. Her captor, Princess Luna, marched in after her, closing the door on the utterly confused guards behind her. Celestia hopped to her hooves in a rage, while Twilight Sparkle was more surprised than anything else. “Good day, little sister. I believe this pony has some things to answer for.”

“What is the meaning of this, Luna?” Celestia yelled.

“Miss Pie has admitted to concealing important information about the Youth Restoration Spell! Furthermore, she broke into the palace through a secret passageway!”

“We already know that.” Celestia motioned to the still-stunned Twilight. “In fact, I was in the middle of telling Twilight all about Kuchen.”

Luna glared at her sister. “If you knew all this, *then why did you not tell me?*”

“Because it wasn’t important at the time.”

“Um, princesseseses?” Pinkie mumbled. “Don’t want to be rude, but can you please let me go? I’ve got a lot of explainin’ to do, and I *reeeeeeeeeeeeaaally* don’t wanna do it while floating. Unless it’s on a balloon, ‘cause balloons make everything *AWEsome!*”

Luna sighed and powered down her horn. The aura around Pinkie dissipated, sending the pony plopping to the floor. Twilight galloped up to her friend, the same one that had terrified her only a few hours prior. "Pinkie, are you all right?"

Pinkie looked up from the ground, her eyes locking with Twilight's. She could feel something warm welling up under her eyes, and it took all her self-control (what little of it she had to begin with) to keep from tackling the unicorn in the mother of all hugs. "H-Hello, Twilight. I-I just wanted to say, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Twilight smiled as best she could right now. "Don't worry about it, Pinkie. I really shouldn't have gone behind your back like that. And I can understand you wanting to protect your family."

Luna glanced back at her sister. "Is there something I should know about this?"

"We were in the middle of story time before you barged in," Celestia said. "Would you like to stay, Pinkie? I think it might clear up a few things about what really happened."

Pinkie climbed back to her hooves. She didn't even dare look at the princess. "Oh, I know all about that already. I know how you walked up to my mean old ancestor and snapped his neck like a piece of celery. Then you banished everypony else in his family so you wouldn't have to be reminded of just how lousy a-"

Luna's horn began to glow, sending a not-so-subtle threat towards Pinkie. The Earth pony squirmed under her maleficent gaze. "I mean...sure, why not?"

"I...suppose I should know about this too," Luna said. "I have been wondering how a common unicorn managed to find the same magic I used as Nightmare Moon."

"Well then, everypony gather around and listen up," Celestia said. "Kuchen had been my student for a few years, and it didn't take long to figure out what his cutie mark actually meant. His brain was built for studying and research. He could read a few pages on somepony like Eclipse the Wise, and bring you back a whole research paper on every facet of how her spells worked. Which was why I needed him to help me research something..."

"You want me to look into Alicorns?"

Kuchen, now a young yearling, followed Princess Celestia down the steps of the Canterlot Library. The princess' face was solemn as they went farther and farther down, into the deepest and most forbidden sections of Equestria's oldest magic library. "That is correct, Kuchen. We wish for you to form a better understanding of our form, and how we embody the best traits of all three races."

"B-But what is there to know? You are our sun goddess, the winged unicorn, the only Alicorn to have ever lived. What else can I possibly tell you?"

The two finally reached the basement level, the stairs stopping just before a large, ancient wooden door. A pair of guards stood along both sides of the entrance, shying their eyes away from Celestia's light spell. Upon receiving a nod from their princess, the two pushed the door open, revealing what looked like an entirely separate library. Dust and debris filled every inch of the walls, while the actual books and their shelves looked like they had not been touched in hundreds of years. The only new furniture was a small table, centered just past the door.

Kuchen stared at the sight in stunned astonishment. "Princess, what is this place?"

"Not all the books ever written have made their way into circulation upstairs. This is where we store the tomes that can still have a use, but are far too dangerous to hold upstairs. There are some things ponies are just not ready for, we fear."

Kuchen didn't quite understand, but tried to keep the conversation going. "So...what am I to do?"

Celestia sighed. She didn't like having to tell anypony about this next part. "We need to know how magic affects ponies like us. As you have already surmised, we are not like normal ponies. The magic we command resembles that of unicorns, but its actual power is far different."

"And...why is this important?"

"We wish to publish your findings, to give other ponies a greater understanding of us. Perhaps then, they will not look upon us with such fear and dread." She was lying, of course; the real plan was to learn how Nightmare Moon managed to possess Luna. That way, she would know the spells to use when her prison door was opened.

Kuchen walked over to the table, setting his saddlebag full of materials onto its surface. "I understand, Princess Celestia. I will get to work right away."

The years passed, seasons changed, and Kuchen kept on working and learning.

In the time since he had been given his royal assignment, he had seemingly made tremendous progress. The forbidden little library had works dating back to the Pre-Classical Era, detailing ancient forms of magic unknown to anypony in the present day. Finding something that mentioned Celestia in any context other than "The greatest pony ever please don't kill me I have a family to feed" was another challenge, but the young stallion could feel things clicking into

place.

At the same time, Celestia had allowed him to pursue his own experiments in his spare time. Before long, he had discovered both physiological and magical similarities between the races, something that greatly excited him for some reason. He was also hard at work developing his own spells, scribbling them down for inclusion in his very own spell book. Celestia was proud of his work, and that made him more than satisfied.

And then, on the very day he reached adulthood, everything began to fall apart.

"What do you mean, fall apart?" Luna asked. "It sounds to me like he was doing just fine."

"It was...more complicated than that," Celestia responded. "We were fast running out of time, and I was getting a little...anxious. And then there was Kuchen's home life. By that time, he was already married, with one newborn foal and another on the way."

Kuchen was seated on the ground floor of the Canterlot Library, reading up on some basic biology, when he heard the sound of heavy plate armor behind him. Before he could turn, a large, unfurry hoof clamped down on his shoulder. "Mr. Kuchen, you are under arrest."

The pink colt spun about, only to find himself face-to-face with a blue pegasus guard. Fear soon gave way to surprise after he managed to get a good long look at the pony's face. "Stormwind?"

"The one and only!" the pegasus shouted, eliciting a hush from the rest of the library's patrons. "It has been far too long."

"I had no idea you were out of school!" Kuchen exclaimed, bringing another round of hushes. "So, what are you doing here? I was sure you would be commanding your own battalion by now."

"My father gave me a job on the palace guard. I was just trying on my armor today. Starting tomorrow, I will take up a post outside the palace kitchens." He slapped his pink buddy on the back. "And what has been going on with you?"

"Well...I married Milky about two years ago."

Stormwind gasped. "You mean, that same filly that worked in the bakery?"

Kuchen smiled. "Yes sir. Already have a little filly, with another foal on the way. And thanks to Princess Celestia, I have a stable job with..."

"Kuchen."

Both ponies spun towards the library door, their eyes widening as they saw Princess Celestia enter. Everypony quickly fell to the floor as the alicorn slowly walked to her student. "Y-Yes, your Highness?"

"Kuchen, I need to talk to you at the palace. Private Stormwind, you are excused."

Kuchen could tell something was wrong with Celestia. Any and all friendliness was gone, as was the patience she usually carried in all things. By the time the two had entered Celestia's study, he was feeling like he was just a little colt again, facing certain doom at the hooves of his ruler.

The minute the door slammed shut behind them, Celestia spun about, her eyes almost searing into Kuchen's. "You have not submitted any reports in months. We need to know what has been happening."

Kuchen gulped. "Well, your Highness, things have been much slower recently. I have looked through every single lead I can find, and I'm afraid I may be reaching a dead end. I have already given you everything I can about enchantments, curses, and how they can relate to a being like yourself. I have even included such findings in my own experiments. But there is only so much I can..."

"If you are having so much difficulty, then why are we seeing you in activities other than studying?"

Kuchen raised an inquisitive brow. "Your Highness?"

"What you are doing here is far more important than anything else in Equestria at this moment. You are delving into mysteries that have confounded ponies since our species began, and at this rate, you will never be able to give us the information we require."

"A-Are you asking me to separate myself from my family?" Kuchen said.

"Yes, and more," Celestia continued. "We are running out of time, and such...distractions will only get in the way of your progress. When we found you, we knew you would be destined for greatness. This is your chance to prove it."

Kuchen could feel something inside him snap. For the first time in his life, he felt well and truly angry at his mentor. "Do you mean to say serving you is more important than my own happiness? Your Majesty, I have done everything you have asked me to, but this is too far! I will not give up everything just so your little vanity project can be completed!"

"VANITY PROJECT?!" The entire room echoed and shook with Celestia's voice. "You have no idea what your work is truly meant for, do you? With this, one of the greatest tragedies in Equestrian history will be undone. And you, my boy, were just gutter trash when we found you. We can easily send you back there! You have no friends, no family, nothing to distract you from your mission. DO YOU UNDERSTAND US?!"

Kuchen was silent, stunned, unable to process what he was witnessing. It was some time before he spoke again. "Understood."

With that, he slowly walked out of the room. Celestia watched him leave, waited for the door to close, and then let out a deep breath. Now, after he had left, was the only time she could intone what she really meant to say. "I am sorry, my faithful student. I promise you, this will all be worth it once Luna is free. Just...please be patient."

Celestia's room was dead quiet. Twilight and Luna shifted their eyes uneasily to Pinkie, who was staring at the filly princess with unwavering certainty. Celestia herself didn't seem particularly proud of what her past self had done. "Wait...this was all about *me*?" asked Luna.

Twilight nodded. "She wanted Kuchen to find a way to release Nightmare Moon early."

Luna's head flipped right back to Celestia. "Sister, of all the foalish things you have done, why would you want to do something like that?"

"I wasn't thinking," Celestia said quietly. "I wanted so badly to have you back that I tried to push Kuchen to work harder. But after that, it was different. My student locked himself in the library basement for a week straight, not even leaving for meals or to use the little colt's room. When he came back, he was...different."

Pinkie nodded. "Yep. Different's the word for it. 'Crazy' and 'Obsessed' might work, too."

"Anyway," Celestia continued, "about a year later, Kuchen left the palace. He said he wanted to explore Equestria, as well as learn of the different kinds of magic used across the land. I let him go, on the condition that he continue working on my project. He seemed glad enough to do it, so I didn't think twice about it. That is, until he stopped writing. That was when I started hearing about what he was doing. Ponies from every walk of life were reporting that an 'evil unicorn' was spreading chaos across Equestria."

“And so you hunted your wayward student down, stripped him of his magic, and banished him from Equestria,” Luna finished.

Celestia shook her head sadly. “No. I made yet another stupid move and let Kuchen run free. I...I couldn’t even bring myself to believe it was really him that was doing this. I had my guards split between looking for Kuchen and bringing in the evil unicorn. And then, it got worse...”

It was with great perplexion that Stormwind received Kuchen’s letter. He had heard nothing from his friend in years, ever since he broke out to explore magic’s secrets away from Celestia’s guidance. The princess occasionally inquired if the Private knew anything about his progress, as some kind of deadline was fast approaching, but he could only tell her that things were quiet.

It was suspicious, however, how quickly Kuchen’s disappearance coincided with the stories of mass magical misuse across Equestria. Ponies were disappearing under mysterious circumstances, sometimes whole villages at a time, and yet there was no sign of the perpetrator. Even attempts to follow the magic back to its source failed. Whatever was doing this was immune to even the most powerful of the Unicorn Council.

Still, neither Stormwind or Celestia could suspect Kuchen of any of this. He was a hard-working stallion, if a tad goofy in the head at times. Nothing could compel somepony like that to such wanton cruelty and evil.

And yet, just a few days ago, a letter suddenly appeared in his mailbox, addressed from Kuchen to Stormwind. With trembling hooves, the pegasus opened the envelope, revealing what looked like a normal letter:

Stormwind,

I am on the verge of something great.

I need to speak with you in person. I have something to give Princess Celestia, but I cannot leave my work unattended. Attached is a map to my house. Make sure to bring it with you.

Do not tell Celestia you are coming here. I want this to be a surprise.

**Hurry,
Kuchen**

Stormwind responded immediately, requesting leave from Canterlot under the pretense of investigating a possible clue in the Seapony case. Celestia appeared curious, even suspicious of such a request, but still allowed him to go. On his way out, he also stopped by to visit Kuchen's family. With their father missing for several years by this point, he was almost a third parent to the three kids. Milky was still holding out hope that her husband's delusions would wash away with time, even though Stormwind knew it seemed almost impossible.

His affairs around town finished, Stormwind flew off towards Equestria's countryside. It didn't take long to find the map's destination: a small cottage in the middle of a vast dirt field. Kuchen did say he wanted solitude with his work, but there wasn't a single living thing to be seen anywhere.

Kuchen was already standing outside, next to a small wooden crate. He gave a friendly smile as the pegasus landed, but even then, Stormwind could see something...off about him. His eyes were shaking unsteadily, and his voice had a small gravelly tone to it. "Thank you for coming, Stormwind. It has been far too long."

Stormwind's hooves made a heavy clop as they touched ground. The pegasus nodded at his friend, his armor clinking and clanking as he did so. "Yes it has. I assume this has something to do with your work for the princess?"

"In a manner of speaking." He motioned to the box. "I've finished my latest batch of writings, and need them delivered to Princess Celestia on the double. I believe she will find them most interesting."

Stormwind took a few steps towards the box and reached out to open it, only to be stopped by Kuchen's own foreleg. "I implore you, do not open it. The contents are for Princess Celestia only."

"I...see." Stormwind took a few steps back, not wanting to upset his already disturbed friend. "In any case, I am certain the princess will be more than thrilled to hear of your progress. It has been some time since you were last in Canterlot." The pegasus' eyes drooped. "Milky wanted you to know she still wants you back."

"She worries too much," said Kuchen. "I am doing important work out here, things that will change the fate of Equestria forever." His face suddenly contorted as a whistling sound broke through the inside of the cottage. "Drat! I forgot to reset that valve! W-Would you be kind enough to wait here a moment?"

The pink colt darted off into the cottage, leaving a trail of dust in his wake. Stormwind stared at

the spot his friend had just been standing on for a few more seconds before turning back to the box. His whole body trembled as insatiable curiosity worked its way through his brain. With one hoof, he slowly slid off the box's lid.

Inside sat a large tome, a perfect match for the spell books that dominated the Canterlot Library. The sight was comforting at first; after all, Kuchen's task was to study magic. It wasn't long, though, before the pegasus began to feel a growing uneasiness about the book itself. Stormwind traced a fetlock over the cover.

It felt like flesh.

"You really should not have done that."

Stormwind turned to confront the speaker, only to find his entire body suddenly paralyzed in a telekinetic field. Kuchen stood at the door of his cottage, eyeing the pegasus with glaring disapproval. "I did not wish for it to end this way. I wanted you to share this glorious dawn of a new Ponydom with me. But if you cannot obey a simple order, then what use are you to me?"

"K-K-Kuchen," Stormwind ached out. "Wh-Why?"

Kuchen merrily trotted up to his captive prey, a gleefully twisted smile growing on his face. "If you want to accomplish something great, you need to show that you deserve your goals. And besides, you would have gotten in my way anyway, once Princess Celestia knew I know what she knows. And now, if you'll excuse me..."

Kuchen grunted, igniting his horn even more. From inside the cottage, a large knife floated through a window and up to the two. "I do believe my work requires something extra."

Celestia's patience was wearing thin. Even amidst the blue daytime sky, the stars were already nearing their ideal position. If she was to free her sister, she needed Kuchen's research right now. And yet, despite having some of the best trackers and guards in Equestria on the case, Kuchen continued to elude her. He had not even sent a letter in months. And now Captain Stormwind had taken leave for a personal matter, leaving the princess with no additional means to locate her wayward student.

She was about ready to go looking for him herself when her chamber's door opened, revealing a unicorn servant. She bowed before the princess, her back falling slightly from the large crate she was carrying. "Your Highness, this package just arrived for you."

Celestia stifled an urge to cheer and hop around the room in triumph. No doubt within this lay all of Kuchen's research, and with it, five hundred years of torment would finally end. She

waved her servant away, waited until she was completely alone, and opened the box.

Inside was a massive tome, the likes of which she had never seen. Curious, she traced a hoof along the cover. She recoiled almost immediately. "Is that...dragon skin?"

Next, she floated the thing out of the box and opened the book to the first page. She almost dropped it when she saw globs of something white sticking between the binding and the pages. "That...That's real glue!"

And then she read the title page: "The Arcanus E Draconus, by Kuchen the Uplifted."

She blasted the book away, her breathing becoming slow and labored. The letters were not ink, but blood. More specifically, it reminded her of dried griffon's blood, a sight she had not seen in millennia. And then she glanced back down at the box itself. Shoved at the very bottom was a smaller package, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. On top of it sat a letter:

"Dear Celestia,

By the time you receive this, it will be too late. You made a mistake entrusting me with this knowledge, and soon, everypony in Equestria will know you as you truly are. But do not fear, I bear no real malice against you. After all, a pretender on the throne still has feelings. So, I left you a little something to remember me by. The first was my life's work, the Arcanus E Draconus. The second is something to keep you warm at night."

Celestia knew she shouldn't look. She should have just hurled the whole package into the sun. Even so, she could not help but pull the string loose. The paper collapsed, revealing a blue, slightly furry blanket.

A blue, slightly furry blanket with a cutie mark...

"He...He...He sent you *what*?" Twilight gasped.

"I-If you wouldn't mind, I do not wish to dwell on that," Celestia said. It was obvious from the crack in her voice that she was holding back her own reaction to the event, an admirable feat considering how her filly brain kept pushing such things to the forefront. Pinkie shrank back into a corner of the room, looking rather ashamed of herself. Luna, meanwhile, felt her breakfast working its way back up her throat, and as it turned out, boiled cabbage and radishes do not taste all that good either way.

"Th-That is the most disgusting thing I have ever heard!" Luna gasped. "I mean, yes, what I did was terrible, but...but I never murdered a pony!"

"It was just then that I could not deny the truth any longer. Kuchen was the evil unicorn everypony had been reporting. And even worse, he had left something attached to the bottom of Skywind's...remains. It was a map to his cottage. He *wanted* me to find him. So, I gathered a few of my best guards and headed out..."

The mad pony's little ramshackle cottage was a far cry from his luxurious quarters at the palace, and was even worse than the bakery Celestia had found him in as but a young colt. No trees or plants grew near the house, nor did any living thing dare set foot on the cursed soil. Even Celestia's royal guards were reluctant to approach the place, lest some terrible fiend emerge from the ground and devour them whole.

Celestia, however, was not afraid of Kuchen's dark sorcery. She had survived Discord and Nightmare Moon both, and her fallen student's powers were a far cry from those two horrors. In any case, she was certain he would do nothing to attack her, at least not before he could prove himself right.

The princess broke away from her cowardly guard, walking over the barren earth with all the menace of an executioner with an axe. She was only a few steps away from the door when she saw Kuchen's pink aura open the door. "You may enter, Princess."

Celestia froze. The cottage's interior was lit with only a few small candles, but they were enough to show her a sampling of what Kuchen had been up to. Wooden shelves were lined with skulls and bottled organs, both of pony and non-pony origin. The floor was covered with blood, grime, and other, thankfully indefinable substances. And sitting next to a mud-covered window was Kuchen himself, patiently awaiting Celestia's entrance.

The princess took a few steps inside, the door slamming shut behind her. Kuchen stared up at her, his mouth twisted into a gleeful, malicious smile. "Good evening. I hope you have not found my hospitality lacking."

"We know what you have been doing, Kuchen," said Celestia. "Whatever possessed you to drive yourself to such evil?"

"I was just working to improve everypony's lot in life," the mad pony said. He circled the princess, pointing out a few charts and graphs he had on one of the shelves. "That research you had me do showed me connections between yourself and every other pony race. With my guidance, magic and flight will not only be the domain of a lucky few. Everypony will soon be able to become just like you, dear princess."

Celestia's eyes widened with shock. "You really think you can make anypony into something

like us? Kuchen, we knew you were mad, but we never imagined you had truly lost touch with reality."

"On the contrary, I understand more than you realize." Kuchen levitated a nearby, leather-bound book. "This journal gave me the insights I needed. Another pony like myself sought the same answers, and suffered for it."

Celestia gasped as she took a good, long look at the book. It wasn't just any journal. It was Luna's journal. "Where did you find that?!"

"Do you remember that day, when you told me I wasn't allowed to have a life, because it might upset you? Well, I went back down to the basement of the Canterlot Library for a while, trying to calm down. And that's when I found this shoved behind some ancient periodicals, along with everything else you've been hiding from us. The so-called 'Mare in the Moon' wasn't just some ghost to scare foals. She was a real pony, one like myself in a way."

The princess gritted her teeth. "She was nothing like you."

Kuchen raised a hoof. "Ah ah, that is where you are wrong. The journal mentioned a means by which she could gain more power, even become a force to challenge one like yourself. That's when it hit me: Princess Celestia is a pony just like everypony else. She is certainly no goddess. By the journal's description, you do not even deserve the title of princess! You overthrew Equestria's standing ruler using those contemptible Elements of Harmony!"

"We did what we had to do," Celestia snapped. "You cannot conceive the horrors Discord inflicted upon Equestria!"

"Perhaps...or maybe you are lying about this, just like everything else." Kuchen continued to circle around the princess, her eyes never losing sight of him. "Once I realized this, I left Canterlot to discover the same power as – what was her name – Nightmare Moon. I used what little I could find to reverse-engineer her spells, trying to figure out just what made them work. I even meditated in your old palace in the Everfree Forest, the same place you stashed the Elements of Harmony. And I succeeded. I finally figured everything out, and now, I am going to improve everypony's lot in life."

"You slaughtered entire villages!" Celestia snapped.

"I needed test subjects for my work! And besides, is that one village not happier as seaponies?"

"You murdered Private Stormwind!"

"Oh, you mean that stupid pegasus who thought he was my friend? You said it best, your Highness. I do not need friends. My purpose in life is to make you happy, nothing more. And

besides, didn't he make an excellent blanket?"

"You think all THIS is making us happy?"

Kuchen feigned a wound to his ego. "Oh, my princess! Please don't tell me you've stopped caring for your subjects! It has only been five hundred years since you killed one!"

"I DID NOT KILL MY SISTER!"

Kuchen's grin quickly turned into a confused frown. "S-Sister?"

"Did your research not tell you the whole story? Nightmare Moon was my sister, Princess Luna. She was jealous not because I was more powerful, but because nopony ever appreciated her nights! And I did not kill her!"

Kuchen coughed under the severe mental strain. "T-Then where is she?"

"I attempted to use the Elements to reverse her transformation, but I was unable to wield all five by myself. When I tried to force their activation, I not only severed my connection with them, I also sent my sister into the moon itself! And just so you know, she and I were both born with wings and horns."

The mad pony's eyes began to dull as the truth weighed heavily on his shoulders. "Then...I was wrong? All those ponies I killed, my family, my best friend...they were all in vain?"

Celestia's eyes softened. Her former student began to slouch in defeat, and she could swear she saw a few small tears streak down his cheek. "Kuchen, we...I did not wish this to happen. You have a brilliant mind, and could have been one of the greatest assets Ponydom had ever known. But I have no choice."

"Wh-What are you going to do?" he whimpered.

"I have to take you back to Canterlot to face justice. I can guarantee that your horn will be removed, and your works banned, but you will still be alive. I will do everything in my power to help you after that."

Kuchen was quiet for several minutes. And then that infernal spark returned to his eyes. "You want me...to give up everything I've worked for? No! My research has come too far to be nothing but lies!"

Celestia looked on as her student returned to his twisted self, fighting fruitlessly against the confines of her spell. "Kuchen, this is the only way."

“Just like how you banished your sister?”

Celestia’s eyes narrowed. The force of her aura tightened in response to her rising anger. “I told you, I used the Elements incorrectly!”

“Another lie!” Kuchen coughed. “You wanted your sister out of the way, so you used the Elements to banish her to the moon! You wanted her to watch as you ruled what was rightfully hers!”

“I. Did. No. Such. Thing!” Celestia growled.

The aura from Celestia’s telekinesis tightened, leaving the pink stallion gasping for air. “You...ruined my life...just like you ruined...hers! Everything...that has happened...is your fault!”

“SHUT UP!”

Kuchen could feel his life ebbing away. Even then, at his last moments, he managed to look Celestia straight in the eyes one last time. The pony that had taken him in, given him a life he would never have had anyway else, and then used him to her own ends. His voice was dry as he shouted one last curse. “C-Celestia...th-th-the....FRAUD!”

“SHUT! UP!”

There was a loud snap, and Kuchen’s body went motionless. His eyes were rolled all the way back into his skull, while his tongue lay flapping out of his lips. The princess could feel the exact moment all life left his body, could feel his magical power fade back into the ether from which it came. Even so, Celestia threw the corpse into the wall a few times, the entire building shuttering with each slam. It wasn’t until after the fifth crash that her rage lessened and reality finally took hold. The magic field levitating her student’s body dissipated, sending it crashing to the floor in a heap.

Almost immediately, the very air seemed to become much lighter, as if a great weight had been lifted from the world itself. The guards, who had been sitting outside the entire time out of fear, burst through the closed door. Everypony’s eyes were locked on the dead pony before them; the guards with their jaws open, and Celestia with the most stoic face possible.

“Y-Your orders, your Highness?” asked one of the pegasi.

Celestia’s eyes never left the body. “We have seen enough. The candles should give us enough flame to start a fire.”

"I had everything in that cottage destroyed," Celestia finished. "Kuchen's body was burnt along with nearly all of his research. All that remained was the Arcanus E Draconus and a few other works, all of which were still stored in Canterlot. I wanted to destroy those as well, but..."

"What stopped you?" asked Twilight.

The flight back to Canterlot was done in total silence. No pony dared to speak, lest they ignite Celestia's considerable wrath. The princess herself rode in her chariot with a detached, remorseless expression, not even looking back at the smoldering remains of the hellish site Kuchen had left behind.

When the wheels of her chariot touched ground, the princess disembarked before the pegasi in front had even finished moving. She turned to her accompaniment, looking every bit the princess she was. "Gentlecolts, I want you to bring me the rest of Kuchen's family. Private Stormwind's, too. They all need to know what has happened this night."

"A-Aye, your Highness," one pegasus coughed. The troop bowed quickly before flying off into the night. Once they were all gone, Celestia teleported herself straight to her chambers. She didn't know how much longer she could control herself.

Celestia reappeared in a flash of white light, landing right in her bedroom. Once she was sure no pony was listening on the other side of the door, she trotted over to her window and looked up at the moon.

Plastered on the lunar surface was Nightmare Moon's visage, still looking down on all of Equestria with barely-contained jealousy and wrath. The four stars, the same system Celestia herself had set up to free her sister, were almost in the optimal position. She still had a few seconds to make everything right, to undo the greatest mistake of her life and bring her sister back to Equestria proper. All she had to do was...

"No," she whispered to herself. "This is not the time. I...I cannot release you, sister."

The stars drifted on, passing the equilibrium point Celestia had waited for. The silhouette on the moon flashed in a rage, apparently having had the same plan as the princess, but without Celestia's power to aid her, the Mare in the Moon was still nothing more than an incorporeal mass of energy buried under the moon.

That left one more thing.

The Arcanus E Draconus still sat where the princess had dropped it earlier. A few brave servants were willing to remove Stormwind's remains, and a proper burial and memorial was already in the planning stage. But the book itself was another matter. Celestia was the only pony alive and un-banished that had encountered something as disgustingly vile. The guards refused to come within ten feet of the tome, and the rest of her staff were equally terrified.

Celestia knew what she should do within moments. This thing is too dangerous to keep around. It should be destroyed. That would be the best hope for Ponykind.

And yet, curiosity took hold. She lifted the book back up, leafing through its skinned pages and bloody ink. Everything she read, from how to turn a pony into a manticore to ways to communicate with beings from beyond their own world, only cemented how absolutely dangerous this book was. There was no way she could allow this on any bookshelf.

But then somepony might stumble across the rest of her student's work. The same curiosity that drove Kuchen to learn about Nightmare Moon might possess them as well, and sooner or later history would repeat itself. She would have to destroy everything he had ever written, and just as with Princess Luna, she would have to suppress any knowledge of Kuchen's existence. She could spin the atrocities off as the works of a generic "evil unicorn," and with the passage of time, all would be forgotten.

But as for the texts, tomes, and spells Kuchen had developed...

"I had everything Kuchen worked on sealed in the basement of the Canterlot Library," Celestia finished. "I wanted to destroy them all, but I couldn't bring myself to."

Pinkie stared at Celestia incredulously. "But why? If you hated him so much for being a nasty-wasty, why didn't you just throw a nice bonfire party?" Her eyes lit up. "OF COURSE! Next Summer Sun Celebration, we're gonna have a bonfire!"

"No, Pinkie!" Twilight gasped. "Do you want to burn down half of Ponyville?"

"Hmph, party pooper," Pinkie sulked.

"I couldn't stop thinking about Kuchen, and how I failed him." Celestia sniffed. "I was so obsessed with freeing Luna that I did things I should have never done. Because of that, so many lost their lives, from ponies to griffons and even dragons. I was his teacher, and I should have behaved like one. That's why I couldn't bring myself to destroy all his hard work, no matter how twisted it was."

"But...what about your vendetta against the Pie Clan?" Pinkie exclaimed.

Celestia sniffled and coughed before continuing, a little bit of her old composure returning. "Well, it was a few days before my guards returned with the only member of Kuchen's family they could find: his wife, Milky. Oh, she was a wonderful mare in her prime, so full of spunk and pizzazz. And she could bake a lemon pie that would..."

Luna raised a hoof. "Drool less, explain more."

"A-Anyway," Celestia said with a blush, "we found Milky hiding in an alley behind Pony Joseph's Circular Cakes. When she was brought to me..."

Celestia couldn't believe what had happened in just a few days.

Milky was a mess, a pony covered in who-knows-how-many-things. The pride she had once shown was gone, replaced with a blank stare that barely betrayed any life whatsoever. Even from her throne, Celestia could not help but feel mortified by the sight before her.

"Milky, we...have some bad news."

"So, you finally went and did it, you liar!"

Celestia's eyes snapped wide open. "Wh-What did you call us?"

Milky struggled against her chains and the guards, hoping against hope that she could free herself and gouge out Celestia's eyes. "I know all about what happened to my husband! I know you stormed into his house and snapped his neck! I FELT IT!"

Celestia took a few steps from her throne as the guards finished pushing the mare down. "What do you mean, felt it?"

"Did you really think he didn't know how this would end? The moment he left Canterlot, he knew he was a dead stallion! That was why he gave us a parting gift, in case somepony killed him!"

Celestia was taken aback. "Gift?"

"He lives on, in our heads! We know everything he did, every spell he ever created, every truth you tried to suppress!"

Celestia's face flushed pale as she realized what Milky was saying. "You mean...he possessed you?"

Milky nodded. "My children and I...he made sure we would never forget. One day, Kuchen the Uplifted will return in full, and he shall destroy you, Celestia the Fraud!"

Celestia looked up to the stunned guards. "Quick. I need you to start a search for Kuchen's offspring."

"You are too late!" Milky laughed. "I already sent them away, with their grandparents and uncles and aunts! They may not have the gift, but they will protect them from you and your thugs until the time is right! And then, Kuchen will be triumphant!"

Everypony turned to Pinkie. The Earth pony already knew what they were going to ask. "The Princess isn't lying. All us Pies have a little voice in the back of our heads, telling us everything about Kuchen. Well, everything that hasn't gone away, I mean."

"Gone away?" asked Twilight.

"Remember what Princess Celestia said? Kuchen was a *real* smarty-pants when it came to making stuff up, but actually having it *work*? That part he had trouble with. You see, all of his kids were Earth ponies, which meant they couldn't use magic. And *their* kids were all Earth ponies, so the same thing happened."

"Magic Decay," Luna interjected. "A possession like what Kuchen used would have eventually worn itself down over time."

"Okay, I get that," Twilight lied. "But if Pinkie is descended from one of Kuchen's children, what about the other two?"

Celestia shrugged. "The possession spell did not work on them as well as Kuchen had intended. Within about two or three generations, they were completely normal. One even eventually moved back to Canterlot, found a music school, and has created some of the best musicians in Equestria. But in Pinkie's family, things were different. They changed their name to the Pies and took up residence all over Equestria. They bred like rabbits, too, so by now there's a Pie or two in almost every village, town and city in Equestria."

"And that's why I couldn't tell any of you about this!" Pinkie said. "It wasn't because I liked lying, but I didn't want to lose my family!"

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Lose your family?"

"You know, have them all put to death, their heads mounted on pikes like shish-kebobs, all that

nasty stuff! I mean, you've been hunting the Pies for years, wanting to kill everypony that knew anything about Kuchen! And that's why I had to warn Twilight about what you'd do to her if she made you angry!"

Celestia was very, very quiet for a few seconds. Then came the small squeak in the back of her throat, followed by a low whimper. "Y-You actually thought I would do that?"

Pinkie was quiet. "Um...yes? I mean..."

"I-I never w-w-wanted to do that!" Celestia could feel the tears running down her cheeks, but didn't care anymore. "I never even wanted to kill Kuchen! Even after all he did, I wanted him to live! I almost raised him myself! I-I-I..."

The rest of Celestia's words were drowned out by the sound of her sobbing. Burying her face in her forelegs, she collapsed on the bed and started bawling like a wounded foal. Luna and Twilight both gave Pinkie some of the most admonishing stares in the history of Equestria, only serving to make the pink pony feel even more upset with herself. She slowly trotted to the princess, placing a foreleg across her back. "I'm sorry. I know you're not a meany or anything. It's just...everypony knows what you can..."

"And you thought I would?!" Celestia squealed. "I could just seal away Kuchen's memories, or try and cure your family! I would never have *killed* them!"

"I...I think we should leave Celestia alone for a short while," Luna said. Her voice was obviously strained with concern. "Twilight Sparkle, Miss Pie, I will see you in my chambers shortly. We have much to discuss."

Ruby and Lofty were halfway through supervising the polishing of the North Hall's suits of armor when Luna returned. "Miss Dream, I understand court is to begin in a half-hour's time."

Ruby could feel the urge to ask about where Luna had been, or who that pink pony was, but wisely chose to ignore those urges. "Why...yes, your Majesty."

The princess' eyes turned to Lofty. "I believe your child deserves a small break from palace procedures, and in any case the usual court activities would be far too boring for one such as her."

Lofty looked up in excitement. "You mean I don't have to listen to a bunch of stuffed-up snobs complain about everything you do just because you're in charge?"

Luna and Ruby traded stares; the former was accusing, the latter was apologizing. "I...do

suppose that is accurate. In any case, I do think Princess Celestia could do with some cheering up. Recent events have been trying for her.”

NOW Lofty’s eyes really lit up. “You mean I can play with the princess again?”

The night princess smiled at the filly, her eyes closed. “Why, yes. Miss Dream, would you be so kind as to escort your filly to my sister’s bedroom? I will meet with you in the throne room shortly.”

Ruby smiled and bowed, secretly happy that the day’s earlier discretion was not going to lead to her standing in the unemployment line. “Of course, your Majesty! Come on, Lofty. We have some royal duties to complete!”

The mother and daughter cantered down the halls and corridors of the palace, vanishing from Luna’s sight. The princess took pride in her latest work. *You’ve been through enough today, little sister. For now, you deserve to be happy.*

TO BE CONTINUED...

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