

Celestia shot upright in her bed. The cool air coming through her window ruffled her curtains, competing with her panting to be the dominant sound in the room.

At first she thought she had just experienced another one of her nightmares. Discord and his followers had escaped from their prison, stealing away into the world to take revenge on her. She visibly shuddered. Slowly, he had turned the world against her, turning her beloved country into a wasteland of chaos and war.

Celestia pressed a hoof to her head and wiped away the sweat. For a late summer evening, the breeze was unusually warm. She tossed the covers to one side and rose from her bed. On nights when she didn't sleep well, she found that flying soothed her mind. Tonight was one of those nights.

As Celestia prepared to jump out of her window, the whole floor began to shake. Magic burst from her horn, shielding her from whatever danger had caught her off guard. But instead of finding an attack, the vibrations increased, knocking her off balance. She stumbled around for a few moments before steadying herself against the wall. Light poured through her window, growing in intensity.

Before it even disappeared, she was running full force down the hallway towards the astronomy tower. She needed to check on the twins. Luna would never make it in time from the throne room if somepony had broken in. She rounded the corner and kicked off the ground hard, soaring up the tower. Taking the stairs would waste time.

As soon as she touched down on the landing she ripped the door from its hinges with her magic, tossing it haphazardly behind her. The occupants of one of the beds squeaked loudly, diving under the covers. The princess of the sun let out a sigh of relief.

"Aunt Celly?"

Celestia watched Dusk poke her head out of the covers. The filly's eyes were wide open. Underneath the covers she was shaking in fear - from the sudden earthquake and from the loss of the bedroom door.

"It's ok Dusk. I'm just making sure you and Dawn are alright. Right, Dawn?" Celestia walked over to the other bed, gently nuzzling the form under the other blanket. A shiver went down her spine. She pulled the blankets off of the bed. Underneath was a large pile of pillows, neatly moved into a position to mimic a sleeping filly. Her heart started to thump out of her chest.

"Dawn?" She called. Her magic reached out to the closet door, pulling it open. No luck. "DAWN!?" Celestia was in a full on panic.

"She's probably running around the castle again, Aunt Celly." Dusk said, climbing up onto her sister's bed. She shifted one of the pillows around but stopped short.

"Celly...?" Dusk backed away from the headboard.

The princess turned around from her search watching the filly starting to shake. Her eyes never moved from the headboard. Celestia grabbed her under her wing, softly trying to calm her.

The words etched into the wood told a different story. Slowly the wood began to change. Inch by inch the wood began to turn to stone, permanently engraving the phrase into her memory.

DECIDE THROUGH TRUTH, THROUGH TRUST, THROUGH BRAWN,  
THEN SUN AND MOON WILL HAVE THEIR DAWN.

The elder sister began breathing through her teeth, only hiding her rage for the sake of the now

crying filly under her wing. Only one pony had the **gall** to leave such a message. The only pony powerful enough to take Dawn without being seen or even leaving so much of a trace: Discord.

A hard landing outside of the room made Celestia throw up a defensive shield. Her magic bent to her will, forming enough magic for an immediate counter attack.

“Sister?”

Celestia dropped the shield immediately, “Luna! Discord is-”

“Free. I know. I tried getting here as quickly as I could through the chaos. Where are the girls?” Luna was speaking frantically, sweeping the room with her eyes, over and over. Celestia gently lifted her wing and Dusk lept from it into her mother’s open hooves.

“Mommy!” Dusk cried, sobbing into her blue coat.

“It’s ok, Dusk. Mommy’s here,” Luna cooed, stroking the filly’s mane. She looked up, panic still playing on her features, “Where’s Dawn?”

Celestia stayed quiet, casting her gaze to the headboard. After a moment she began to whisper angrily, “I’ll ensure he suffers the worst fate I can imagine...”

Luna couldn’t make heads or tails of the headboard. It was cryptic, yes and the implications...

“Where is she Celestia?” Luna’s voice began to crack and her eyes began to fill with tears.

“...he’ll wish that he was encased in stone when I’m through.”

“No... please tell me he didn’t...”

Celestia could feel Luna’s heart breaking from across the room. The rage she was containing began to spill over into her magic. The stone bed shattered crumbling to the floor, only leaving the headboard intact. The window shattered behind her and the floor began to crack. As the cracks wound their way up the wall, the guards that accompanied Luna backed away in sheer terror, unable to leave their princesses, but wanting to put as much distance between them as possible.

Luna sobbed lightly into her forehooves, bringing Dusk into a tighter embrace. Celestia was only able to manage one coherent word in her rage:

“**DISCORD.**”

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Cunning was dancing. His hysterical laughter filled Bright Light’s large office, as he hopped to and fro.

The office was quite cozy - it was a perfect place to do research and for certain conversations. The room had long since been sound-proofed. As an added bonus, he had taken the liberty of preventing scrying within the room’s confines. Well... it really only prevented somepony else from scrying on **him**.

Behind the desk, settled on the wall between two large windows was a mirror which at the moment held the fury Princess Celestia was experiencing on the news that his brother was wide awake. A large wooden desk sat a few feet in front of that, scattered with notes and alchemy materials. Bookshelves covered the side walls from the floor to the ceiling, filled with books on various topics that held his fleeting interest.

In front of the doors stood five interesting figures, each staring forward and unmoving. Their eyes were a light glowing red, completely under Cunning’s control. He bounced over to them, giggling as he did so.

“Oh what a **wonderful** day this is!” He spoke, chuckling to himself. “Not only do I get a reunion with my friends and compatriots, I get to see my brother for the first time in years! How has the stone been

treating you?”

“It’s been a rocky experience,” one of the figures replied, devoid of emotion or feeling. The creature stood on his two different hind legs, his serpentine tail motionless behind him. His head was that of a pony, with an antler on one side and a rams horn on the other. His forearms were at his sides.

Cunning laughed, pretending his brother’s voice matched the display of wit, “I suppose it has, brother. But it hasn’t crumbled your wit in the least. I suppose that’s good for me in the long run.”

His brother nodded.

“Especially now that my dear Celeste thinks her former beloved, Discord, Prince of Chaos has stolen away little Dawn.” Cunning slowed his dancing to a trot, walking straight up to his brother, “So I suppose for my sake you’ll be happy to play along?”

Discord nodded.

“Good.” He trotted back to the desk. One of the most surprising discoveries he had made since his plan unfolded, was how strong his control still was. Of course, he had spent the last hour reinforcing his magical hold on them, but he was giddy at the thought that Celestia’s use of the Elements of Harmony had **preserved** his clever spell. It was priceless, to say the least.

Cunning turned around, leaning his flank into the table, “Listen closely. Princess Celestia is starting to tip over the edge into darker water. With Princess Luna now suitably broken, she will either back down, or join her sister’s witch hunt. In order for... us, to control the whole world, we must avoid war between other kingdoms unless absolutely necessary.

“Therefore, you are all tasked with stirring up Starfall’s insistent rabble in Equestria.. Create a commotion in other lands with their rebels and dissidents. Have the world unite under the princess and then crush every resistance we create. For when fear looms, the Princess will be their guiding light. A light that I hold in my hand.”

Discord and the four ponies bowed at once to Cunning.

“Brother, you will need to stay for a moment. The rest of you may leave unseen.”

One of the four ponies’ horns glowed. Shadows stretched down from the walls and wrapped itself around the other three. As soon as it seemed to envelop their bodies, the shadows and the ponies disappeared without a sound.

“I have a special task for you, brother. One of the new Elements of Harmony is being sent to our old master. I want you to make your way to the dragon kingdom as well. But you must not be seen and you cannot arrive before she does.” He tossed a picture across the room, using his magic to hover it in front of Discord, “She is the purple unicorn in the picture. You may take it for reference.”

Discord nodded, snapping his fingers to make it disappear.

“When you arrive, you will be unconscious for three days. You will remember nothing of my control over you, nor of the events which led you to be banished. They will be... cloudy. Eventually they will return, but not for many years. It is the least I can do for you, brother.”

Discord nodded once more, his eyes still blank.

“Go.”

Cunning’s brother snapped his fingers and vanished. The silence hung in the room for a few moments, before Cunning let out another burst of laughter. He had let go of his brother, only to have him not know why Celestia no longer loved him. It was a fitting end, since Discord had her love to himself all those years ago. Love that Cunning believed he deserved, even if he had to control her to get it.

He most certainly wasn’t going to share her with anypony else.

Dawn groaned as she turned over in the little carrying compartment she stowed away in. She could hear the wheels of the carriage floating over the cobblestone streets through the muffled sounds of whatever place they were in. She shifted some of the scrolls to the side, reaching up with her hooves to grab hold of the top, tossing the flap over her head to look outside.

The city was full of ponies of all colors and talents. Pegasi flew about the sky, tossing papers every which way. Vendors stood on the street corner, competing to sell their food. A newsstand was surrounded by ponies in gray and black suits, carrying professional-looking saddlebags. The pegasus in the center of the crowd hoisted a paper over his head shouting some of the daily news.

She looked towards the sky. Just beyond some of the buildings the sun poured its rays over the city streets. But it was dwarfed by massive structures, reaching high into the skies. In all her life, she had only ever seen the castle towers in Canterlot. These must have been several times bigger, maybe more. As they glistened in the morning sunlight and she realized most of these buildings were made from metal and glass. To the side, she watched earth ponies walking treacherously across steel beams high in the sky. They were working with other pegasi, but from this distance, they looked like ants.

She gaped in sheer amazement. Distracted, she barely noticed the nearest carriage pass hers, cutting them off. Their carriage stopped short, causing her to tumble back into the bag. There was a bit of yelling, accompanied by a few words she had never heard before. The driver of her carriage let out a few of the same words. She'd have to ask Twilight what they meant later.

Dawn frowned, looking at the back of the carriage. Through the back window, she noticed Applejack sleeping against the side of the carriage. She hadn't even considered how to tell them she had stowed away in their cart. Aunt Rainbow would likely be furious with her. The guard Aunt Celestia sent would probably insist on turning the whole cart around to bring her home.

She slid back down into the cart. The first thing she needed now was a plan. There had to be some possible way to stay with them. A sigh escaped her lips. If she could figure out whoever it was Celestia sent, she might be able to worm her way out of being brought back home. Especially if it was one of the guards she had caught doing something weird with the other staff. Like that time she had caught Just Desserts kissing Thunder Cloud, when she was alone in the kitchen. Or the time Stormy Sea changed the locks on all of the guard lockers.

The carriage continued down the lane, as she settled deeper into the confines of the scroll pouch.

Inside, Applejack began to stir. It had been a long night of travel from Canterlot. With the guard flying the carriage, they had cut their time significantly. Early on, Rainbow hooked into the reigns and helped fly it across the country fields.

She remembered passing over the ruins of Fillydelphia before nodding off to sleep. After the civil war, the road that went through the city was never really repaired. For almost four years the ruins from the battle deteriorated, with no pony returning to rebuild. Within the last year ponies began to return in droves to start over. But they had barely started repairs on the road, since Celestia had a new road built between Canterlot and Manehattan to avoid passing through the ruins.

It didn't matter though. Whatever effort the two ponies had done together had been enough to get them here very quickly. This was just one day in the long journey that lay ahead of them.

Across from her, both Twilight and Rainbow Dash were fast asleep. She hadn't expected differently.

Rainbow had pulled for as long as she had been awake to watch the scenery go by and Twilight was still recovering from her... ordeal. She shook the thought from her head. This was no time to dwell on the past, especially since that had all already changed. Instead, she opened the door to the carriage and lifted herself onto the seat in the front, closing the door behind her.

"I ain't seen Manehattan fer a while and its as if I'd never been," she said to herself, taking in the sights.

"Miss Applejack?" The guard turned to face her.

"Mornin'... uh..." Her train of thought fizzled out. She had already forgotten his name.

"Thunder Cloud, Miss."

"Of course. Sorry 'bout that."

He nodded shortly, turning his attention back to the road. Manehattan drivers were some of the worst in Equestria.

"So, uh... where exactly are we heading off to?" She asked.

He worked his way around a stopped taxi carriage, "To Grand Central station. Canterlot's train line is still shut down by the storm, otherwise we would have taken the train instead."

"Is it gonna be one of them sleeper trains, like the one to Appleloosa?"

He nodded.

She chuckled to herself, "We'll try not ta keep you up."

It didn't take much longer until they reached the station. Applejack woke up Rainbow and Twilight, while Thunder Cloud walked around back to unload the bags. Twilight shifted slightly in her position, while Rainbow Dash grunted, rubbing her eyes.

"We're here," Applejack said. Thunder Cloud tossed a few articles of clothing at Applejack, which she caught in her teeth. "Y'uhll 'eed da but dis on," she spoke.

Twilight squinted at Applejack, trying to understand her words between the clothes in her mouth and the lack of restful sleep she received. The iron clamp still on her horn didn't help the sleeping part much.

Applejack tossed them each one of the cloths, throwing one over herself.

"Twilight, yours is a hooded sweater and Rainbow, that's a jacket o' some sort. Rarity made them for each of ya. She said it'd help ya fit in here and they'll keep ya warm up north. They ain't no frou frou fashions, but they'll help us blend in. Especially you Twilight."

They nodded, although Rainbow Dash was far less enthusiastic about the new dress. Applejack pulled on a green sweater, before going into the back to help Thunder Cloud. He was struggling to lift the some of the compartments out of their holsters.

"Need a hand?" She asked, sliding one of the detached bags over.

"Yeah. I can't seem to get these untied," he pointed at one of the still hanging bags. "The other bag is a lot heavier than I imagined it to be, but I cant get that one untied either."

"Consider yerself lucky, I'm here. I know my way 'round knots."

Applejack waited for Thunder Cloud to grab hold of the bag, before she clamped on the first knot with her teeth. It was a delicate process, but after years running around on the farm it was as good as untied. A sudden grunt from the guard confirmed the bag falling freely into his hooves.

She moved onto the next bag, working her teeth around the knot. It came loose as well, but the guard fumbled with the catch. It fell to the ground.

Dawn stifled a grunt as she hit the ground.

"Yer sure you don't have more than maps in here? Like those fancy travel books?" Applejack was

unprepared for the actual weight of the bag, but she lifted it with her mouth to place it on the sidewalk.

“Perhaps. Some of the books are more accurate than the scrolls,” the stallion shrugged. He waved over an attendant who brought out a large cart from inside the building.

“I also asked for a few books to read on the trip,” Twilight said, appearing from the other side of the carriage. The navy-blue hooded sweater fit snugly over her body, covering her cutie mark and - as intended - the clamp on her horn. Her saddlebags were a plain gray color, seemingly filled to the brim with books. “I figured I needed to see what I’ve missed. I have the ones I want to read now in my saddlebags.”

Rainbow hovered onto the sidewalk, wearing a thin denim jacket and a pair of shades on her head, “That shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll just pile them onto the cart for the train.” She lifted the bag with the maps - and Dawn - preparing to put it on the cart.

“That bag goes last, Ms. Dash.” Thunder Cloud and Applejack took a few moments to unload the carriage of the other small bags, placing the other large sack neatly in the corner of the cart. The stallion motioned to Rainbow Dash, who placed the map bag on top.

“This way, officer,” the attendant spoke, pushing the cart down one of the side entrances to the station.

They followed the side hallway until it opened up into a fairly large shopping area. Stores lined the hall selling an assortment of souvenirs, food, even clothing for the unprepared traveler. They rounded the corner past a Star Buck’s before arriving at a series of elevators. The bag attendant pressed the button to call an elevator car.

“How long is the train ride going to be?” Rainbow asked, breaking the lingering silence.

“About 10 days. If the lines need to be cleared from fall snow, it could take a few more,” Thunder Cloud said.

Applejack shook her head and stared at the guard, “**Ten** days? I thought you said that this was like a the ride ta Appaloosa?”

“In terms of comfort? Yes. However, our destination isn’t nearly as close as Appaloosa. Where we’re going is several **thousand** miles from home. Plus some distance we’ll have to cover by hoof.”

“But we’ve seen a dragon before, just outside of Ponyville! They can’t possibly be that far from home.” Rainbow looked clearly irritated with the stallion.

The elevator doors opened. Each of the ponies clambered into the elevator, but Thunder Cloud continued, “Indeed you have. I believe Miss Sparkle knows much more than I do on the matter of why they live so far away.”

“Their ancestral home has always been in the Far North. But a few decide to inhabit other free places where the environment isn’t regulated by pony kind. The tradition of territory is still very strong in their culture - space in the ancestral homeland sometimes isn’t enough.” Twilight beamed at her quick recollection of Dragon history. It had been ages since she last picked up the book it was in even before she had moved to Ponyville.

Dawn couldn’t help but be impressed. She had lay as motionless as possible to avoid raising suspicion. But that didn’t stop her from listening to where they were going. It would be important to plan ahead so she could force them to let her tag along on the rest of the trip. The whole point after all was to meet her mother.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she was lifted once more into the air before being set down on something hard and hollow. She heard the other bags landing somewhere below her.

Outside the attendant was walking away, while one of the conductor stallions began closing up the

baggage car. “You’ll be able to have someone retrieve your luggage during the ride. As you saw each bag has a tag attached to it with a number corresponding to your train ticket.” The conductor smiled at them, “Enjoy your trip.”