

Shadows of the Sun

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Chapter 10

As the sun receded over the landscape and signalled the end of the day, only a few hours separated the four cloaked ponies from Canterlot. They had passed through the border to Equestria and, once again, they were in their homeland. Yet despite their return, the country didn't feel like home. The wave of nostalgia that they had expected to wash over them upon seeing the familiar landscape was absent, hidden in some dark shadow. If anything, the scene had triggered a troubling recollection of their plan and how poorly established it really was. It left so many questions unanswered. How would they actually stop Princess Celestia when she returned? How would Princess Luna react to their plan? Would it all be too much, even for their combined strength, to handle?

"We're going to need Princess Luna's help with this, aren't we?" Goldenroot asked, giving voice to the apprehension they all shared, "Even if we get a hundred or a thousand other ponies to help us, we don't have any chance of stopping Princess Celestia without her sister's help. Only another alicorn is going to stand any chance of stopping her."

"But how can we convince her to turn on her own family?" Rarity asked earnestly, "Even if she knows that her sister is hallucinating, that she's gone mad, will Princess Luna admit it? Will she be willing to throw her in a cage like some animal?"

The question was one that they were all worried about. They were sisters and the bond they shared was nearly untouchable. They would do anything for each other, so why would one so readily lock up the other?

"I didn't want to have to ask Princess Luna for her help, because I was afraid of how she would react." the white unicorn continued, "For all we know, she may throw every one of us in the dungeon for merely suggesting the idea."

"We don't have any other options." Goldenroot explained, "We need her help."

"Don't be so sure, Goldenroot." Thunderhorn replied, staring at the stallion. "There is one other alternative, an artefact capable of storing massive quantities of magic. We could use it to stun the princess long enough to get her in the cell."

"I assume this was another one of Princess Celestia's creations?" Goldenroot asked. "Something she created to help her sister?"

"Yes." Thunderhorn answered, "She thought it might convince the council to change their minds. If regular unicorns could harness a power capable of matching that of the alicorns, then they would have another way to stop Nightmare Moon and the plan to

bring her back would not seem so dangerous.”

The old unicorn sighed deeply.

“But, like the prison, the council changed their mind to follow through with the plan shortly after its completion. Because of the danger that it posed, it was hidden away. It has the potential to level mountains and drain oceans so, if we’re not careful, we could destroy the entire city and everything in it.”

Rarity stopped in her tracks and glared at the old unicorn, “I refuse to take that chance, Lord Thunderhorn. Nothing is worth putting so many innocent lives in danger. We need to convince Princess Luna to help us or else find another way.”

Thunderhorn paused and turned to face the white unicorn, “What about the war? What about the lives lost from that? We only need to be careful and we can prevent any catastrophes.”

The other two ponies stopped as the unicorns started what they all knew would be a heated debate.

“I agree with Rarity. It’s not worth the risk.” Goldenroot exclaimed, “I’m hardly even willing to start a riot. Blowing up the capital and everyone in it is out of the question. I’ve already caused enough harm to this country...”

“What if we have no other choice?” Thunderhorn asked.

“Where is it?” Vortex asked abruptly, “With any luck, we won’t have to use it, but we should be prepared for anything. We don’t have to make our decision now, but if we find it and have it ready, we can leave our options open.”

“We can find it in the lowest catacombs of the castle, far below the dungeon we were held in.” Thunderhorn explained, “But it will be heavily guarded and it’s locked away behind a magical barrier.”

“Well obviously you must have some plan to remove the barrier or you wouldn’t have mentioned this thing, so how can we get past it?”

“I have a book in my house that explains both how to remove the barrier and how to actually use the artefact.”

The entire group was stunned by the sudden realization. Why was Thunderhorn in possession of something that he himself described as having the potential to level mountains and drain oceans?

“You mean you have instructions to a doomsday device in your basement?”

Vortex asked, interrupting the awkward silence.

“It’s not what you think.” Thunderhorn hastily intervened, “Princess Celestia gave me the book when I was still a general of the royal army. Although I suppose her trust was misplaced as I completely forgot about it until just now...”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t condone this.” Goldenroot interrupted, “If the Equestrian army is already on the border than we can’t afford to waste any time.”

Realizing the irony of what he had just said, the stallion started on his way down the path again. The others followed quickly, attempting to match his pace and determined to continue their argument.

“Why should we have to put all our eggs in one basket?” Vortex remarked, “You and Rarity realize the importance of convincing Luna and you’re both much more persuasive than Thunderhorn and I are.”

The old unicorn gave her a quick, rude glance.

“You can go see Luna and try to convince her while the general and I find this artefact thing.” she continued.

“That’s not really such a bad idea.” Rarity admitted, “Although I refuse to let you use this dangerous artefact in anything less than the most extreme circumstances, I think it’s important for some of us to stay away from Princess Luna. If she tries to throw us in the dungeon, then at least the others can still find a way to stop Princess Celestia.”

Goldenroot shook his head, “I don’t think we should split up.”

“We’re only wasting time if stick together.” Thunderhorn scorned, “Vortex and I will go to my manor and retrieve the book and then we’ll go grab the artefact. I don’t know how much time you’ll need to speak with Princess Luna, but it should only take us a couple of hours. However, we should organize a rendezvous somewhere safe.”

“Can’t we just meet you at your home?” Rarity asked.

“I don’t know if it’s safe there. Considering the fact that we weren’t supposed to come back, ponies may have looted my property. If we run into anyone, even a common thief, it will be all too obvious to them who we are.”

Thunderhorn’s words distracted the former council members, pulling them away from the important details of their journey and letting them drift away to their former lives. The fond memories of peaceful evenings spent alone, reading or just enjoying the quiet and gratifying nature of their unadulterated solitude, the cherished time with close friends and family sitting around a table, appreciating a home-cooked meal and each

other's company. Everything that was brilliant and respectable about the simple independence of their lives was defiled by the disturbing notion of other ponies rooting through each of their personal belongings. They were pitiable scavengers, taking everything they held dear for the sole purpose of their inane material value and stepping on their precious memories like they were merely dust and ash. It was contemptible and heart-wrenching; almost bringing tears to their eyes as they slowly trudged along the dirt path.

"How do you know they won't have taken the book you need?" Rarity asked, jerking them away from their diversion and back to the focal point of their discussion.

"I hid the book under the floorboards in the basement." Thunderhorn replied, "I never told anyone of its existence, so they won't find it until they start pulling my house apart, piece-by-piece."

"What about the tavern in the noble quarter?" Goldenroot suggested, returning their thoughts to the rendezvous point. "They're open fairly late."

"You're thinking in the right direction, but you need to lower your standards a little, Goldenroot." Vortex said, smirking slightly, "A group of hooded ponies will stick out like an earth pony in Cloudsdale. We should go to The Ivory Bear instead. It's right in the middle of the common quarter and there's a huge white bear on the sign so it's pretty hard to miss. They're open all day long and the ponies keep to themselves, so we shouldn't run into any problems."

"I know the place." Thunderhorn said, nodding his head, "I've been there on occasion. They make a good stew and their drinks are cheap and of a reasonable quality, though I doubt I will be drinking anything tonight. This is too important to be intoxicated for."

"I've never actually been inside, but I've seen the sign a few times before." Goldenroot said, "What time can we expect you to be there?"

"What time is it now?" Thunderhorn asked.

Goldenroot just shrugged.

"I think I might be able to help you with that, actually. Twilight taught me a spell for telling the time." Rarity exclaimed with a kind of bittersweet happiness, her joy plagued by the memories of her dearly departed friend.

She stopped and began to focus the magic around her horn. Simultaneously, Vortex turned away and seemed to lose herself in the bright, white moon above their heads. As a bright violet clock started to form in the air in front of the unicorn, Vortex snapped back to attention.

“Seven twenty-three.” said the pegasus proudly to the other members of the group.

The other ponies just looked at each other with strange expressions while the clock started to take shape. The hands, starting at the twelve, began to spin around the face and come to slow stop. The little hand pointed towards the seven and the larger hand pointed towards the space in between the four and the five.

Goldenroot laughed hysterically and fell to the ground while Vortex just smiled boastfully at her near pinpoint accuracy. The other two ponies exchanged puzzled glances.

“How exactly did you do that, dear?” Rarity asked, maintaining her confused expression and turning to the pegasus.

“Hey, you have your secrets and I have mine.” the blue mare responded smugly.

The two unicorns smiled and rolled their eyes as they started down the path again. Goldenroot, still laughing, rolled over and hopped back to his feet, wiping the joyful tears from his eyes.

“With any haste, we’ll be done and at The Ivory Bear at eleven o’clock sharp!” Thunderhorn yelled, not caring to turn his head around to face the two ponies behind him.

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Tactically, it was a foolish decision. Princess Celestia had left a large portion of the main regiment behind to both guard the enemy soldiers that were captured and assist their badly wounded allies in the fight within the Splinter Forest. Between the casualties of the war and the able bodied soldiers that were left behind, only half of the regiment remained. The alternative had been to execute the enemy soldiers and leave the wounded behind to fend for themselves. That was the tactically intelligent decision, but a horribly ruthless one nonetheless and Celestia would not succumb to the sickness that filled her veins. She would not let her hatred and lust for revenge take over and turn her into some kind of monster, but the sensation was undeniably growing stronger. Prance had killed so many of her soldiers and injured even more. They even had the audacity to directly attack the princess and cause her the immense pain that, although completely healed now, left an indistinct reminder whenever she flexed the muscle. To have the bones in your leg shattered like that was nearly a mortal wound and usually necessitated amputation of the damaged limb, so having it all heal so quickly was jarring to say the least.

Walking with a swift, but polished gait, the princess crested the large, rolling

hilltop. The flowers that blanketed the ground at their hooves were brittle, wilted and dead, a sign of the changing weather and the fast approaching winter season. The princess recognized the little plants; they were daisies, simple white flowers with a cheery yellow center, but they did not appear that way at the moment. The once wide petals were stringy and drooping with a strange pale brown colour spotting the edges. The dazzling yellow center had lost all of its beauty, replaced with a parched and unsightly brown.

Stopping, the princess peered out over the hilltop and down into the valley below. It was covered in the same flowers and what she imagined to have been a beautiful sight at one time, was now putrid and revolting. The horrible brown continued along the ground all the way to the walled city and the black pillar jutting up into the sky. The rumbling clouds in the skyline were not black, but they were a menacing dark grey colour. And although it would not rain on the day they stormed the walled city, the scene decorated her thoughts with angst and despair.

A burgundy pony with a black mane and grave look about his face had been following the princess closely and had just now stopped beside her. He had a deep gash cut into the side of his golden armour that revealed the plain silver metal beneath, a memento of the battle in the forest. A general of the royal army, he had been watching the rear of the battalion when they were attacked, but after discovering that the princess had been injured, he had refused to leave her side.

The princess had found his concern mildly ironic. She was leading him and everyone else into the fires of war and exposing them to all the dangers that followed and yet they were worried about her health? Those who had friends or family members injured in the fight had hurriedly rushed to their side and had just ignored the princess when she cried out. So did they care about her well-being out of some misplaced sense of honour and duty or was it a real emotion that they felt? Was she like a mother to them, even after placing them in a scorching fire like this?

“Princess Celestia, we have reached the assigned meeting point a days travel from the capital city of Prance.” the general noted, saluting the princess as he spoke.

“Let the soldiers rest awhile, General Redhoof.” the alicorn replied with an eerily monotonous tone as she gazed out across the landscape, “We have enough time to rest for a moment while the other detachments catch up with us.”

The general nodded and signalled to the army behind them. The golden mass of armoured ponies, which had been so attentively following the princess, immediately dispersed along the hillside. They removed their bags and gathered food or water, talked quietly amongst themselves or simply collapsed out of exhaustion.

She was pushing them too hard. They had travelled so far in such a small time and the inexperienced troops were growing weary and agitated. They weren't used to this kind of travel, but neither was she. And although she was able to prevent the pain of her

burning muscles with magic, she was quickly reaching the point of mental exhaustion.

She turned to face the army behind her and sat down, content to just look out across them as the group bustled with activity. They weren't the same ponies that she remembered from before the war. They weren't just tired, they were depressed and scared. They knew what they had to do and so they pressed on, but she recognized that they all just wanted to go home. No longer did they talk about the war. They did not talk about their fear of the battles ahead of them or the excitement of coming home as heroes. Instead, they talked about what really mattered, their friends and family. They talked about their homes, wives, husbands, daughters, sisters, brothers, and parents. They talked about the little fillies and colts as they played in the yard just outside their house. They talked about the simple gratifications of a hard day's work and relaxing afterward. They talked about what they once had and what they longed to experience again.

They don't fight for me. They don't really care about me, nor should they, the princess thought as she listened to them converse quietly. They fight for what they have. They fight to protect everything that's sacred in their lives and they know that, even if they die, they died fighting for a better life for someone else.

Is that what the soldiers of Prance believe as well? Do they believe they are fighting for a better future for their country or do they know the truth? And if they knew the truth, would they be willing to fight for it?

"They're not really so different from the flowers, are they General Redhoof?" she asked, expressing her thoughts verbally and turning to the general who was slowly wiping his brow.

"I'm sorry, your highness, but I'm not really sure what you mean." he answered.

"The flowers; they are wilted and dead now, but they had a beautiful and peaceful life in the past, didn't they?" she continued, staring out across the soldiers, "They're not really so different from the flowers."

"Please, your highness, do not talk about such things. You know that every soldier here is happy to fight for you. They know they're doing the right thing."

You trust in my judgement so willingly, general, but I'm no longer sure that I trust in it myself, she thought.

Noticing her concern, the general tried to ease her mind with a curt smile as another golden mass appeared on the horizon to the east.

Rising to her hooves, the princess pushed away her thoughts and turned to the crowd of ponies on the hillside, "Equestrians, your brothers and sisters of the eastern battalion have arrived! I expect you to show them a warm welcome as they are no doubt

as weary as you are!”

Murmurs of excitement drifted around the group and they shifted their attention to the east. The ponies were a pleasant sight, a reminder of the others that were fighting just as hard as they were. But as they drew ever closer, both the soldiers and the princess noticed that there were far fewer soldiers than they remembered. Whereas the main battalion was at half strength, the eastern battalion looked to be at nearly a third of its original size.

Have I really underestimated our enemy so much? Celestia thought, frowning at the eastern battalion that was approaching. Or have I overestimated our own might?

The princess waited in silence as the troops eventually made their way up the hill and towards her. Friends and family members, separated by the subdivision and reunited at last, rushed towards each other, greeting them warmly. Others seemed to panic and rush around the crowd, looking for someone who, whether left behind in the forest or met with a much crueller fate, was obviously not there.

A dark green, female pegasus made her way up the hill and saluted the princess with a nervous expression, “Major Swift Wing, reporting, your highness.”

“Where is Lieutenant Colonel Silvermane?” Celestia asked bluntly.

The pegasus lowered her hoof, “Colonel Silvermane has fallen in battle against Prance. As second in command of the regiment, I assumed command of the eastern division.”

“And what of the rest of your battalion, major?” General Redhoof asked with a grim expression, expecting a similar fate to have befallen them.

“A large number of our soldiers were injured in the fight, sir.” Swift Wing replied weakly, “We left some of our medics behind to assist the wounded and some of our soldiers to protect them. The rest are unfortunately... more permanent casualties.”

“I can only hope that the western battalion has better luck.” The general commented, “With only five thousand left in the central division and about...”

“Nineteen hundred, sir.” the pegasus interrupted.

The general swore under his breath.

“What the hell happened out there!?” he demanded.

“I... I think they were expecting us, sir.” she answered, “They ambushed us in the mountain pass when we were most vulnerable. We hardly had time to figure out what was

going on before we had taken nearly a thousand casualties.”

“There’s no way they could have predicted our movements exactly! I think we have a spy among us.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. They know their land well and they take advantage of it. They are not foreigners to war and strategizing. Predicting our movements would not be impossible for them.” Celestia intervened, “This only goes to show how prepared they were for our arrival. They knew we’d have a large army and the Splinter Forest, the mountain pass and the canyon to the west are choke points on the three most direct routes to the capital. But there isn’t any cover in between here and the capital, so I don’t think we should expect anything more until we lay siege to the city. They know better than to face us out in the open.”

“Do you think the western battalion was ambushed as well, princess?” Swift Wing asked, here gaze nervously darting from the princess’ face to her hooves.

“I’m not sure, but if they don’t show up by the morning, we will have to leave without them. We can’t afford to give the enemy any more time to prepare.” the alicorn replied, “Until then, we need to rethink our strategy. Our large numbers are only working against us, causing unnecessary casualties and slowing us down.”

“We have enough troops to blockade the city. We could defeat them with simple attrition warfare and wait for their inevitable surrender as they run out of food and resources.” the general suggested.

“If their leader truly is as cruel as I imagine him to be, he would rather watch every last citizen starve to death than surrender to us.” Celestia responded glumly, “I don’t want that to happen.

“However, I can lead a small team of pegasi and assault the pillar through the windows. Le Roi Pierre will be somewhere in that tower and if we confront him directly then their army will have to surrender. They cannot function without their leader.”

“I don’t think you should put yourself in danger like that, your highness. You’re going to lure every soldier in the city to your position.”

“We will still need to siege the castle, but it will be more of a distraction from our true intent than a necessary point of entry.” the alicorn admitted, “I would much rather end this quickly if possible and I have no qualms about putting my own life in danger. This is as much my fault as it is theirs and these ponies have already suffered far more than I could have ever imagined.”

The general sighed lightly, trying to mask his concern for the princess’ safety.

“I would be honoured to assault the pillar with you, Princess Celestia.” Swift Wing said, jumping back into the discussion.

“Thank you, Swift Wing.” Celestia smiled softly, “I will also need you to find eleven other capable pegasi to assist us. You are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Th... thank you, Princess Celestia. I’ll start gathering the pegasi immediately.”

The pegasus turned, bolted into the crowd and start shouting orders to the group, rounding up all of the pegasi and bringing them to one side of the group.

“General Redhoof, I will need you to lead the assault on the castle walls.” The princess explained, “We lack the capable supervision necessary to split the army into smaller sections and attack separate gates, so focus your strength on the front gate.”

“And what if I push through the main gate?” he asked.

“If you get passed the main gate, they will retreat their forces to the tower. Unfortunately, we don’t want that so I don’t want you trying to penetrate their defences until after the first hour. Given one hour, I’m sure that will be enough time to determine my fate.”

“Your highness, you can’t...”

“Under no circumstances, will you turn away. Even if I should perish, I want you to stop this lunatic. Do you understand, general?”

“Your highness, I don’t...”

“Do you understand!?” she repeated, glaring at the burgundy stallion.

“Of course, your highness.” Redhoof confirmed, “And what if the western battalion arrives?”

Celestia took a moment to think about the question he had posed. If the western battalion arrived, would it change her plans? Probably not. She was more concerned about their well-being than the military asset they provided her with. She just wanted to know that they were alright and that they had only been delayed for some fantastically dull reason. The very thought that more ponies had perished from her tactical stupidity was horribly dismal.

“If Lieutenant Colonel Dark Cloud survived and has sufficient numbers to do so, tell him to attack the western gate.”

“Of course.” The general replied, “Now, if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’m going to satiate my appetite. I haven’t eaten in days.”

Celestia just nodded and turned back to the black tower on the horizon, *one way or another, Pierre, this will all come to an end, but how deep a scar do we leave behind us? Will the passage of time prove me to be a saviour of your country and its freedom and you a ruthless, insane dictator pursuing some goal that was merely an illusion of your mind? Or will it be the opposite? For theirs are the only beliefs that really matter, not ours.*

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The streets of Canterlot were cold, dark and empty. The lights that fervently lit up the city at this time of the evening were all but extinguished, their inhabitants gone or simply too worried about their families and friends to stay up late into the night, only pretending to be careless and joyful. The nobility quarter, however, was a strange contradiction to the activity in the grim capital. The bright lights washing out into the wide streets and meticulous gardens illuminated the two cloaked ponies as they made their way across the district. It was completely different and, in its own way, insulting to the ponies that fought beyond their borders. These nobles, with their posh lifestyles and gleeful negligence to their duty and honour, were avoiding the war altogether. Not that they didn’t care, they just didn’t want to be involved, the slightest hint of danger scaring them away from the prospect of serving the nation they lived inside. For some there were other reasons as well. Indeed, some of these ponies felt betrayed by Princess Celestia’s recent decisions and they were acting this way in a silent rebellion against their monarch. They believed that the council should not have been eliminated, that a few ponies should not pave the way to their own disaster and that the public voice remained a necessary ingredient of the political choices made in their country, regardless of how private that public really was. With their democracy taken, they felt no particular attachment to their country anymore. They felt no need to participate in defending a government that no longer seemed to represent their interests. And so, these deserters of their own country, these ponies that chose not to fight in the war to the north, were entirely apathetic of the pain the rest of the city felt.

“I’ve never been to your house before, general.” Vortex said, her small grin barely visible under the hood of her cloak, “Is it as fancy as most of the places around here?”

Thunderhorn sighed deeply, “It was when I left it.”

The old unicorn stopped and gazed out upon the spectacular mansion in front of him, Vortex coming to a sudden halt when she realized that this striking building was his home.

“This... this is your place?” she asked doubtfully.

The building was not how he had remembered or Vortex had imagined it to be. The massive, blocky house had the word ‘traitor’ written across it in bright red paint, which against the blue walls and white trim, was painfully noticeable. The many windows were all smashed and broken, shards of glass littering his yard. The door was removed from its hinges and rested unpleasantly on the flowerbed to the right of the doorway. The trees and plants in his garden were burnt and destroyed, the scraps of foliage decorating the cobblestone path to the entranceway in an assortment of greens and browns. The sight was almost stomach churning and it left a foul taste in the unicorn’s mouth.

“I had not expected them to desecrate my property, only take the valuables and leave the rest as it was.” he responded irritably, stepping over the scattered shrubbery and approaching the doorway, “It’s almost hard to believe that someone would do this to anyone.”

Vortex said nothing, following the general through the opening and into his home to further inspect the damage inside the building. It wasn’t any more pleasant than the view from the outside and the walls displayed several more intense crimson words. Most were merely crude phrases and insults to the general, but one seemed to stand out among all the others and draw her gaze.

‘Why?’ it read.

Even I’m not sure I know the answer to that question, she thought, pulling her eyes away from the red paint and hurrying to catch up with the unicorn.

The old stallion was making his way around the corridors, stopping only just before the stairs as his own gaze was stolen away, not necessarily by the vandals, but by a simple, nearly untouched picture lying on the hard wooden floor. The frame was damaged in one corner, the glass cracked, but none of that affected the memory inside. It was a quaint photo of two smiling ponies, one a much younger image of the old stallion, the other a violet unicorn with long black hair hanging to one side of her face and brilliant light blue eyes.

Catching a glimpse of what had caused the unicorn to stop, Vortex interrupted his focus, “Is that you?”

“Yes.” he replied quietly, “From about thirty years ago.”

“Who’s that you’re standing with?”

There was a long silence as the old pony lifted the picture into the air, levitating it gently in front of his face with his magic.

“She was my wife.” he finally answered with a strangely pleasant tone, “The reason I became a soldier... a general... a politician... No one ever becomes a soldier and puts their life at risk without a reason...”

“She was my reason.”

He set the photo on a table nearby and continued down the hallway.

“Unfortunately, disease is something that no soldier can fight. If I had known what would happen, then maybe I would have become a doctor, but as we’ve both seen, life rarely ever gives you much foresight on the world.” he said, opening the door to the staircase that led deep into the dark basement below.

“I’m sorry, Thunderhorn. I didn’t mean to...” the pegasus apologized, not moving from her place in the hallway.

“You don’t need to apologize for anything, Vortex.” he interrupted, his horn flaring and lighting up the dark stairwell, “Even just a moment with her was enough to last a lifetime. I miss her now that she’s gone, but I’m not going to give up. She wouldn’t want that.”

Taking his first step down into the basement, he stopped and turned around to look back at the pegasus who seemed rather shocked to see the old unicorn react like that.

“But don’t you dare tell Goldenroot any of that.” he insisted with a grin, “I like him thinking that I’m just some stubborn old conservative jerk.”

He continued down the staircase with Vortex following close behind. The pegasus smirked when she thought about the pale green stallion and his never-ending feud with Thunderhorn.

The basement was nearly untouched in comparison with the rest of the house. There was no graffiti; the tiny windows near the ceiling were still intact and the work bench and tools sitting in one corner of the otherwise empty room were covered in a thin layer of dust.

“Doesn’t seem like they even bothered to come down here.” Thunderhorn said, “I guess they were bad carpenters too.”

Vortex smiled more brightly at the strange old unicorn, but she still couldn’t shake the feelings from their earlier conversation, *is he just messing with me?*

He walked towards the center of the room and started pulling the nails out of the floorboards one after another, setting them on the work bench in the corner. Lifting the

heavy board out of the way and setting it to one side, he pulled a dusty old tome out of the cavity and placed it on the work bench.

“Now, let’s make sure this is actually the book we need.” he mumbled, opening the cover and searching the pages.

Vortex wandered closer and looked at the pages as he flipped through and eventually stopped at a single page.

Locked away in that orb of her own being, she held it, now it holds her. She fought against us in times past, but what did she seek? They believe her a power hungry tyrant. We believe her a neglected and forgotten filly and so we wrung our knowledge so that we might birth her anew, redeem her in their intolerant eyes.

Time had aged only a little, but we loathe her absence and so much longer we cannot wait. It burns at our tendons, screams in our ears, pulls at our limbs and cuts into our heart like the sharpest of knives. So created, was the prison of our own holding and demonstrated within ‘twas our own capture, so that she might be nearer to us, so that we might have but one chance to see her stealing eyes, those delicate circles of blue so much like the one in the night sky, in ours once again.

But when the time was met, ‘twas a terrible fate that they would reject the most opportune moment that we had dreamed. They tossed aside our ambition, denied our ‘gamble’, they told. Our own sister, too powerful and wicked for us to contain? Prithee, tell us what has befallen you, dearest council? Dost thou not care for our kin’s wellbeing? No, not so, they plead. Their duty is to protect this nation, not to endanger it. What protection lies in unleashing a monster to the world? What protection do we provide in sacrificing the peace so that one might live anew?

We would not accept this heavy fate for our immortal sister. To live in thy lunar prison forever more would surely pull us and our sister to pieces and drive a stake through our sanity. ‘Tis our own fault, this fate of yours. We led thee astray, therefore, ‘tis our duty to lead thee back. Our youngest creation, a jewel of most glorious capacity, the crystalline orb now holds the key to thy redemption. We sought a power to match our own and this orb follows it to the very tooth and claw.

“Now they will not find us so fearsome, their fate so uncertain, for they hold the power to keep us both.” thought we.

‘Twas foolish to think it, such nonsense in our mind. They do not wish to see us and our sister together again. They do not wish to put our conscience to rest.

“If ‘twill not provide us with a key, it mustn’t provide us with anything at all.” said we to these barbarians against our will.

“Our most glorious one, we mustn’t destroy what took such length to create. For now, ‘tis a key we can use and a key it must remain.” the portly one answered back, almost maliciously so.

So now this jester of our aspiration and his devilish cohorts keep us and that infernal orb in the castle cellar, leaving it to mock our efforts with its presence. To us, ‘tis a key no longer, for now ‘tis our own undoing and will unlock no doors. We should have known better of ourselves. They are the principal of disaster. Their greedy hooves stole away the commoners’ voice under our own negligence. We thought if we had walked with them, they would walk with us, but ‘twas not to be.

We took a precaution, locked it away, sealed it with magic they know not how to eradicate. We think it best to keep it out of their reach, at least for this present time.

But they know now how this orb operates, so then we must as well. So that time doth not erase our memory, we wrote the directions in this magic book, protected from the damage of time and hidden away for safe keeping. Look to what follows, for it holds our secret.

“Yes, this is the book I’m looking for.” Thunderhorn said, taking note of the magic spells written below, “It tells us how to disengage the magical barrier and how to use this ‘crystalline orb’. It seems like we only need to fill the orb with our magical power and it will store it so that it can be unleashed all at once. We’ll need to find at least a dozen other unicorns to help us fill the orb, but that shouldn’t be difficult.”

“This is Princess Celestia, right?” Vortex asked, almost completely ignoring his words, “Doesn’t she sound kind of... crazy to you?”

Thunderhorn laughed, “She wasn’t crazy when she wrote this, Vortex, she was just angry. She wrote this immediately after the council rejected her plans to free Luna from the moon hundreds of years ago, consequently that’s also why she’s using such an ancient and difficult tongue. But after spending the last decade working on this plan and then simply getting a ‘no’ from the council and a refusal to destroy all the dangerous artefacts that she had created for it, I think it was reasonable for her to be angry at this point.

“However, I was a little surprised she didn’t change it all when she gave me a copy of what is essentially her diary, but when I asked about it, she just laughed and said, ‘I like to keep things around that remind me and everyone else that I’m still just a pony on the inside. I have emotions, just like you and just like you, I’m vulnerable to overreacting every once in while. I think it’s important to remember that.’

“She really is a good pony, Vortex. She’s only trying to help us, but everything that’s happened over the past few months was just too much for her to handle. I’m sure we can find a way to bring her back to her senses, it’s just going to take some effort on

our part.”

“I hope so, Thunderhorn.” the pegasus replied, shaking her head and starting up the stairs, “This is turning into a real mess.”

~

“We’re lucky there’s only one, but how are we going to get passed him?” Goldenroot asked, watching the armoured pony from around the corner of a building.

“*Well*, you may have forgotten, but I haven’t been branded a traitor just yet.” Rarity answered, “I’ll distract him and you can sneak around.”

Goldenroot chuckled quietly, “Do you ever think you’re exploiting your own persuasiveness, Miss Rarity?”

“Oh, *most certainly not*, Sir Goldenroot.” the unicorn replied with a curt smile, lifting off her hood and fixing her long, delicate hair, “A proper mare deserves those benefits.”

Goldenroot smiled at her reaction and watched in silence as she gracefully walked out into the open and then towards the guard. After a moment, and as if on cue, the unicorn seemed to pull the guard’s attention away from the entrance and towards the moon above. Noticing the opportunity, Goldenroot slipped around the corner and approached the doorway, hugging close against the stone wall as he neared the opening.

“I’m sorry miss, I agree it’s really quite romantic, but you’re distracting me from my work.” the guard said, starting to turn away from the moon and back towards the door.

“Oh, well... umm...” Rarity panicked, noticing Goldenroot stopped and standing wide-eyed near the doorway.

Her horn shone dully and she lifted the pony’s helmet off his head and tossed it into the courtyard in the opposite direction of the pale green stallion, the metal clanging loudly against the hard rock as it landed.

“Oh, I’m *so sorry*, I didn’t mean to do that.” she exclaimed loudly as the pale green stallion ducked inside the castle and out of sight.

“Honestly, miss!” the guard yelled, “I don’t have time for your nonsense! Is there, or isn’t there something you want from me!?”

“Oh, actually yes, I need to see Princess Luna.” she said meekly.

“Just go!” he said, pointing through the doorway, “I’m sure she can handle one obnoxious unicorn.”

“Now see here!” she replied, annoyed that the guard had insulted her elegance, “I am not...”

She stopped when she noticed that Goldenroot was giving her a strange look, his eyes like saucers from around the doorway, and decided it might be best not to anger the guard with something so trivial.

“Alright, sorry.” she said quickly.

Embarrassed, the unicorn rushed past the irritated guard and inside the castle. When she had made significant progress down the hallway, Goldenroot ducked out of a corner and walked up beside her.

“I thought you were going to kiss him for a moment there.” he smiled. “And then, not a moment later, I thought you were going to kick him in the face.”

“Oh please, Sir Goldenroot, he was far too gruff and unkempt for my liking.” she said, scrunching up her face, “Even in times of absolute distress, a mare mustn’t lower her standards.

“And calling me *obnoxious* of all things! That is something entirely worthy of a swift kick to the face.”

Goldenroot smiled more brightly as they quickened their pace down the hallway. When they finally arrived at the door, they were surprised to see that there wasn’t a single guard standing outside the moon princess’ room. In fact, the entire hallway had been completely devoid of any other ponies whatsoever.

“Now what do we do?” she asked, staring at the closed door, “This is the exact same predicament I was in before and we all know how well *that* turned out...”

“I don’t think our situation necessitates a formal acknowledgement.” Goldenroot said, pushing open the door and walking into the room, “We just have to hope for the best.”

“Sir Goldenroot!” she exclaimed accusingly, “I thought you knew better than to barge in on a princess like that!”

Goldenroot rolled his eyes, *Do you even realize how hypocritical that is? You did the exact same thing!*

Hearing Rarity's voice, the princess, who was standing on the balcony and peering off into the distance, turned around to face the two cloaked ponies standing in her bedroom.

"Oh! My dearest apologies, Princess Luna. That was so *very rude* of us." Rarity apologized, bowing her head slightly.

"I already know why you're here." the alicorn said with an empty expression.

"You mean you already know that your sister is..." Goldenroot replied, trying to find the right words to finish his sentence with.

"Insane?" Luna replied coldly, turning back to look off the balcony.

The word seemed to linger in the air around her, the princess losing herself in a storm of her own emotions. The very thought of her sister pierced her heart and filled it with misery, yet it did not bring tears to her eyes. She hated how her sister had fallen to the whim of an illusion and how she had done nothing to stop it, but she was not angry. Instead, she could only be described as beautifully mundane. She showed no joy, no sadness, no anger, no regret, no emotions whatsoever, but in her heart, she felt everything at once.

Celestia was her sister, her family, her friend. She was the sister that forgave her for breaking the trust they shared for what seemed like an eternity, for terrorizing the world in her own selfish ambition. She was the family that she grew up with, who protected her and inspired the courage and hope necessary for her to overcome the grief of their parents' passing. She was the friend that knew how to make her smile, make her laugh and showed her the beauty of the amazing world they lived in. Without her, she would be so very different, the entire world would be so very different.

But now that sister was gone, snatched away by the very same emotions that she had worked so hard to help Luna overcome. She was caught in a whirlpool of deceit and hallucinations. The world was convoluted in her eyes and she was convoluting herself to match it.

"Then you must also realize that we need your help." Goldenroot said, removing his hood and attempting to provoke a reaction from the paralyzed princess.

"First, you must answer me this," Luna asked, turning to the stallion and stepping towards him, "why was the drought so terrible, Goldenroot? I know that Celestia knew why, but she would not tell me. She only gave me the very same canned response that she gave everyone else, that Prance and the council were responsible for it and everything else that's happened.

“So I want to know, is it the truth? Are you really responsible for this?”

Goldenroot stared back at her with an indecisive look in his eyes, *Should I lie to her and pretend that I don't know what happened? Should I fake my innocence so that she might help us?*

After much contemplation, a grim look formed on the stallion's face. He had reached a conclusion about what he would tell the princess, but he wasn't sure if it would ultimately prove to be the correct one.

“I was responsible for that, Princess Luna.” he said, admitting the truth. “But I alone was cooperating with Prance and worsening the drought, the other council members are innocent.

“I wanted to expand the council and our political system to include the commoners. I wanted to restore the equality and efficiency that your sister had intended for the council to have. At the same time, Prance wanted to establish trade routes with Equestria. They were in desperate need of resources they did not have and they needed our help. We both had our goals and we both thought that worsening the drought was an obligatory action to get around the inefficiencies and stubbornness in the current council.

“It was a mistake, I know that now and I regret my decision. But even if no one ever forgives me for it, I still want to try and fix the problems I have created. I want to apologize for what I've done, but I need your help.”

Luna turned back towards the balcony and watched the dazzling night sky as she pondered his explanation, *Then she wasn't really lying to me after all.*

The two ponies sat in silence as they waited for a reply, the princess ignoring their existence completely. She had all the answers now, but it only seemed to tangle her understanding of the truth even more.

“I cannot help you, Goldenroot.” Luna said, still watching the night sky, “You toyed with our lives and hurt innocent ponies so that you might further your own ends. Because of you, my sister is fighting a losing battle with her grasp on reality. She cannot discern truth from lies and I'm beginning to think that neither can you.”

She turned to the stallion and fixed a piercing glare into his eyes, “You say you want to apologize, that you want to help and make things right again, but if you really want to help, you'll stay out of our affairs. You'll leave us alone and you'll go back from whence you came.

“It may take precious time, but she will come to her senses. I will make sure of it.”

“Please, Princess Luna, surely you must realize that this war has to end before any more ponies’ lives are put needlessly in harm’s way?” Rarity pleaded, “They’re fighting a senseless war! It has to come to an end.”

“And what exactly do you suggest I do about it?” Luna asked, “Call the army back? She will only march them time and time again and we will only be dragging on these already tragic circumstances.

“I do not think that she is that far from the capital now and, soon enough, it will be over and I can pull her back into our reality, no matter how harsh it is for her to face. But only when this ends, will she give me the attention I so desperately need to do so.”

“I’m sorry princess, but I won’t accept that fate for our country or for theirs.” Goldenroot replied, “We can still stop this before it gets any worse, but we may need to imprison your sister to do so.”

The alicorn focussed a truly smouldering look of disgust upon the pony in front of her.

“That seems to be your solution to everything, isn’t it?” she said harshly, “We make one mistake and you want to send us away forever and let the infinite passing of time be our judgement.

“Would you have her sent to the moon? Seal her in a prison of stone? What cruel fate have you planned for her to spend the rest of her days as a victim to?”

“Princess Luna, please listen to us!” Rarity begged, a deep concern in her eyes, “We would never want to imprison her endlessly like that. You must believe that our goals are the same. We only need somewhere safe to confront her and convince her of the truth, but as you stated, that will take time and I doubt she will accept it willingly.

“There is a magical prison below the castle that we can use. If we can only just talk to her, then perhaps we can stop this.”

“Then throw her in prison if you must, Rarity. I will not interfere with your plans nor will I play any part in them.” the princess exclaimed, turning back to the balcony. “She may be insane, but she is still my sister and my family and I refuse to help the traitor, who has sent her and everyone else into this nightmare, banish her even further. Do not forget that he is the reason your friend is now dead.”

Goldenroot’s determined expression fell immediately upon remembering the poor young filly that had disappeared on her journey to Prance.

“That was an accident.” the unicorn stuttered, her lips trembling. “He cannot be held responsible for that.”

“Not everyone can be as generous with their forgiveness as you are, Rarity.” the alicorn replied.

“I’m sorry, Princess Luna.” Goldenroot affirmed to the best of his ability, given the circumstances. “But even if it is against your will, I will not just give up. We will find some way to stop your sister without your help.”

Concluding that the princess would not aid them, the two ponies left her in the bedroom alone, gently closing the door behind them. The ruler of the night silently gazed out over her stars, bright holes in the dark blanket of the tranquil atmosphere, and surrendered to her anguish.

What has become of us, sister? she thought, warm tears trickling down her face, Are we to be feared by everyone and loved by no one? Must our lives always be filled with such despair?

Author’s notes:

Hello everyone! I really hope you enjoyed the chapter and I’m sorry it took so long. I had to study for midterms, work on projects and I got sick with pneumonia. Fun!

Thank you so much to everyone that is so diligently watching this now. I was absolutely ecstatic to realize that I had been put in the feature box on FimFiction, even if it was only for a day.

I would like to thank my editor, Specter Von Baren, for the amazing work he does with this and his prompt replies. He’s been working on another story of his own lately, so watch out for that over the next little while.

And as always, if you have any questions or comments about the story, you can reach me at my email: admin@theamberfox.ca I’ll also be keeping a close eye on the comments below the story.

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