

THE BLACK GATE

(1)

In the beginning, there was nothing but Equestria.

Spanning hundreds of miles in all directions, the vast pony domain of Equestria sat in the middle of the known world. The Griffin Kingdoms of the North were marred by civil strife and borderline anarchy, a defining characteristic not only of the many Griffin Kingdoms, but of their inhabitants themselves. To the west were the Chillypeak Mountains, the dwelling of the various Dragon Clans, each vying for dominance over the others. Fortunately, though, while they were destructive when unified, the dragon clans were powerless while scattered. To the east was the Everfree Forest, an ancient land long abandoned for reasons unknown to all but a few ponies. There, nature reclaimed in silence what pony settlements had dotted its ominous presence centuries ago. To the south were the Great Plains, unexplored and wild. It seemed it would forever remain uncharted, as frequent exploration missions always failed with a mysterious and unexplainable consistency. A popular lye was how one could be 'cursed with the southern luck'.

And so Equestria sat in the middle of all this. Long ago, ponies had affectionately referred to it as the 'Central Kingdom', ruled by their loving Princesses, the Regal Sisters: Celestia and Luna. Both ponies were unmatched in age, and were even rumored to be older than the land itself. However, they were reluctant to share their true age, or the true origins of Equestria for that matter. So, for better or worse, the ponies of Equestria lived in a joyous and prosperous land yes, but in an admittedly ignorant one as well.

Many generations of prosperity resulted in a consistent outpouring of support for the two sisters. Whenever trouble would arise, legend tells that the two Princesses were always able to defeat it. There are ancient tales of would-be plagues of darkness threatening the land, only be unquestionably beaten back by Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. However, there have been no written accounts of these such 'plagues', and obviously nopony is old enough to remember such a time. Nopony was about to question either of the Princesses, either, especially after the Second Nightmare Moon Crisis. The Second

Nightmare Moon Crisis would prove to be a turning point in the history of Equestria, as historians would hail this event as the unfortunate end to the 'Pax Equestria', which had lasted for one thousand years.

Those who did suspect that the Second Nightmare Moon Crisis did foreshadow a collapse of the Dual Monarchy were silenced forever, however, when the long-lost Elements of Harmony resurfaced in the form of six young fillies. Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy, Rarity, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie-- Magic, Kindness, Generosity, Honesty, Loyalty, and Laughter. However, many would later agree that the appearance of the Elements of Harmony further flung Equestria into a 'passive' state. Perhaps, however, they deserved a respite after the Second Nightmare Moon Crisis. Such a threat to the safety of Equestria hadn't been seen in the last thousand years, during the First Nightmare Moon Crisis. So who was not to think that future trouble couldn't be far, far off, perhaps another thousand years? Ten thousand years? Perhaps such trouble would never be seen again? We cannot pin blame for this kind of thinking, however, on anypony, and it would be foolish to do so anyways. History, as it always would, marched on regardless.

However, as we all know, the ponies of Equestria did not get such a respite. Shortly after the end of the Pax Equestria, those many of years of prosperity, Equestria fell farther than it had ever had in it's known history. And to this day, my friends, we remain in this Dark Age. Hmmm? What's that? How did it all begin? Well, you could say it began with a small pegasus-pony who we know as 'Exotic'. It really wasn't her fault what happened, but it is understandable why her name bears a negative connotation today...

A turquoise pegasus-pony flew parallel to the glittering Equestrian skyline. The pony's long, sapphire-green mane provided a stark contrast with the blues of the mid-morning sky as she tried to gain speed. Peering down with bright-blue eyes, all of Equestria lay before her. The Lake Mead River Valley was famous for its rolling hills and meandering rivers that stretched for countless miles in all directions, and boasted some of the most fertile land in all of Equestria. The nearby Whitetail Forests' trees stood silently rooted in a solemn vigil, protective of the

ancient ruins and secrets within. Flying high but just beneath the clouds, Exotic inhaled the dewy sting of the wet morning air as she flew top-speed to her destination. Her friends were always teasing her for not staying in one place long enough to enjoy life, her being a dispatch-runner to Canterlot. She didn't mind though, it really wasn't in her nature to slow down anyways.

She looked up. Clouds flew by and more clouds replaced them, creating a panorama of beautiful and perfectly blended hues of whites and blues. *The morning sky*, she thought. *This kind of silence, with the perfect atmosphere to fly to--* Exotic's nose twitched. Something was wrong.

The pegasus-pony flipped her brakes and stopped abruptly in mid-air, frowning. She had flown across this lane every day for several years, but something suddenly seemed out of place. The pegasus-pony couldn't quite put her hoof on it, but something about Lake Mead was definitely different. Exotic glanced down and surveyed the familiar landscape, but couldn't see anything immediately *wrong* with it, per say. She frowned, confused. The feeling of displacement was so powerful she was unable to shake it off and resume her flight. Exotic surveyed the landscape.

Lake Mead at first glance seemed no different than it always was, being the large body of water Exotic flew across before entering Canterlot several miles away. However, something was definitely amiss. Then the pegasus-pony noticed it: Lake Mead, normally vibrant and sometimes even violent in crashing against the shore in its wake, was uncharacteristically calm. Calmer, in fact, than it had ever been before. It was after this revelation that the curious pegasus-pony's back seized up, Exotic feeling a sudden splitting ache in her upper-back and wings. Flying nonstop from San Franciscolt to Canterlot had taken it's toll on her wings. *I shouldn't have stopped flying so abruptly*, self-lectured the pegasus-pony. *Well, I guess I can take a quick stop*, she thought, her frown quickly disappearing. *It's... nice. I've never seen Mead this quiet before.*

She landed roughly, the pegasus-pony being much more accustomed to landing mid-gallop. Her hooves touched the soft, still grass. The teal pegasus-pony inhaled deeply, expecting the rush of smells of dew and tree bark but instead receiving... nothing. Exotic tilted her head in confusion. Where were the rich aromas of the swampy marsh, the fresh water? Come to think of it, where were the birds, the rabbits? Exotic slowly started to back away from the dense forest, to Lake

Mead, suddenly cautious. She backed up too far, and her left hoof connected with the water. The water, far from being a summer warm, was instead icy-cold. It felt as if she had connected with a solid plate of ice, but instead of slipping her hoof had gone right through it. Exotic pulled her hoof back as if she had been burned. She shook herself off vigorously by the lakeside, and caught a glimpse her own reflection of Lake Mead. She saw herself: the stylish, green mane; the sleek, turquoise coat- *All, of course, in top physical condition!* she affirmed to herself confidently. But why had the water been so *cold*? Exotic's frown returned as she looked closer into the lake.

That was when she saw it. A tidal wave-- not of water, but of something far darker than simple lake water-- in her reflection. In fact, it seemed to be bearing down right on her from behind! She whipped around, half-expecting to be drenched, clenching shut her eyes tightly while raising her hooves in what she knew to be a vain attempt to shield herself. She remained that way for several seconds, and when she felt nothing, opened her eyes. . The puzzled pony blinked once. Then again. DOWN

Oh, you silly filly, she thought to herself. *You should get more sleep from now on to avoid hallucinations. It'd be pretty bad if they appeared in flight!* Chuckling, she turned back to Lake Mead. However, without warning as she was about to take off, a searing pain overtook her in her back-left hoof that made her knees buckle underneath themselves. She turned to her hoof, flinching, and saw that it's normal coloration had turned to black, like a smear of black paint on her normally shining blue-green coat.

"What the-" she began, but quickly stopped as the pain spiked. Looking closer, Exotic then noticed something strange about the dark area on her left hoof. It appeared-- it appeared to be spreading. Black tendrils shooting out of the splotch of paint-- it was starting to cover her entire body. They oozed some kind of tar-ish slime that Exotic was immediately repulsed at, and slapped themselves lazily around her stomach, coiling several times over, before-- before seeming to literally melt into her coat, turning it black.

"GAH!" *What the...* Exotic looked in the distance, making out the vague outline of the city of Canterlot not too far away, high in the mountains. *I've got to get to Canterlot... away... away... AWAY!* Knowing that just *somepony* at Canterlot would be able to help her, Exotic took off, flying

faster than she had ever thought possible. All the while, she tried to ignore the enormous pain that had enveloped her body.

There was a low rumbling of thunder across the dark Canterlot sky. It would rain soon, Princess Celestia could tell, and it would be quite a heavy rain indeed. *Very, very curious*, she thought. *We had just such a downpour yesterday; we won't need another until at least next month.* Princess Celestia closed her eyes while maintaining her usual serene smile, and silently deliberated in her mind. The throne was quite comfortable and posh with red and purple cushions, and she fought off the unshakable impulse to nap.

A few yards away, it was Strider's first month out of the barracks, guarding Her Royal Highness herself, Princess Celestia. The yellow-maned pony shivered inside his brown coat. Admittedly, and despite his post, Strider still had yet to fully adjust to the cool air of Canterlot, so high in the mountains. However, he had lost the nervous fidget that had defined his first week of guard duty, but not before the other guards had harassed him for it. Strider exhaled, and a small white wisp escaped, flying out of his mouth.

"Is that my *breath*? I can see my *breath* here?" muttered the shivering guardspony in desperation.

Princess Celestia seemed to nod to herself and raised her left hoof, beckoning towards Strider.

The brown pegasus-pony had never been directly addressed by Princess Celestia. There was of course the opening ceremony (Strider remembered Princess Celestia announcing that her sister was in 'desperate' need of a suitor), and the Summer Sun Celebration the better part of a year ago (Strider remembered Princess Celestia espousing that anypony who felt 'attraction' towards her sister should step forward), but never something like this. He tried to call out, but-- *Oh no. No. Not now of all times!* Strider felt his throat constricting, another one of his nervous habits that he had yet to conquer. The brown pegasus-pony knew he didn't have long before he would lose his speech completely. In desperation, Strider called out loudly to let Princess Celestia know that he was indeed ready and willing to serve.

“Yes, Princ-sssss ” wailed Strider, using the last of his air to address Princess Celestia. He immediately clutched his chest, and started wheezing, trying to catch his breath, rolling around on the ground. He managed to see the Sun Regent’s horn glowing, and suddenly felt an enormous calming sensation in his lungs, as if he had been freed after months in the dungeon. He gasped for air, sputtering and wailing.

The other guardspony, Strider’s senior officer, facehoofed.

The brown guardspony immediately clamped his mouth shut, the damage done. He then inched his way over to her, his face half an inch off the ground. Strider could tell the Princess was suppressing an urge to giggle, but instead maintained her smile. The guardspony slowly bowed before her, and the Princess leaned in close to speak with him, speaking softly, Strider hoped, to alleviate further embarrassment.

“Oh, Strider, it’s more than fine, so don’t worry. The more often you are on duty, the faster you will become accustomed to it, correct?” Princess Celestia saw the guardspony smile slightly. “Now lift your head. I have an assignment for you, Strider, if you don’t mind.” Strider was beside himself. *If I don’t mind? Oh wow, Celestia’s got to be the most caring and--* Strider whipped his head up, eager to please. Strider’s lengthy mane, however, flew through the air-- and landed square on the Princess’s snout.

Uh-oh.

“Ah...”

Strider saw it coming, and was horrified. He flung himself backwards, mane and all, but it was too late.

“Aaah...”

The other senior guardspony’s eyes were glued to Princess Celestia. This would be good.

“Hach-choO!” The sneeze penetrated the throne room, causing several retainers to turn heads.

Oh wow, I just made her sneeze. I made a Princess of Equestria sneeze.

Princess Celestia was still reeling from her uncharacteristic outburst, face contorted in an expression of shock and dizziness. Strider didn't even think it was possible for Princesses to sneeze. His heart sunk. The guardspony managed to make out his Princess's visage, eyebrows crossed in what he hoped wasn't anger.

It's the guillotine for me.

“Princesses don't sneeze.” Strider's buttermilk eyes widened as the Sun Regent regained herself and stared calmly at the guardspony. Strider realized that he didn't even have anypony to say a prayer to.

“Right as, uh, always, your Highness! I didn't mean to, uh, *assault* you with my mane and cause-”

“Princesses don't sneeze, my little guardspony.”

A light went off in Strider's head. The guardspony responded softly, regaining confidence with each word.

“I... can't... imagine what you're speaking off, Princess Celestia. I didn't hear anything, did you?”

Princess Celestia's eyes narrowed at her young Royal Guardian. After a heated few seconds of amused staring, the Sun Regent regained her famous smile, eliciting a very loud sigh of relief from Strider. She nodded, silently, and beckoned once more with her hoof to the guardspony. Strider took pain to avoid any other such mistakes and gingerly trotted over to Princess Celestia, thanking his good fortune.

There was another pause. Then:

“Strider, this weather is particularly dreadful, and I don’t see why it’s necessary. Please, inquire as to why it is in the Canterlot Weather-Brigade’s quarters in the city, if you don’t mind,” said the Princess softly.

Strider’s will to fulfill his Princess’s wishes sounded off deafening clangs as the guardspony’s armored hooves hit the floor of ornately carved marble tiles. Each told a segment of the lengthy story of Princess Celestia’s reign. Strider liked looking at them while standing guard, there were hundreds of them. The Throne Hall’s red carpet was at least half a mile in length alone, something that although Princess Celestia saw no purpose in, the architect-ponies of long ago apparently did. Strider eventually disappeared out of sight, and Princess Celestia eased herself, faithful in her dedicated guardspony.

There was a long pause. The Weather Brigade’s offices were several miles away from the Royal Palace, so Celestia nestled herself comfortably on her throne, again becoming a paragon of serenity. However, when she looked outside it was clear that the storm was determined to act against her, growing more intense and chaotic as time went on. Princess Celestia sadly noted that with the amount of water the storm was pouring on them would almost certainly cause flooding in the scattered settlements below Canterlot. She looked at her remaining Royal Guardian, a guardspony by the name of Silver Shield.

Silver Shield was without a doubt the eldest of her guards, and remained as a part of the Princess’ Royal Guard only because of the lasting impression he had had on Princess Celestia many, many years ago. It was Silver Shield who Princess Celestia had constantly picked as her personal guardspony when it was insisted upon that she have protection in potentially hostile lands. The guardspony was not yet old, however, and was known of as a role model to other guardsponies. Eventually, his constant contact with the Princess culminated into him being named as her ‘Personal Champion’, a title that he obviously cherished with great pride. Perhaps it was because of his attitude: the guardspony spoke for far too long to the Princess about topics far too beneath her, and became in the eyes of other castle staff far too close to Celestia than anypony should be. She held him close for these very reasons. Silver Shield was a friend first and one of the castle staff second, something the Sun Regent wished could be said for

everpony in the castle. Princess Celestia was known to take Silver Shield's consideration over trusted diplomats and other ancillaries, much to the ire of the Canterlot political elite and nobility. Silver Shield had even once publicly introduced Princess Celestia as 'She-Who-Dominates-Our-Miserable-Lives' at a diplomatic conference between Equestria and the Dragon Federation, resulting in distinctly audible gasps from the officials of the former but bellowing guffaws from the officials of the latter. It was certainly no coincidence that that day saw the signing of a memorandum of 'Mutual Understanding' between the two races, which lay the groundwork for the formal 'Treaty of Friendship' between the two races several months later. Silver Shield was also considered quite fetching by the castle mares. The guardspony sported a snow-white coat, and, being true to his name, a wild and unkempt silver mane that seemed to flirt endlessly with the wind.

"This certainly is some foul weather we're having, hmm? *Your* kind of weather, wouldn't you say?" Princess Celestia teased.

The guardspony turned his head to his Princess, and rolled his blue eyes. The guardspony gave a very audible and clearly disrespectful '*humph*', all while smiling out of the corner of his mouth. Princess Celestia was not amused: her usual serene smile faltered for a quick second as she bored holes of the sun's fire directly Silver Shield's eyes. The pegasus-pony didn't even blink. The first time he had done such a thing, Celestia had thought nothing of it. The second time, Silver Shield had excused himself vigorously and promised that it would not happen again. The third time, Princess Celestia gave him a terse warning that a 'time-out' on the moon may be necessary if it happened again. The fourth, fifth, and sixth times had followed a short few seconds after the third, and the Princess had tried best to contain herself.

She realized, or at least reasoned, that her guardspony had been testing her temper. Celestia often used his brush-offs as a way to control that temper. Princess Celestia had always been complimented on being peaceful and passive, but *that* was only after, *how* many times had Silver Shield annoyed her like that?

"Eight thousand, nine hundred and seventy-two times," replied Silver Shield smugly, and Princess Celestia realized that she must have been wondering out loud. She quickly regained her composure, turning her head away from her friend, trying to hide a creeping smile creeping

onto her face from him.

“Yes, well, don't blame me if you suddenly find yourself unable to breathe.” said Celestia cheerfully.

“Oh, yes, to be sure. We *all* fear the wrath of our mighty Queen,” smirked the guardspony.

“*Princess!*” insisted Princess Celestia. It was common knowledge that she was referred to as a 'Queen' when she was not present, which annoyed her to no end. Silver Shield, as always, delighted in taking it a step further, and would frequently address her as a 'Queen' in front of others guests.

“Po-tae-to, po-tah-to. Hmmm... Speaking of potatoes, perhaps we should all bestow onto you a new title: the right and honorable 'Potato-Queen' of Equestria?” inquired Silver Shield, stroking his chin thoughtfully and stifling a laugh. It was a childish joke, true, but if not anything, Silver Shield *did* alleviate the painful silence that Princess Celestia found herself surrounded with all too often in the stuffy castle.

“I am controlling my emotions right now, Silver Shield. Thank you. But enough is enough.”

“You only had to ask, you know. I'm nervous, though, at Strider's lengthy break.”

“You would know him more than I would, Silver Shield. He's *your* protege. Is he as dependable as-”

CRASH!

Silver Shield turned his head. The sound had emanated definitely from a long way away.

“What do you believe that was?” said Celestia, maintaining a serene smile.

“Wasn't from the kitchen, Potato-Queen,” said Silver Shield gruffly, Princess Celestia's left

eyebrow twitching slightly. "Which means it probably wasn't a cooking accident like the loud noises heard in this castle are normally from. It would appear that it came from the East Entrance. Probably some kind of flying accident with some moronic pegasus-" Silver Shield was cut off as the sound of ponies could suddenly be heard from the East Wing, yelling loudly in surprise and shock.

Silver Shield stopped himself, shaking his head. No, those sounds weren't the yells of surprise and shock, they were screams of panic and fright. The guardspony flinched at a particularly loud scream. He quickly turned to a frowning Princess Celestia, who the wizened pony could tell was very much disturbed.

"That description does not seem to fit and describe why we would be hearing the panic-stricken yells of my subjects," replied Celestia, resolutely standing from her golden throne, wings stretched wide.

"The other guards know the protocol for this sort of thing. I suspect that they've gone to deal with the disturbance first. I believe it'll settle down in some time. Let us remain here for now, your Highness. With luck, the Royal Guardians will resolve the situation without delay." Princess Celestia nodded curtly, and sat, closing her eyes in what Silver Shield had dubbed 'Regal Meditation'. Princess Celestia took in air so softly and daintily that Silver Shield never heard it, and exhaled similarly. Silver Shield made a note to himself to conceive some way to mock his seemingly breathless Princess. Time passed painfully slowly.

Sitting through the panicked yells of ponies proved to be impossible a task, even for a Princess. And so eventually, after maybe a minute, the Princess stood again, determined to find out what was wrong or amiss in her castle. She glanced fiercely at Silver Shield, who immediately understood her silent order. It was impossible to mistake Princess Celestia's 'serious' look, on account of how uncommon it was seen. He hastily trotted over to the large double-doors leading into the rest of the castle. It appeared that as they approached the doors, the yells and screams grew louder, becoming extremely disconcerting for Silver Shield.

Silver Shield tensed, looking nervously at the large windows that were littered throughout the Grand Hall, almost seeing dragons burst through them and other such nonsense. He put his

hoof to his head, massaging it. He looked for the smile, Celestia's noble and inspiring smile. Satisfied he, flung the massive doors.

“AaaaaaaAAaaaaAAaaaAaaaAaAAAAHHHH?!” UP

The Moon Regent flung herself backwards to avoid being crushed by the massive stone doors, hitting the wall behind her hard and eliciting a loud *THUMP!* from the it. She felt a short, but sharp stab of pain. Her ears rang for a few short seconds, but the pain quickly passed.

“Sister! Are you okay?” asked Princess Celestia, hurrying over to her sister. Luna gingerly rubbed her side, and was able to immediately dispel pain away entirely. She tried for a slight smile to assure her older sister that everything was all right. *But what were those screams?*

“Sister, I think something's wrong,” Luna said softly, still massaging her side. While she had certainly grown back into full ‘princess-form’ somewhat, she always remained Celestia smiled at her little sister. The petite crown, the dinner-plate eyes, the insufferably adorable half-frown... PRINCESS LUNA IS NOW BOSS MODE (C remembers what she used to look like?)

“Princess, you're spacing out again,” half-groaned, half-grinned Silver Shield. Princess Celestia's eyes shot open and she quickly wiped her mouth, closing her eyes and trying to look as dignified as one could while wiping one's face. She could have sworn that she saw Luna hiding a grin.

“*Well.* Something wrong, Luna? I'll say. Let's go and find out what's causing the commotion. *My little guardpony* here--” Silver Spear scoffed-- “believes they are coming from the East Wing. Let's be off then, mhmm?” Luna attempted her sister's radiant smile, nodding eagerly.

Silver Shield took to the front of his Princesses, leading them to the East Wing atrium. They proceeded down the Grand Hallway, the longest in Canterlot Castle, connecting the North, South, East, and West Wings. ‘*The most vital artery in the entire Castle*’ was how the architect-ponies described it, though the prospect of walking through an artery every day made

Princess Celestia somewhat nauseous. The Sun Regent also wasn't too overly fond of the choice of construction material that was used here and throughout the entirety of the castle. *Marble, marble everywhere*, she thought. The whitest of marble, for the ceiling, floors, walls. A long red carpet with golden knots at the end. Portraits of the most famous of her insufferably obedient lackeys-- *Respectable statesponies*, as they were known to the general public.

The guardspony glanced down the hall. To his relief, the yelling and screaming seemed to be subsiding. He turned to the two Princesses, nodding sternly. It definitely *was* just some moronic pegasus-pony. They all trotted at a speed just short of running, Silver Shield at the head.

Princess Luna trotted close to her older sister's side, almost bumping into her with every trot. It was an old habit of her, started unintentionally a very, very long time ago. Luna had tried to break it some time ago, and did, surprisingly, but found that being at her sister's side was much more comfortable than not. The Moon Regent saw various portraits of statesponies as they passed through the hall: a vast expanse of scarlet rugs, expert masonry, and the most expensive of ornaments and fixtures. The first few statesponies she recognized, like Ostler von Hoofsmark, but further down the hall she began to see more and more unfamiliar faces. *One thousand years is indeed a long time*, she thought sadly. She frowned, swearing to herself to kick her study of Equestrian history during her absence into overdrive when she got back to her room.

Celestia raised her eyebrow, smiling. She saw her younger sister tense up, looking all cute and determined. Mostly cute. Outside, however, the ominous clouds had started to unload even more tremendous amounts of water on the castle, as if the castle was underneath a waterfall. *This was just like... that... time.* The Princess shook her head, dismissing the memories of a dark past. Better to focus on the task at hand.

Several minutes and forty yards later, the loud yells and screams had seemed to have died down completely. Though comforting, this dissipated fear was immediately replaced by a multitude of others. Where were the ponies who should be scrambling to tell her what had happened? Why were the three of them the only ponies walking down the enormous Grand Hallway, which was normally a scene of intense hubbub and movement? And why...

Why did it seem like they were the only ones in the entire castle?

The large door into the East Wing atrium slowly came into view, and continued to grow larger until the three ponies stood in front of it. It towered over them, the legacy of the architect-ponies who had designed the East Wing. Princess Celestia couldn't help but to smile, remembering them fondly. By now they had all by now peacefully departed this world, but the Sun Regent knew that their work would endure for many more millenniums. Princess Celestia reached out with her right hoof and ran it over the door's detail, which depicted herself and her sister on opposite sides of the door, facing each other while raising both the sun and moon, respectively.

"Your Highness?" said Silver Shield, turning to his Princesses. Princess Celestia closed her eyes, still running her armored hoof over the detail, as if reminding herself of long ago. She basked in her memories for a short time. However, a particularly sour one brought her back.

"Open it. Let's find out what's going on, hmmm?" Celestia said cheerfully. Silver Shield nodded.

The guardspony swung open the doors, and the East Wing Atrium came into view. Of all the Wings, the East was the most extravagantly decorated, as Princess Celestia would always stride through it to raise the sun from the East early in the morning. Various staircases along the side walls led into the upper and lower levels of the Castle, where the guards, servers, cooks, and other such attendants slept. Across the atrium was a gigantic door of solid gold, mined, as Celestia remembered, against her will from the Chillypeak Mountains and fitted into what many Royal Artificers documented to be among the most priceless objects in all of Equestria. Through these doors lay the sky (though by now it was in no way clear), and because of this the East Entrance was a popular entrance for pegasus-ponies entering the castle on official business.

The doors were open as they always were, showing a vast expanse of night sky, with enormous rolling clouds unleashing the waters of an unforgiving storm on the castle. The rain hit the floor of the atrium loudly, and by now had formed several pools of water throughout the room. That, however, wasn't what the three ponies who had come from the Grand Hallway were staring at.

A hooded figure was standing on the very end of the atrium at the entrance to the castle, it's back turned to the trio of ponies. It wore a long, brown cloak that billowed in the wind as it's

wearer peered over the vast cliff, apparently looking at the drowning settlements below Canterlot. The guardspony's blue eyes narrowed as he took three protective steps in front of the Princesses. He didn't know what it was, but from this cloaked pony he sensed a great danger, a danger he was unable to describe. For a while, the ponies were silent, uttering not even a word.

Celestia was the first to speak.

"Cloaked one, who-" she began, but was quickly interrupted by the hooded pony. The pony had what appeared to be a mare's voice, but it was as if she were reading the introduction to some tragic drama that Silver Shield was often forced into going to at Princess Celestia's behest to 'guard' her. The guardspony was barely able to make out the pony's coat, black as the darkest of nights. He couldn't think of anypony he knew with such a coat, other than-- *W-wait a minute!...*

"--There are some *qualities*," interrupted the hooded pony, "some *incorporate* things, that have a *double* life. It is a type of *twin* entity, which springs from both *matter* and *light*, you see, evinced both in *solid*..." the hooded pony trailed off into a deafening silence, as if waiting for something.

"--And in '*Shade*'," the Sun Regent finished, her eyes narrowing. She couldn't see it, but she knew the hooded pony was grinning. Silver Shield's eyes widened by comparison, but he quickly shut them, trying but unable to stave off the flood of bad memories of a buried past invading his mind. Luna, however, only had an inquisitive eyebrow raised, confused but curious of the whole dialogue. She opened her mouth to voice her concern but was interrupted again.

"So. It has returned to wander it's old battlefields, I see--," began Princess Celestia.

"--Or perhaps it is looking for some foal's revenge," finished the guardspony roughly, looking at the dark pony, it's back still turned to him. The hooded pony lowered it's head, speaking softly.

"I'm flattered you remember me, Princess Celestia. You too, Silver Spear." Silver Shield stirred, clearly agitated. Eyebrows furrowed, he angrily stomped his hooves in protest of the name.

"My name is not Silver Spear, dark one. My name is Silver *Shield*," the guardspony said tersely.

“Silver Spear? Wasn’t your name, you say? Oh, but it was your name, it was, and do you know what, old friend? It will be your name *again*.” The pony turned around, and immediately Princess Celestia’s eyes widened. Visions of destruction, visions of hatred, visions of despair, visions of death and decay; they permeated the dark pony’s very essence, seeping into the hearts of all who held it’s gaze. The Sun Regent couldn’t shake off the dark pony’s aura, visibly shuddering.

“I-- I had almost forgotten. How... how unbecoming of me,” Celestia said. Silver Shield turned.

“With respect, your Highness, there were many of us who wanted to forget.” Celestia nodded.

“You *know*, I don’t know where this sudden hostility is coming from, Princess Celestia, Silver Spear. It’s obvious you hate me, but I’ve truly done nothing wrong,” the dark pony said, raising her front leg, massaging her chin . The Sun Regent gasped.

“You’ve taken the body of an innocent, haven’t you!” cried Celestia, obviously shocked.

“Well, my Princess, it was a necessity. I *really* wanted to see you again, so I don’t think this poor pegasus-pony will mind if I, er, *borrow* her body for a while, now do you?” grinned the dark pony.

“What you’ve done is against the highest law in this land. The penalty for the crimes you’ve already committed is banishment,” said Princess Celestia. The Princess knew that if *this* pony had returned, it had brought with it the knowledge of dangerous magic, magic unknown of even to her. Or, perhaps even more dangerous, magic learned in the nether plane of banishment.

“You’re not going to send me back *now*, are you? We’ve only just been reunited, Princess, after so many centuries of being apart! The brave Celestia, gentle Luna, loyal Silver Spear-- the only pony that’s missing from such an entourage is *me!*” cried the dark pony in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “And now I’m here! The most faithful of your servants and your subjects, Nigh-”

“*Silence*,” snarled Princess Celestia, eliciting a gasp from her younger sister. She had never heard such a hostility in her older sister’s voice before. “The evil you’ve brought back with you, dark one, why? I would have welcomed you, the true you, without question. But you have

brought back such *powerful* evil with you. I can see your mane is slick with it, your coat defiled by it, your voice haunted by it. We can all sense it's presence. Show me what this evil of yours is for, dark one, make me understand it. As with all things, there is a reason for your hatred. There must be."

"Oh, Princess Celestia. As always, you talk in circles. You haven't changed," said the dark pony. "Equestria's a different place now, anypony can see that. It's a different land from the one that I despise, a different land from the one that abandoned me in my time of need. But my presence alone means that my job isn't finished here, not at all. You need to face it, my Princess. I'm here for revenge, yes, but it was *Equestria* brought me back. This realm *needs* somepony like me."

With the latest exchange of dialogue, Princess Luna had become even more confused. However, before the Moon Regent could question her older sister on the nature of this mysterious new guest, the hooded pony charged towards the trio of ponies-- brown cloak a blaze, white mane a cascade, black coat a blur, red eyes a fire. The dark pony was indeed fast.

"*It's time to reopen old wounds, Princess Celestia, Princess Luna!*" cried the dark pony, her voice a twisted mixture of both malice and glee. Luna jumped, startled at the mention of her name.

Princess Celestia closed her eyes and nudged her younger sister softly, her constant smile of reassurance nowhere to be seen. She motioned to Luna, who pulled in close to hear her older sister's council in the face of this new, unknown threat. Princess Celestia spoke quickly, with a look that her younger sister was sure she had never seen on her older sister's face: doubt.

"Sister, you need to assemble the Elements, *now*. None of us thought that she would return, none of us even wanted to think about what would happen when she did. For better or worse, my dearest, younger sister, we'll meet up again at that wretched place-- *The Black Gate*," said the Sun Regent, almost spitting the last three words. The dark pony was gaining on them.

"You'll do well to remember who, or *what*, all of Equestria is up against once more," she continued. "You know as well as I do that these are the inevitable consequences of our actions,

all of those long years ago.” Princess Luna opened her mouth in confusion, but was interrupted again by her sister, voice rising as the galloping of the dark pony seemed to grow infinitely louder.

“Oh, and Luna-- *remember to hit the ground galloping.*”

At this, Princess Celestia channeled energy into her horn, and it began to glow. Luna was still utterly distraught, and saw the dark pony charging towards them still. Silver Shield lowered his body so that his upper chest was as close to the floor as it could get without touching it. He unfurled his wings defensively. Suddenly, Princess Luna was just unable to contain herself.

“Wait, but what's going on? And-- and *hit the ground galloping?* What's that supposed to-” Before Princess Luna could voice any further objection, she felt a colossal amount of energy shoot her into the air. She had a mind to complain to her sister, but her thoughts were suddenly focused on the window far in the distance, which all of a sudden seemed to grow bigger and bigger. When she realized that she had been catapulted out of the castle.

The Moon Regent suddenly saw the sky. What should have been the vast expanse of her older sister's glittering daytime sky had been obstructed by enormous rainclouds that seemed to stretch in every direction indefinitely. It was dark. The rainclouds had blocked out the sun.

By the time Luna was done marveling at the sky and looked behind her, the castle become nearly a speck in her view, growing smaller with each passing second. Only then did Luna feel the pelting of an unforgiving rain. The raindrops seemed to shatter and sting when they hit her coat. It was as if they were made out of ice. She tried to shake it off, but couldn't escape the hail.

The Moon Regent watched the castle recede from view. Princess Luna tried to stretch out her wings-- but couldn't. It felt as if she was trying to unfurl her wings against two stone walls. Luna became suddenly aware of a problem far more important than any of her sister's old friends.

‘There comes a point where it becomes impossible to stretch one's wings when in free-fall’, she

suddenly remembered. *'Something about the 'G-force', or at least that's what I'm told. All you have to do, sister, is remember to stretch before you reach this point. If you do, you'll be fine.'*

Luna's breath skipped a beat.

I almost want to claim ownership of the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic franchise (that I don't have, Hasboro yada yada) so that they'll contact me about copyright infringement and I can tell them how awesome the show is. Thanks for bearing with me here, people.

[Author's note: this is all subject to rampant editing. Edits made since release: 34]