

Darkest Before Dawn

by Sessalisk

Chapter Eleven

Author's Note: The chapters here are not connected. They can be read in any order or skipped entirely, depending on preference. Also, most of the chapters are not finished and I was persuaded to dispense with this chapter entirely, so they will not be. That is all.

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Ace - Grownups

Even though school had been out for a couple of weeks, Ace still set his alarm clock for six-thirty every morning. The nanny never let him stay up past midnight, so if he missed his mom at breakfast, he sometimes didn't see her again until the next day.

"I don't want to," said the colt, putting his spoon down on the table. He frowned at his mother and gave her his most determined and serious look. It was rather spoiled by what he said next. "None of my friends are gonna be there..."

Ace's mother snapped the clips of her briefcase shut and levitated it beside her. "I don't want to argue this with you any more. This is the best school in Canterlot for a colt your age, and that's that." The mare knew that if he made it through all four years, that he would be automatically accepted into any university or college in the country. Her expression softened slightly. "Sweetie, I know you'll miss your friends, and I know they'll miss you." She sighed. "Sometimes life just takes you in different directions from the people you love. You might not understand this now, but even if you went to Littlehooves with the rest of your friends, it doesn't mean that you'll always be in the same class, or that they won't move away, or that you'll even always be friends."

Ace didn't believe a word of that.

“It’s just part of growing up,” said his mother. “I know it’s hard, and it’ll always be hard, but people move out of your life, and just as quickly, other people move on in and take their place. You’ll make new friends soon enough, and you’ll probably find that they’re just as fun to be with as your old ones.”

Grownups just don’t get it, thought Ace. They always made it seem like changing your whole life was as easy as changing your clothes. He laid his head down on his hooves and sighed.

“Don’t be like that,” said his mother. In ten years he’d be glad of his education and the opportunities it brought him. She kissed him softly on the forehead. “It’s really all for the best.”

“Good evening, ignoramus!” said a familiar voice.

Ace knew exactly which yellow colt that voice belonged to.

He didn’t turn around. “Stop calling me that.”

“Oh?” said the voice. “Could it be that a miracle has occurred, and for once in your utterly unenlightened life, that you decided to pick up a *dictionary*? Could it *be*!”

Ace walked back to his room, still not turning around.

Grownups always lied.

Azure Sky - Wishes

The shrill cry of a newborn rang out. “It’s a filly!” said the doctor.

“A unicorn?” The father stared at the tiny bundle of orange in disbelief. “But how?”

“Well,” said the obstetrician, keeping his voice as even as possible, “it could be that you have a great aunt or a second cousin who’s a unicorn. Maybe way, way, way back?”

“I don’t know. I don’t keep tabs on all of my distant relatives.” He looked over at his exhausted wife.

“I have a half-uncle,” she said dismissively. The mare only had eyes for her foal. She held her forehooves out to indicate that she wanted to hold her daughter, and the doctor obliged. “You’re not exactly blue,” she cooed to the foal. “But I think my mother’s name might still fit you just right.”

“She’s not exactly a pegasus, either,” said the father. “What are we gonna do, Cirrus? How’re we supposed to bring her home?”

“She’s not a puppy, and I’d appreciate it if you stopped talking about her like one.” The mare looked more than a little indignant. “We’ll work something out.”

“Ah,” said the doctor, as if he didn’t quite want to interrupt. “This sort of situation is uncommon, but not unheard of.” He gestured to the floor. “It’s why the whole hospital is made of treated stone, after all.” The doctor opened a nearby drawer and pulled out a series of forms. “You’ll just need to fill these out.”

The filly’s father looked down at the forms. “What are these for?”

“It’s a license for a modified cloud-walking charm. Your daughter can stay in the foalcare ward until it gets processed, or until you figure out your living situation. I will send up a nurse who can tell you more.” The doctor nodded slightly and made his way out the door, seeming rather eager to leave.

It had been a long time since Swirling Cirrus had been able to fly so freely. In the last couple months while she was carrying her daughter, she’d been slow. Heavy.

Stormy Skies matched her pace with ease. He carried their foal on his back, and he flew slowly and carefully. The filly’s mother amused herself with the idea of her husband finally getting a small taste of what the last eleven months had been like for her.

As her wingbeats carried her higher, her heart thumped in her chest. She knew she hadn’t flown or even exercised much lately, but even so, her blood seemed to be racing through her veins. The edges of her vision went a little dark, and she was overcome with vertigo. Her wings moved without coordination for a moment, and she dipped in the sky before catching herself.

Stormy Skies looked at his wife, his eyes filled with concern. “You don’t look too good.”

“Just a little dizzy. I haven’t flown for a while, that’s all.”

He banked slowly, making certain that their daughter wouldn’t fall from his back.

“What?” Swirling Cirrus swerved far more quickly than he had. “Where’re you going?”

“We’d better get that checked out just in case.”

“Oh, stop being such a worrywort, I-” Suddenly, Swirling Cirrus lost the fight against her nausea, and was messily sick onto the clouds below.

“Yeah,” said her husband. “We’re going back to the hospital.”

“When’s Mommy coming home?” Freefall asked. The pegasus filly nudged a black and white ball around with her nose.

Stormy Skies said nothing for a moment. “She’s staying at the hospital for a little while. She’ll be back once she’s better.”

“But she was just there *days* ago! Why isn’t she better already?”

“That was for something different, for when your sister was born. Now she’s a little sick and she needs to get better first.”

“Oh.” Freefall bucked the ball and sent it sailing right through the wall. The clouds reformed themselves into a solid surface.

“Don’t throw the ball in the...” her father said, his voice devoid of enthusiasm. He slumped on the couch. “You know what? Throw it as much as you like.”

The filly looked at her father suspiciously, as if she was suspecting some sort of trap. “Really?”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“Yay!” She leapt through the wall, which she also wasn’t allowed to do, and retrieved her ball. “How come Azure isn’t here? Isn’t she supposed to come home today too?”

“She’s staying with Mommy right now,” said Stormy Skies. “We’re going back to visit after you’ve had dinner.”

“But I want to show her to all my friends!” The filly pouted. “None of them have ever seen a unicorn before.”

“That’ll just have to wait until later.”

“But you said it would be today! You *promised*.”

“Your mother wanted to have your sister with her right now. We’ll go see them later.”

“But my friends won’t see. They’ll think I’m a liar! Can’t they at least come too?”

“No, Freefall.”

Tears welled up in the filly’s eyes. “You promised!”

He just... he just couldn’t deal with it anymore. “Go to your room, Freefall,” he said. “I’ll call you down for dinner.”

“That’s not fair...” she said with a snuffle. “Is it because I threw the ball?”

“No. It’s not your fault. Just go to your room, please.”

As soon as she was up the stairs, Stormy Skies began to weep.

The teacher droned on and on about Equestrian history, and Sky toyed with the charm around her neck. It was ugly and gaudy, but a strong sticking spell made sure she could never take it off. Not until she could cast equally powerful magic of her own. It stank that they couldn’t have at least put the cloud-walking charm in something cool, like a spiked collar, or a skull helmet.

“Azure Sky,” snapped the severe-looking pegasus stallion. “If you’re not too busy daydreaming, perhaps you could tell us the names of all the founders of Cloudsdale?”

And she did, even giving their titles and occupations. It was in the textbook, after all, and Sky always had a knack for recalling things that she’d read.

The teacher sniffed. “Very well. It seems like you have been paying attention after all.”

Haha. Nope. Sky went back to fiddling with her charm.

The grey colt dangled her book just out of reach, clutching it with his two front hooves. His small wings beat furiously to keep him aloft. “I’m having trouble figuring out whether you’re just a *conehead* or if you’re an *egghead* too!” He laughed at his own

joke.

Sky grit her teeth at the slur and jumped for the book. The colt responded by flying just a little bit higher. “Well, I’m not sure whether you’re a *brickhead* or a *blockhead*,” she retorted.

“Oooo, is that the best you can come up with?” He rolled his eyes and shook the book in front of her, pulling up every time she came close. “Too bad you can’t trade that useless bump on your forehead for a proper pair of wings!”

She tried to visualise herself pulling the book from him with her magic. Nothing happened. “Well fuck you then, you stupid giraffe cunt.” She remembered a foreign epithet from a book. “Salaud.” It didn’t get her book back, but at least it made her feel better.

The colt made a face. “I’m telling somepony that you said that to me.”

“Yeah? What’re you gonna say? ‘Oh Mommy, I was stealing this filly’s book and calling her names and then she called me a nasty name back! Waaah.’”

“Shut up!”

Sky suddenly froze, and looked down at the clouds beneath her feet, watching the skies out of the sides of her vision. She saw the colt slowly drawing closer.

Her legs tensed and she sprinted towards the colt in a full gallop. Before he could react, Sky *leapt*, headbutting him in the flank. He cried out in pain and dropped the book onto the cloud. “Yeah, asshole,” said Sky, as the colt stared at his bloodied leg. “I bet you wish I had wings instead of a horn *now*.”

It was half a year before her grounding ended, and at the end, all Sky could think was, *Worth It*.

Airballs were enchanted to fall very slowly, like a balloon filled with air rather than helium. When hit with enough strength, however, they would fly as quickly and forcefully as any regular ball. Even though she couldn’t play, Sky loved watching airball games. Her sister was *good*, and when Sky watched her, she almost felt like she was flying too.

A green filly was flanking Freefall from the right, and another was cutting her off from below. Freefall punted the airball with her forehooves as she flew. The filly to her right bodychecked her to knock the ball from her hold, and Freefall responded with a comparatively gentle buffet with her wing, clipping the green filly in the face.

The referee blew her whistle.

The green filly wheeled backwards and spun through the air. She landed on a cloud with soft whumph. “Owww!” said the filly, clutching her bleeding muzzle. She spat out a tooth. “That’s a pedalty!”

“No it’s not!” Sky pulled a thick book out of her saddlebags with her teeth and plopped it onto the bleachers. Some uncanny act of Celestia must have had her open it to just the right page, but Sky didn’t even have to look down as she recited exactly what was written. She knew the book as well as her own name, like how she knew all books.

Her sister should have gotten off on a technicality. Wing-strikes after a body check are given the benefit of the doubt for being accidental. Sky *knew* this. She’d *read* it! It was in the rules and everything. There was a flash of light as a blue rectangle appeared on both of her flanks.

Sky stretched her neck to look at her hindquarters. “The heck is this?”

Freefall tilted her wings forward and plummeted towards the bleachers like a stone. There was a blast of wind as she spread her wings open again and caught herself before hitting them. “Oh my goodness! You got your cutie mark!” The bleachers were strictly off limits during a game, and even if the wing incident wasn’t a penalty, this one definitely would be.

“Yeah,” said Sky. “Duh. Get back up there before you lose the game for your team. We can celebrate later.”

“No way!” Freefall had a stupid grin plastered on her face. “I can play airball any time! It’s not even nationals or anything. Hail Chaser can take my place!” She wrapped her forehooves around Sky and lifted them both off the clouds. “We’re going for sodas!”

Sky made halfhearted sounds of protest.

“What’s your cutie mark supposed to be, anyway?”

“Dunno,” lied Sky. “Maybe it’s a swimming pool, but instead of water it’s full of regret?” Why couldn’t it have been a pile of broken bones or an airball like her sister? Of all the things it could be, why did it have to be a *bookmark*?

Freefall snorted at the remark. “Don’t make me drop you again.”

“Just try it,” said Sky. “I’ll bounce back up so hard that my horn’ll hit you right in the ass.”

He showed up to the union meeting again... alone.

No pony at the school took their jobs seriously but him.

Belaq - Sacred Garden

“*Good.*” The earth pony watched as her niece pruned away the dead leaves and branches. She held a watering can in her teeth, but spoke like it wasn’t there at all. “*You have a knack for this, little one.*”

The filly seemed more upset by the praise than anything. “*How, Auntie?*” she said. “*I can’t even make them grow.*”

“*Save your humility.*” Her aunt feigned crossness. “*You cannot make the plants spring to life with a touch. What of it?*” The pink mare lifted a seedling into her hooves, and it grew, far faster and more robust than anything the young filly had ever grown herself. It fanned its leaves out in the blink of an eye, stretching hungrily towards the sun.

The pit of her stomach filled with bitter envy.

“*I cannot trim a hedge without shears,*” said her aunt. “*I cannot reach the highest branches of the trees. I cannot send my will across the room to do my bidding. What of it? We must make the best of our lot in life.*” The corners of her mouth turned upwards. “*You are very good for a unicorn. That much I concede.*”

Most unicorns are introduced to magic when they first move something without touching it. For Belaq, gardening came much more easily. She had learned five different plant spells before she ever used her magic to lift a feather. Belaq could heal sick roots; she could turn a bud into blossom; she could save a plant from frost; she could even coax a seed to sprout. The first spell she learned, however, was how to snip away the dead leaves, to coax new, healthy leaves to grow. The pruning spell.

She had not thought that plant magic was dangerous.

When the orange filly came charging towards her, all she could see was pain. She could not get up and out of the way. The filly would not listen.

Belaq reacted.

A gout of blood sprayed forth from the filly’s neck, drenching her.

She had only wanted it to stop...

She wanted to be sick.

The colt's eyes only had blame in them, and she knew he was right.

I think we all know whose fault this is.

Belaq limped away, favouring her injured leg.

For some reason, the tall filly followed her. The one who she'd never spoken to.

"What was it like?"

"What are you talking about?" Belaq's voice came out much harsher than she intended, but the filly did not flinch.

"When you saw she might die," said Rune. "What was it like?"

Belaq used her hoof to rub some of the blood off her face. It didn't help. "There's something wrong with you," she said. "You're sick."

"I want to know." Rune did not look away. "So maybe I'm not the only one anymore."

"The only one what?" Belaq spat the words out like poison. She needed to get away from this filly. She shouldn't be alone with her. "The only psychopath? How many ponies have *you* hurt, then?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"*I don't know!*" It was the loudest Belaq had ever heard her speak. They continued to walk, but neither of them spoke for a while. "I wasn't trying to do it either. It still happened." Rune was silent for a long time. "It doesn't go away."

"It would help if you weren't so vague."

"Afterwards," said Rune. "You know that you can do it again, and then maybe it'll be *worse*. And you know it *can* happen again. It's always inside of you, for it to happen. It's always been there," Rune said. "It makes you different after, and it doesn't go away."

Belaq didn't know what Rune did and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. "You wanted to know what it was like?" Belaq said finally. "It was like saying something bad,

and then not being able to take it back. But a million times worse.”

Rune nodded. “I know it doesn’t make it better,” she said, “and I know it’s not as much as you, but I’m sorry.”

Belaq didn’t say anything to that.

She cleaned herself up, and told Marching Dawn that she couldn’t be at the school anymore.

Every day, she was learning to be more dangerous. Learning more “harmless” spells, for things like cooking or cleaning. If even the first spell could kill, this knowledge was too dangerous to be in her hooves.

Benoit Miseurewicz - Different

It was his first time in Canterlot, and the blasted city confounded him. None of the buildings were designed for earth ponies. The latches were always these infuriating knobs, and none of them would open for anything but a unicorn. Moreover, everypony wore *clothes* in this city.

Back in his country, clothing was only for special occasions. Weddings, funerals, fancy parties, or for ponies who had jobs that required an extra layer of protection. Here, it was the norm rather than the exception, and Benoit had never felt so naked in his life.

He rapped on the door, the third one that night, and prayed that somepony would take pity on the poor earth pony and open it up. Five minutes passed and nopony came.

His sixth try was at one of the shabbiest-looking inns he’d seen that night, and if this one wouldn’t open up, well... the alley wouldn’t charge him any bits to stay. Rats might be good company, he thought. They usually had interesting stories, and in the city, there should be lots of them.

The door glowed and swung open. “An earth pony!” said the old stallion. “Come in, come in.”

Benoit paid three times as much as what a similar inn might have charged in his home town, but he was just grateful to have a warm place to sleep that night. Even if there wouldn’t be any rats. Still, for whatever the inn lacked in rodents, it certainly made up for in insects. He decided to give the bedbugs, and whatever else was biting him, a break from their evening meal to step out into the alley.

“Excuse me,” he said to no one in particular. “Is there anyone here?” He made sure not to say anypony; animals could get very touchy about that.

Something chittered from underneath a dumpster.

“Oh good. Finally somep- someone to talk to.” Benoit smiled, careful not to display his teeth, which was often a sign of aggression. He looked down at the small grey rat that decided to approach him. “Hello. My name is Benoit.”

The rat spoke quickly in small squeaks and chirrs.

“Please slow down. This is not my mother tongue.”

The rat repeated itself, but more slowly, gesticulating exaggeratedly. It added on a couple of questions after this, enunciating as clearly as it could.

“Ah yes. It is nice to meet you too, Jellybean. To answer your question, I suppose it is a little like translating twice until I get to something I can understand.” He laughed.

More rats scurried out from cracks in the wall and from under detritus. One of them chittered in a friendly fashion, lamenting the lack of good pony conversation in the city.

“Does nopony talk to you?”

A different rat, and Benoit was having trouble picking up all the nuances, said that nopony could. Nopony stopped to listen, the rat said.

He thought about that for a moment. There hadn’t been a single place in this city that was friendly to a pony who had to use his hooves rather than his horn. “It’s my first time here, but If you will forgive the insult, I can see why few choose to stay.”

He stayed there for a long time, exchanging stories with the rats. For the most part, they had their eyes low to the ground and learned the kinds of things that a local pony might overlook. They were also far more helpful than anypony had been to him since he’d arrived in this city. By the time he realised he had places to be, the sky was streaked with pink and gold. Benoit bid the rats farewell, retrieved his things from the inn, and made his way down to Canterlot palace.

“Monsieur Misiurewicz,” said the Princess. “It is good to see you.”

In the beginning, they were two.

In other places, monarchs use the royal *we* to show that they speak for their nations as well as for themselves. Not them.

Neither of them was complete without the other. Not an *I*, but a *we*.

One sister had dominion over the sun, and the other, over the moon - or at least that is what is written in the earliest accounts of the tale.

It is true that it was easier for one to raise the sun, and easier for the other to raise the moon, but their reign over the heavens was no more than two sides of the same coin.

Those who understood the power also knew their affinities to be nothing but pretense. Before the two had entered the land, it was the ponies who had changed night to day and day to night. Great things could be accomplished through the efforts of many, even the movement of the heavens. When the two sisters looked from the skies above the Equestrian steppes, the cities of ponies sprawled out below, it awed them that such things could be built with mortal horns and mortal hooves.

The sisters knew that they could beget utter devastation and ruin, that they could move and shake the world in ways no mortal pony could. But to work together to create, to build, it was a power of which they knew nothing. They had thought they understood chaos, that aspect being a large part of who they were. They understood it to be subtle and indifferent, to be of change and of movement. In this land, however, chaos worked against its nature to be given a form, a mind of its own, directly waging war against those who struggled to impose order.

Unlike the simple magics of the sun and the moon, the might of all these ponies, striving and working together as one, was far beyond them. In this land, where forces were given form, where the winds, the rains were given names and bodies, the lives of plants given hooves and manes, the two sisters saw the alien power of kinship. And they did not understand.

They, who were two, allowed themselves to be as the skies and the grasses and the stars above: they allowed themselves to live as ponies. To know that which made these weak creatures so powerful, they combined their essences into one, embracing the harmony that gave small things strength. In this land where order and chaos were in an eternal stalemate, the two forces planted themselves firmly on the side of order and tipped the scales so thoroughly that they shattered.

The young stallion trotted slowly to the Princess' work chamber. He knew that at

this hour, on this day, that she had no meetings booked. He rapped once - twice, on her door.

"Please come in," called the voice from the other side.

"Hello, Auntie Celestia."

"She looked up from her paperwork and smiled. "A pleasure to see you again, young Syzygy. What brings you here?"

He told her he wanted to postpone the next week's ceremony. Perhaps indefinitely. "It's not the, um, coronation jitters that are bothering me..." he said, "so much as... I don't know... the responsibility, I guess."

"Oh?"

"I know what you're thinking," he said automatically. "No pony knows how to handle responsibility when they first deal with it, I am more ready than I think, I've been trained well - that kind of thing, right?"

The Princess was silent and her expression said nothing.

"But it's not that," he continued. "Or rather, it's not just that." He looked down, unwilling to meet his aunt's eyes. "I've been thinking," he said. "I keep thinking about how I'm going to be making all these important decisions - What if I make a law that accidentally kills some pony? Or what if I mess up and the taxes are so high that every pony is miserable, or they're so low that I can't even keep the roads in a decent state of repair?"

"What if something *bad* happens? What if there's a flood or a fire, and every pony will looking to me for what to do? What if no matter what I try, I can't save every pony? I know I already have to put numbers on lives and ask myself if it's better to save an orphanage with a dozen foals, or the hospital that might save the lives of thousands, and that doesn't make it any easier. I- I can't do it."

"Prince Syzygy." Her eyes were sympathetic, but her voice was firm. "As the adage goes, the pony who wants power is the last pony who you want to give it to."

He opened his mouth and then closed it. Had she been listening at all?

"Yes, I have," she said.

Syzygy gaped at her. He had been, up until this point, completely unaware that she could read minds. Suddenly, he was very aware of all the times he had admired the shapely forms of some of the servants and nobles, while being in the same room as her

nonetheless. He blushed deeply.

She looked at him, her face a mask of amusement. “The crux of the matter is not whether I can see your thoughts, which I cannot, but rather how predictable your responses will be.”

“I-” He stopped. “This is going to be one of those ‘family secrets’ isn’t it?”

She considered that for a moment. “I would certainly appreciate it if you kept what I am about to tell you between the two of us.”

To his right, the fireplace crackled and spat, but all he could hear was the thump-thumping in his own chest. His mother had told him about these, that Auntie Celestia might one day take him aside and tell him things that he must never tell anyone. Not even her. And it always sounded so extremely *sinister*. He shivered despite the heat of the room.

“It is nothing horrifying, I assure you,” she said. “There are no skeletons buried in the family closet. I will not sell your soul to some dark entity. I do not require the sacrifice of a newborn foal at dawn. Nothing like that.”

“Forgive me if I do not breathe a sigh of relief.”

She laughed. “Understandable. Family, though we may be, I have not given you any outstanding reason to trust me.” She lifted an empty scroll from her basket and drew a large number of lines and dots. “This is vastly simplified, but imagine you are here,” she said, using her ink-stained quill to tap at a dot on the far left of the page.

He nodded, not quite sure what to make of whatever this was.

“Now at this point, you are in the room talking with me. Imagine you choose to tell me that I am crazy, and storm out of the room.” She tapped at the line branching out from the very first dot.

That was a very easy scenario to envision.

She nodded, with a knowing grin. “Now imagine you *also* stay here and listen to what I have to say. And another where you keep interrupting me. And another where you tear off all your clothing and pronounce yourself king of the underworld.” She tapped every a line branching from that first dot on the chart for every outcome she mentioned.

“Er,” he said. “That last one doesn’t sound very likely.”

“No, but it’s possible, is it not?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t-” He shrugged, humouring the Princess.

“Now let us say that from each of these choices you might make, another tree of possibility branches out from them.”

“Yes, I learned all about probability trees in my mathematics lessons,” he said.

“I would hope so,” said the Princess. “Otherwise we have wasted taxpayer money on an incompetent tutor.” His aunt levitated a small red inkpot out of her drawer. “I doubt your tutor mentioned this, though.” She splashed the crimson ink all over the page, somehow getting it on everything except for a single zig-zagged line. “Dramatic, but I hope it gets the point across,” she said.

Prince Syzygy just stared at her.

“When you have one outcome, it is to the exclusion of all others. By being here now, you have forced countless instances of yourself into nonexistence, all without knowing or understanding. Many of those instances would have gone on to do wonderful things, things that you will never know and can now, never accomplish. Many of them would have saved lives. Many of them might have achieved a greatness that the current you could never hope to match.”

“That is... depressing,” he said finally.

“Only if you do not take into consideration the fact that just as many have gone on to do horrible things, ended numerous lives and caused great harm upon all of ponykind. But the point is that you are here now, and that you are you. If you were any of the others, you would not be yourself.”

He mulled over that in silence. “That’s an interesting... ideology,” he said. “But it doesn’t change the fact that there will be choices in the future, horrible choices, and that as prince, it will be my duty to make them. The fact that I could have done worse or better does not change a thing.”

“No,” she said. “But you can always do your best.”

When he spoke again at last he said, “I don’t see why this in particular needs to be kept in confidence. You have told me nothing a scholar could not divine from ordinary philosophy.”

“That is because an ordinary scholar could not show you what I am about to show you.”

And the world fell away from him, his body, his choices, his life. He saw the things he had done, and the countless webs that spread out from every tiny decision he

had ever made, all the pain he had caused at every junction, all his hopes and dreams dissected in nets of twining golden light. How meaningless they all were. Time rushed at him from every angle, angles he did not even know existed, ebbing away at who he was and what he was.

His mind broke.

He was no longer able to understand anything at all.

He was crushed under the weight of all his choices.

Then he was himself again, falling to the floor, violently ill. His aunt held him as the tears streamed down his face, even as he fouled her immaculate white coat, not sure whether he should laugh or cry or scream. When the pieces of his mind slowly knitted back together, when the sobbing finally subsided, she looked at him without pity or disgust - simply understanding. "Now do you see?" she said, and he knew that she already had the answer.

But for appearance's sake, he nodded.

They did not talk about the incident again.

He did his best to bury that memory under layers of forgetfulness, to lose all the individual futures and instances in a haze of oblivion. It was all he could do to keep the half-healed wounds on his mind from cracking and shattering into a thousand glittering pieces.

During his coronation the next week, he found himself feeling like he'd already been there, already done this. He could almost predict what some of the lords and ladies were about to say, right down to the word. But the feeling passed.

Years later, when his first foal was born, he looked at his daughter and found himself shocked to remember flashes of something that might have been her when she was full grown. But it was not the filly who lay in front of him, but a *different* her - one with a yellow coat rather than white. One who had not been born, and now, would never be born.

And during the nights, sometimes he dreamed. His sleep filled with the futures that would not happen, the "present" that could never be. As he woke, he never remembered a thing, except for maybe, what it was like to know everything that could, might, would and had gone wrong, and that he was ignorant, so blissfully ignorant.

Every decision was important, even the ones he did not know he was making. Every choice was a death, was countless deaths, of himself and of everypony he knew.

All he could do was choose for himself and hope for the best.

Ponies would often ask her what it was like to live for so long, to see friends wither and fade. They wanted to know if, to one as long-lived as her, if the years were water, trickling and flowing without end or comprehension.

In truth, it was often most convenient to see things the way they did. It was not hard to slip into the tides of time, dissecting every moment into fragments that could be experienced at leisure. The seconds did not cohere on their own, but when held together, were the tiles of a mosaic, a complete picture that could be abstracted. It was the way that was comfortable to her mortal flesh, the way it fell into naturally and without coaxing.

It had been so strange for her at first. She knew time and space to be a vast ocean that curved and shifted in ways known and familiar. She had existed. It had made sense. A day was the same as a second and a second was the same as a millennium. Questions like, 'how long' were meaningless, cobbled together out of ignorance and misunderstanding. She humoured the idea, but the more she used their worldview, the easier she fell into the trappings of their language and thought. That their flawed framework was so contagious, so insidious... it had rankled.

When the workings of each moment were stripped away from her, all she was left with was a single point sliding in one inexorable direction through time. The *now*. She could not see ahead or sideways - only behind. Life was the cage that was flesh that was duty. It would cloud her vision, but to stay in this world she had to be like the ones who lived in it.

It was blindness and stupidity, but this was her burden.

When she unshackled herself to be as she was, the world had opened up and all of time had blossomed around her in shimmering gossamer. She had been home again, but in many ways, she had not been whole. To be herself, truly herself, she had to renounce all that tied her to life. It had been like rending a part of herself that knew, but could know no longer.

It had been like dying.

Her body had chained her to the earth and to the people. It had destroyed all that she was. And somehow it had made her free.

She never said this, of course.

She talks to the ambassadors and diplomats, but her mind - her self - is elsewhere. The pathways are foggy and indistinct, but like maize out of a basket, a filly tumbles off a cloud. There are several outcomes.

During one, the filly's flaps her wings, choppy and clumsy, but she saves herself before she hits the ground. After that there are more pathways, ones where she can't make it back, and others where she overcomes her doubt and returns to whence she came. Then after that, there are more choices, more outcomes, spreading and branching off into clouds of possibility.

In another the filly simply tumbles until she hit the ground and dies.

And in another, she flounders in the air for a little while before she hits the ground and is crippled. She never flies again. Or she never walks again. Or she never wakes again.

And in another she hits a cloud and stays there until she is rescued.

And in another -

The Princess sees enough.

Ponies talk, a buzz of political and economic jargon. She smiles at them and even before they voice their words, she understands them, their meaning. As they speak to her, she already knows what to say. It takes an eternity for them to finish, but she waits.

When all deals are brokered, treaties written, only then does she take wing to the south.

The second she reaches the place, she speaks aloud. Her voice is the sound of wings and the forest around her stills. She whispers to the small fliers, the nectar drinkers, and one by one, they flicker closer. She says to them to wait. To stay here till the sun sets again.

They are not happy. They say they are free people to fly where they choose. To taste what flowers they may. That she is the princess of the ponies, and not of them.

And the Princess says that this is true, but reminds them that without her people, there would be no flowers at all. She says this is important and calls upon an old favour she has been saving for just this occasion.

And begrudgingly, they agree.

She spreads her wings once more and soars high into the air. The clouds break over her head and she slips awkwardly into shadow. She wishes she was more like her

sister, her sister who could wear darkness like a second skin (*but if this was so she would not be here now*). She pushes this aside; there is no point in wishing when she could be doing instead.

Slowly, what she is looking for comes into sight - the cloud cabins. Her shade-body flickers sable and she is inside.

She knows that in the day, the filly's mane would be like the refracted light of sunshine in rain. In the darkness, all colours are grey. She peers closely at the drab, sleeping child.

Shadows are silent. And - as she reaches inside her own aching chest, pulls out the pulsating pigeon's-blood light, lets the filly breathe the brightness into her lungs - she is silent too. She leaves like a ghost.

She looks into the webs of *might* and *could*, and sees two who will move themselves into position, all of their own accord. When she gazes at the somber one, the one who will have a cotton-candy mane, she almost feels the filly looking back. The solemn filly gives a knowing smile, as if she, too, understands. The Princess shivers and does not look into that one's pathways again.

Later, she rolls a boulder into place and taps it once, lightly, with her horn. She can already feel the tingle of its pull.

There is still one more, the consolidator, the most difficult of all. Even though everything is in place, she knows that her work is not done. She cannot force; she can only coax.

There must always be a choice, or it would not be real. She hopes that when the time comes, they choose well.

"Please do not do this." Her voice sounded as if it was travelling from very far away. The once-proud arch of her neck was gone, and her head sagged low to the ground. "Look beyond blood and envy and to the branches of what will be. This will beget nothing but sorrow."

"They do not understand," said the dark sister. She stared out into the vast expanse of night below, her face unreadable. "We have given everything for them and they do not care. *They do not care.*"

"And so wilt thou smite them for their ignorance?"

The dark sister looked up sharply. "*Thou?*" The singular rather than the plural.

Her eyes grew wide.

Tendrils of the light sister's mane began to writhe. Her form was now more verisimilitude than truth. "If the sun cannot shine, those who live will suffer and fade. No pony can live without sustenance or breath." Her voice, which still sounded distant, carried a quality to it that the dark sister knew all too well.

She responded to the threat in kind, oscillating outwards from her flesh, expanding from the realm of being and into the one of *might* and *could*. "What matter are their lives to such as we? To them we are a force to be ignored, *shunned*. Best we should rise to their expectations."

Until they flowed together as equals, without shape or time, the pale one said nothing. Without their oppressive bodies, the pathways of what could be, could have been, and were, laid bare all around them. She let the possibilities break upon her sister, waves of potentiality, crashing on a hard core of thought.

Now dost thou see? The bleak, lifeless future stretched out for aeons across the timeless waste. *Thou shalt bring naught but ruination upon our people. Please, Sister. Cease this madness. For all that lives. For us.*

Fool. The ideas echoed in all that was, is and will be. *What didst thou think to accomplish by drawing us here? Wert thou blind enough to think love any less petty than hate?*

Dost thou truly believe that we were lacking in perspective?

Mortal concepts have no meaning. Our hearts lie too close to those who live and breathe and strive - they have violated us beyond belief, impelled their inanities and trivialities upon our being. We have been broken by them. Hurt by them. All we - I - want is justice, Sister. If what is, is no more, we can be free again. Who art thou to deny this from me?

And all that could have been, might be, lay before them, a darkness everlasting and undying. There was iron in the dark sister's resolve, her providence, in all futures from then till the end of time. She would not balk at this. She would not shy at the destruction of a world. It was written in choice and in destiny and in all that would be.

The light sister chose.

I am Celestia. The pale one tasted the words as they left her, ephemeral, temporary. To speak as they were speaking, to be two, rather than one, was a corruption of what they were. She anchored herself to frailty and impermanence. *I give myself freely to the temporality of life. To friendship and to love. I cannot turn my back on our people. Not even for thee, Sister.*

She embraced her mortal form, and all the weakness that entailed. Deep within

her, the bindings drew so tightly that they hurt, lashing across her insubstantial form. Her certainties dissolved like a drop of blood in water, but behind it was the solid and simple truth of all life that wants to keep on living. The light sister felt something inside her tear, ripping out of her chest and bubbling out of her mouth - the broken laughter of those who have lost, and have lost everything.

“I am sorry.”

And the forces of the world, the harmony that kept it in check, rushed out to the dark sister’s empty body, tying it not to the earth, but to her namesake.

Thou art foolish indeed if thou believest that shell to be more than a puppet, dancing under mine strings.

“Thou art more *Luna* than thou knowest, Sister. With thy hate and envy, thou hast bound thyself to thy body, just as I have bound myself to mine.”

I have done no such thing! The air shook with rage and defiance. Mortal emotions betraying what she had truly become.

From the balcony, the pale one looked up to the moon. “I cannot change thy nature, Sister. We may be sundered, but our paths still lie entwined. I cannot heal thine anger without first changing myself and that is beyond our power. I am sorry.”

There must have been words, but they were whispers in the wind. Echoes in stone.

The elder sister did not hear the moon speak again.

Demise - Remember

The rain poured down like it had personally started a vendetta against the colt, but he stood there, waiting. Dripping green strands of his mane hung down over his eyes and he pushed them out of the way.

Finally the old mare crept into view, creaky-hipped, and arthritic.

Demise had trouble speaking around the bouquet of flowers in his mouth. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Azalea.” He passed the flowers to her with a big grin, daffodils, violets and tulips. No pony ever came to visit her, and from all the flowers she grew in her garden, he knew she had a particular fondness for them.

She looked surprised at first, but the corners of her mouth quickly turned upwards and her eyes twinkled, perhaps not just wet from the rain. “Why thank you! Such a kind boy.”

“Welcome!” he said, and trotted off down the street.

“Why don’t you spend your allowance on something useful?” asked his father.

“Huh?”

“I always see you buying flowers for old ladies, or treats for dogs, or toys for other kids. It’s nice to see you showing so much... *altruism*, I suppose. It’s good that you aren’t blowing all your money at the toy store, but why not use your money for a better cause?”

“Like what?”

“You could donate it to a charity. They would know how to spend your money to help a lot of ponies. You could be feeding the starving and curing the sick.”

“Would it make them happy?”

“Having food to eat is definitely better than having none.”

The obvious refusal to answer his question was a little disappointing, although he supposed his father’s words did make sense. Kind of. “Would it make them more happy than if I went and cheered them up?”

His father put a hoof to his forehead. “I don’t think you can measure happiness like that, Son.”

“Oh.”

Later that week, he gave his entire allowance to one of the charities his father had suggested to him, and he picked some flowers for Mrs. Azalea instead.

He, Sunshine and Mint Jujube walked outside the theatre after the play. Sunshine always spotted him, since he never had any money of his own, and he knew that his father would always pay her back afterwards.

“I wish I could forget that.” Sunshine rolled her eyes at the memory of the scene.

“It’s totally destroyed my love of monsters for good.”

Hm... “Mind if I try something?” asked Demise. He’d been practicing this at home, but it was hard to find somepony good to practice on, because they would never remember what you were supposed to be doing in the first place.

“Um... Sure?” said Sunshine. Jujube crowded in closer, to see whatever this was.

Demise’s horn flashed once and Sunshine rubbed her forehead blearily. “What just happened?”

Jujube gave her a funny look. “Uh, we were just watching a play. Remember?”

“What was it about?”

“You don’t want to know.”

He stood across the room from his classmate. Even though he had to tilt his head back to look her in the eye, he felt like somehow he was the taller one. It was as if she occupied less space than her body took up.

“You seem kinda down.”

She said nothing.

“What’s eating you? Sometimes it can make you feel better if you just talk about it to somepony.” He smiled at her warmly, hoping that maybe she would open up if he was friendly enough. “I know when I was *reaaaaally* little, I dropped this jar of jam in the kitchen. And then I was so worried about getting in trouble for it. I cleaned it all up and didn’t tell anypony, and I was so scared for days that somepony would find out. I couldn’t eat or anything. And then when I finally told my momma-”

“It’s nothing,” the filly said, interrupting him. “You don’t need to worry yourself about it.”

Demise frowned for a moment. “But when ponies are sad, I make them feel better. It’s my talent.” He pointed to a smiling face on one of his flanks. “I can’t *not* worry about it.”

She stared blankly at him. “I have nightmares. You can’t help with those.”

“Actually,” he said, “if you want, I can make you forget them. At least, that way you won’t be bothered by them during the day.” He tapped his horn. “I know a spell and

everything!”

“That’s okay,” she said. “Sometimes it’s better to remember bad things.”

“But that would make you *sad*.”

“I would rather remember and be sad, than be happy and forget why I was sad in the first place.”

“But why?”

The orange filly’s brows furrowed, and her shoulders hunched defensively, like she was about to yell at him, or cuss. But then he saw her, with great effort, struggle to make herself calm again. “You should go, Demise. Please.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know I can be annoying sometimes. I didn’t mean to bother you. I won’t ask you again, I promise.”

She said nothing.

Echelle - The Power of Friendship

The old stallion tapped at the board with a hoof. “Now young filly, please tell me the importance of friendship.”

“Friendship helps you gain allies who will find it harder to betray you. A friend will reveal more to another friend than to a stranger, and the right kinds of friends will help manoeuvre you into positions you could not achieve otherwise.”

“Good, good.” He picked up a pen with his teeth and scribbled onto a piece of paper.

“Am I ready yet?”

“That is for your father to decide, but I believe you have all the basics down. We still have to work on the subtleties.”

“Aw...”

“Patience, child. One does not gain friends by groaning at them and insisting the process be hurried along.”

Enigma - Why

When you got down to it, learning was all about figuring out the things that didn't make sense. And a lot of things didn't make sense.

For instance, why were rainbows called rainbows, if they didn't need rain, and they looked nothing like bows? Or how did all the parts inside a camera work?

One day he hoped to prise apart the world and take all of its secrets. And then maybe when he was done, he might have figured out why he wanted to do that in the first place.

Gingersnap - Cookie Jar

That morning she woke up to the sound of one of her brothers yelling loudly, and she pressed her pillow over her head to drown out the noise. It had to be Snickerdoodle; he could never keep his trap shut for longer than ten minutes.

After a while, it became clear that she wasn't going to get any more sleep. She rolled off the top bunk and landed firmly on all four hooves.

"Showoff," muttered Pfeffernüsse. Her youngest brother, the only one younger than her, was lying on his back with a comic book propped on his chest. He was clearly already awake.

"Only 'cuz you have nothing to show."

He made a rude gesture at her and went back to reading his comic.

If Chocolate Chip wasn't off at college, he would have already shut Snickerdoodle up. He would have stormed out of his room like a beige tornado, cuffing the loud colt until he realised the wisdom in not flapping his gums at this ungodly hour of the morning. She resigned herself to the fact that he wasn't here, and that she would have to take care of this herself.

She cantered down the hallway and planted herself firmly in front of both Macaroon and Snickerdoodle. The latter was shouting at the former, trying to get him to agree with what was most likely some inane article of trivia. Perhaps he was trying to persuade Macaroon with the sheer power of volume.

She glowered at her older brother. "I was *trying* to sleep."

“Whatever.” He tossed his mane dismissively. “It’s almost eight anyway.”

“It’s a Saturday! And I was up studying past midnight!”

“Learn not to study so late then, Dweeb.”

She knew better than to tackle him, to attack him physically. He was much bigger than her, older than her, and a boy to boot. There was no way she would win. She ground her teeth out of sheer frustration. “Well... Fine. I’m telling Mom.”

Snickerdoodle made a face at her. “*I’m telling Mooom.*” He said it in a high pitched whine, mocking her.

“Arrgh!” Gingersnap felt a spike of power lance out from her horn and strike him in the chest. She expected something flashy, for him to keel over, twitching, maybe for him to fly back and hit a wall - but nothing happened.

“Was that your best shot?” he mocked. Or at least that’s what he would’ve said, if he could talk. His mouth made all the motions of speech, but no sound came out. *Interesting*, she thought. She’d only ever cast that spell on herself before, blocking out sound.

But this she couldn’t complain about at all.

Ingrid Marie - Apples

There was a murmur of conversation as her graduating class discussed all the things they would be taking in college, their plans, their majors.

“What are you taking, Ingrid?” a colt asked her. She knew that he was going to be a civil engineer and already had a job lined up for him as soon as he got his degree.

She answered without hesitation. “Plant thaumaturgy.”

“Oh? Are you looking for a research job?”

“I don’t really know yet. Maybe I could work on a farm.”

He laughed at what he must have perceived to be a joke. “I was thinking of joining the Wonderbolts myself,” he said, winking at her. “Check out my loop-the-loop.” He stood there, absolutely still. “Pretty impressive, huh?”

She forced out a laugh. “Yeah...”

The colt stared at her for a moment, blinking. "You were serious."

She looked away.

"Well you're pretty good," he said, backtracking. "I've never seen another unicorn grow anything as well as you could."

"Heh, thanks."

"How're you going to pay for the tuition, though? You don't get scholarships for--"

"I was thinking of joining the royal guard once I'm old enough," she said, knowing this question was coming. Her mother was a baker and her father mended clothes, and the colt knew this. "If you serve for seven years, they cover all your school debt and everything."

"Wow," he said. "You're pretty brave! I don't think my dad would even let me if I suggested it."

That's because your dad could buy the school if he wanted to. She knew she was being bitter, and that he'd done nothing to deserve it, but she couldn't stop herself. "Mhm... I have some application forms to fill out. If you know what those are."

The colt frowned at her as she walked away.

The unicorn stood at attention, waiting for her orders. Like everypony else in the file, she had a patch above her shoulder displaying a pair of crossed horns, and a badge below it with a single golden horn on a teal rectangle. All of them had an upside-down teardrop shape on their uniforms, marking them as specialists.

She listened to the captain as he told them how they should flank the beast, noticing not only his lack of a horn, but the lack of a circular scar on his forehead. It was not her place to question orders. With a hasty salute, she and the rest of her troop marched out the tent and towards their deaths.

It was tall, the tip of its head reaching over twice the height of a pony. The beast walked on its hind limbs - wrenching buildings from their foundations with its left foreleg, or slashing at them with the curved sickle of its right. When it crouched down to run on its long, spindly arms, shivers went up her spine. Despite being obviously, *obscenely* male, she couldn't help but think of the monster as anything other than an *it*.

Everything about the creature, the gaunt proportions, the flat oval of its face, the ungainly grace of its four-legged lope... there was something subtly wrong about it, like it had been moulded from an ape or a dog and had its proportions stretched to the point of abomination. Except for a shaggy grey mane framing its head, it had a completely hairless hide, and the beast's eyes were mad with hunger. Among the tents and encampments, it was known as Child-Eater... and for good reason.

Nostrils flaring, it swivelled its head towards the orange stallion on the soldier's left. She saw the creature bear down on him, and stood frozen as Lambent Thought drew up a force field. The stallion hesitated for a split-second, shield popping like a soap bubble. The Child-Eater pulled back its monstrosously long arms and knocked him sprawling through the air. Reflexes took over, and she dropped her shoulder and rolled, narrowly avoiding getting gored by its filthy claws. Suddenly she had a very clear view of its unnatural paws - five bony, thrice-jointed tentacles tipped with flat yellow nails. Overhead, the stallion sailed right into the path of a large pine. His back hit the trunk with the sound of snapping bone; she would have winced if she could afford the luxury.

"Archer! Reeds! Pinball!" she bellowed. "To my right, and shield!"

Without hesitation, the three unicorns combined their magic to make a large barrier around her. She charged forward and began running through the steps of a spell. Something like a halberd formed above her horn, and she drove it into the beast's side.

HR OOOOAAAARR

The sound shook her to her bones and she struggled to hold on to her spell, pushing herself forward and the beast back. But although she was not daunted, her shielders were less resolute. Reeds flinched, making the barrier flicker while the other two unicorns fought to pick up the slack. Yellow claws and silver sickle crashed against the white of her force field, sparks flying and sizzling on the grass.

It was good that she had drawn the beast's attention to herself. The sergeant's squad had lead the charge and had already been taken out. Another had lost its lancer and was thus, useless. The last squad was trucking on with a single shielder and lancer, one who had not once been able to even get near the Child-Eater. Up in the skies, the pegasus troops were having much more success, flinging lightning bolts from afar, herding the monster back towards the gates of Tartarus, bit-by-torturous-bit.

The beast made a bluff charge, all its hairs standing on end, and even *her* shielders faltered. The night became startlingly dark as the barrier winked out from

around her. The Child-Eater showed all its pointed white teeth as it made a *real* charge towards her. “Oh sh-”

The other lancer was the only pony who still had a shield. He leapt in front of her, blocking the creature’s blow.

“Idiot!” she screeched. “Get back!”

His shield wouldn’t be enough with just a single pony casting. But it was too late. The Child-Eater bellowed triumphantly as it tore through the stallion’s barrier and reached for the pony within. As it swallowed dripping gobbets of flesh, she saw its wounds close and pucker into scars. Queasy and sick with fear, she turned tail to sprint as fast and far away as she could. Without shielders and backup, she had no chance. The pegasi were driving the real charge now, completely out of the beast’s reach. All the unicorns were fleeing - many unsuccessfully. Only by dint of reaching the trench, her back against the parados, was she safe. She stayed there, letting the fight catch up with her, clutching herself as she rocked back and forth.

Out of the sixteen unicorns that had gone in, only four were still alive: the three shielders from the squad who’d lost their lancer early... and her. The pegasus troops hadn’t lost a single unit.

The captain had been watching the battle from afar, and even though the earth pony had seen everything that had gone wrong, he was still clueless. “Why didn’t everypony just stand their ground?”

“Because they were *scared*,” she replied. “We’ve never had to face anything without Cerberus before. We’ve never been alone with that... *thing*.”

“So you were yellow.” He glanced over at Specialist Buttercup Fields. “Not referring to you especially.”

The shielder shrugged.

The captain pressed on, “We trained you ponies to deal with all sorts of tough situations! We trained you to handle anything! And when the chips are in, you panic and screw things up! If it wasn’t for the pegasi, we’d be standing in the smoking ruins of Trottingham right now. Or at least *I* would. You’d all be dead!”

“Permission to speak, Sir,” she said.

He gave her a withering glare. “Granted.”

“Yes, we were trained for all sorts of things, Sir, but it was always *safe*. You need concentration and calm for magic.” She was explained this for his benefit more than anypony else. “It’s not like running or breathing.” A couple of other unicorns nodded.

“You think I don’t know that, Specialist? What would you have us do? Set every Celestia-blasted titan on the new recruits so they know what it’s like not to be ‘*safe*’?”

She opened her mouth, but he cut her off before she could say anything.

“I’m still talking, soldier.” He shook his head. “We’re not torturers and sadists, Specialist. We can’t put our recruits in pointless danger. Nopony would stand for it!”

As always, ethics won out over practicality. There was a saying that all is fair in love and war, but war was something Equestria hadn’t seen in a long, long time. “I did not mean to be out of line, Sir.”

“Dismissed.”

When word got back to Canterlot, the sky blazed with fire and light, but the fight was over. The Princess garrisoned extra soldiers around the gates, even dipping into the pool of castle guards. It was still too late.

Life went on. The days turned to weeks, then to months then to years, and the incident with the Child-Eater remained, by far, the most disastrous. Still, guarding the gates was dangerous work. Sometimes the soldier would lose a comrade. Sometimes she would even lose a friend.

Life went on.

She had been teased for her beige coat and brown mane as a filly, but they grew to be one of her biggest assets. Without heavy barding or any more camouflage than smeared mud, she was agile and invisible; fatal blows missed her; the beasts that spat fire, or ice, or other noxious substances would seldom aim in her direction; often they did not even see her until she was right in front of them. When her luck ran out, she found that even without it, she was good at staying alive. It was enough to get her laterally promoted to corporal. Using unorthodox methods, the soldiers under her learned to be steadfast and unflappable.

It did not make her popular.

She went back to Canterlot when her seven years were up, a thousand years older than when she left.

The soldier travelled along the outskirts of her city, looking for work, and unsuccessful, she returned to Canterlot once again. Planting and growing was an earth pony's job, not a unicorn's.

Perhaps she never truly knew her talent. Perhaps it wasn't that she was the best at encouraging young trees to sprout from the ground, to flower and be productive. Perhaps the years she'd spent studying had been wasted. Perhaps that was true of the last decade of her life.

Life went on.

She managed to scrape by with her army pension. A friend of her mother's informed her about a job opening at the school she'd attended as a child, the one that had utterly failed to prepare her for all the things that lay ahead.

If her purpose wasn't to bring life to orchards and vineyards, it might be that, in some ways at least, she could still have her studies bear fruit.

Twilight trotted into the classroom, expecting the worst. If she looked up her name in the dictionary right now (after the line about the time of day, of course) there would be a blurb about flipping to the entry on masochism.

She had *known* who was going to be teaching this class and she had taken it anyway. It seemed like such a simple matter on paper, but when the reality of it stared her in the face...

Contrary to her usual seating habits, she picked a chair as far to the back of the class as possible.

As the spots around her slowly filled, Twilight busied herself with reviewing the material. She'd read books where the teachers would verbally quiz you on the first day, in order to make you feel inadequate and stupid. This seemed like exactly the sort of thing that might happen.

Twilight was in the middle of her textbook's section on cotyledons when the teacher trotted in.

"Good afternoon, class," said the beige mare. Her voice was not friendly, but it was not menacing either. Something was about to happen. Something horrible.

The mare pulled open a drawer of her desk and Twilight ducked under her own. She was not the only one. They were indoors, but that did not mean that Ms. Marie wouldn't throw chairs or books at them.

Without further fanfare, the mare removed a textbook from her desk drawer and placed it on top of the desk, flipping to a page near the start. "Please be seated and open your books to page eight, introduction to botany."

What *was* this?

Ingot - Benighted

The new filly had a coat so black it almost glistened blue. Her mane was equally dark, and she wore no colours at all. Even Nightbreaker's coat was lighter, nor was his mane so garish. She didn't so much have a cutie mark as she had a pair of faces leering out at the world from both of her flanks, a pair of eyes and a fanged mouth. All in all, she had the look of somepony who was trying to look dark and mysterious, but was not quite pulling it off due to the lingering baby fat around her face and body.

"I'm Vespertine," she said, slurring and lisping her words, mashing them together like she'd never heard them said before.

Twilight took a moment to process the sounds. "Oh! Me too! It looks like we'll have lots of late night study parties together! I can't wait!"

The black unicorn put her face in her hooves. "No," she said. "That's my name."

"Oh, um. Well I'm Twilight. Nice to meet you."

"You're Nightbreaker, aren't you?" the filly asked.

He heard his name in there somewhere, but the rest of the sentence was barely intelligible. He took a guess. "My name's Nightbreaker."

She watched his mouth carefully as he spoke. "That's what I said."

"Huh?" He didn't understand a word of that.

She made a noise of frustration and glowing letters appeared in the air.

"Ohhh..."

'All the ofher kids here are kina of lame, arent they?' read the letters.

“Some of them are my friends,” he said defensively.

‘They wear their pastel candy colors like the world is made of sunshine... they don’t see the despair that lurks in every pony’s soul... too busy harping on their own happiness in their empty and meaningless lives’

“Uh...” Nightbreaker replied intelligently. He looked up at the words rather than at her. “Okay?”

The filly sighed. *‘I thought you would get it, but clearly you’re just like them’*

“I don’t see what’s wrong with that.”

She sighed again, wishing she was a better judge of character.

‘What do you even do in these lessons anyway? My dad says they’re intensive’

“Well,” said Twilight. Vespertine noted the care the purple filly took in making sure to face her, the exaggerated mouth movements. “It’s a lot like ordinary school, but more... focused I suppose.” The filly slung her saddlebags over her back and trotted out the door.

“Huh?” Vespertine followed Twilight out the door, their next class being the same one.

“There’s a lot more homework, and the lessons are harder. Um... You know those projects you do where you have to learn about whales, magnets, things like that, and then make posters or do presentations?”

“Yeah. What about them?” They were walking now, so Vespertine could not write out her speech unless she wanted to risk bumping into a wall. Nor would Twilight be able to read it without hazarding the same.

“We don’t have those at this school.”

“Oh.”

“Have you ever written an essay before?”

Vespertine shook her head. She’d written *reports* but never an essay. Essays were long, with lots of pages and rules, and they were for older students.

“You should probably learn how. There are a lot of them in Ms. Lida’s class.”

Starting in the second year at a new school with a bunch of cheery conformists was bad enough, but on top of that, this sounded like some sort of academic boot camp.

'Do we normally have two teachers at once?' she wrote into the air. Both of them had stopped short in front of Ms. North Star's classroom.

"Not in this class..."

That meant other classes had two teachers, didn't it? Was this out of the ordinary?

Twilight peered into the classroom. "Maybe it's a presentation or something?"

Vespertine had to get Twilight to repeat that, because the bookish filly was facing away, preoccupied by the teachers waiting at the front of the classroom.

Once class had started, one of the teachers spoke.

"You must all be wondering why we're here," said the older yellow mare, one with frizzy grey hair. From the corners of her eyes, Vespertine noticed her classmates nodding and moving their mouths in assent.

The other mare, a pinkish-purple unicorn with reddish eyes, stepped forward. "The beginning of year two is going to be a little different from what you were used to in magic kindergarten. I'm sure most of you already know what I'm referring to."

Huh? Well maybe *they* did, but this was all news to her.

"This year," continued the mare, "we're going to be training your magical perception and adroitness. In a couple of weeks, up until the spring semester starts, we need to take away both your vision and most of your hearing."

How could she understand what ponies were saying if she couldn't see them? How could *anypony* know where they were going? What did magic have to do with *either* of those things?

...This school was *insane*.

The older yellow mare spoke up again. "We understand that these are very significant handicaps, which is why both of the second year dormitories and all of your classes are now located on the first floor.

"The stairs and stairwells are strictly forbidden until you have passed the requisite tests. If you try to play games on them, test your limits with them, try to ascend without permission or assistance, *we will know*. Punishment will be severe, ranging from a failing

grade in this class to a full expulsion. Tomfoolery will not be tolerated.”

Tomfoolery?

Papers flew out of the older mare’s bag, landing on every occupied desk in the classroom. The enclosed space of the room resembled nothing less than a frenzy of panicked origami doves. “These are waivers that both you and your parents will need to sign. Participation in this exercise is not strictly required. Keep in mind that with parental permission, you may opt out at any time after the first week.

“Please review those forms-” Vespertine peeked down at the paper and was greeted by so many strange and difficult words that she had no idea what to make of it. “-With your parents if at all possible, but they do need to be signed and delivered by the end of the month.”

With that, the older mare left, and the actual class began.

The teacher made sure to introduce her to the rest of the class - as ‘Ingot’ no less. Vespertine made sure to correct this right away. The teacher’s name, she found out, was Ms. North Star, and she started off the greeting by telling all the other students that they needed to be extra sensitive and all the other stuff teachers usually told classes whenever she was introduced.

She hung her bangs in her face, trying to look like she was bored and brooding. Why couldn’t they just say, “Hey guys, this is Ingot. She’s deaf!” and be done with it?

The lesson took *forever* to end. Not only were the classes at this school stupidly long, but she hadn’t understood a single thing being discussed, even though it was the very first class of the year. The fact that there were only seven other students also made it a lot more obvious when she started to doze off. Every time her eyelids started to feel heavy, she would feel the vibrations of the teacher’s hooves as they rapped against the floor, stepping closer and closer, and a gentle hoof on her shoulder, nudging her awake. The teacher asked Vespertine to see her after the lesson ended, and her heart sank into her stomach. It was just the first day and she was already in trouble.

“I really tried to stay awake,” said Vespertine. “It’s just that the class is so long and I don’t understand...”

The teacher waited patiently for her to finish speaking, and several seconds longer than necessary, almost as if to make sure she’d actually *finished*. “It’s perfectly normal to have trouble adjusting to the curricula,” said the teacher. “I was just going to recommend that you come by after class, or during your breaks for some extra help. I’m sure most of this material was not covered at your old school.”

Oh. So she wasn’t in trouble.

“Also...” Ms. North Star said, she looked uncomfortable, like she was about to broach an awkward subject. “Even if all the other students are going to be... blinding themselves and such... it doesn’t mean that you should feel pressured to do the same. Somepony in your situation would-”

“I’m going to do it,” Vespertine said, more because of how the teacher was acting than any actual conviction. *Darnit*. “I want to do this for myself, to prove that I can.” Now that she was playing this role, the words came out unbidden and unwanted. She didn’t *actually* want to blind herself for the sake of whatever this was, but now that she’d said it, she was kind of locked in. She almost sighed.

“Oh, yes,” the teacher said, perhaps a little too quickly. “That’s a matter completely for you to decide - and your parents, of course.”

“The darkness that feeds upon my psyche is all-consuming and eternal.” With the absolute lameness of her last reaction, perhaps she could save face *somehow*. “What little should it matter that my vision should match it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ms. North Star. “I’m afraid I didn’t quite get that. Could you please repeat it?”

This time she actually did sigh.

Jazz - The Rules

The record spun, and the scratchy melody drifted up from the player. He could almost see it - the way that the notes danced with a power that went beyond sound, beyond the simple vibrations made in the air. It was the colour of trees and the smell of rain.

The stallion *did* see it then. An interplay of sound and thought, which he plucked out of the noise. It crystallized immediately. “There we go,” he said, pulling the not-quite-thing out of the air.

The principal stood there blinking. Her mouth hung slightly open. “Did you just... Is that the *concept* of music?”

“Eh.” He shrugged. “More like ‘a’ concept rather than ‘the’. It’s dead now, though.”

“You...” The mare looked like she was about to faint. “You can kill music?”

“It’s only alive when it’s moving, and it isn’t moving anymore. At least that’s what it looks like to me.” He put the green shape of the music on the table and prodded it with a hoof. It made a *twanggg* and rolled a little. The room filled with the scent of a summer rainstorm. “Maybe it’s undead?”

“What other qualifications do you have?” she said finally, after she had taken several deep breaths.

“Uh... I was in this band and we played at the Rusty Kettle a lot. I can hold my breath for almost three minutes... I have a PhD in ancient spell cryptowhatsit. Um... I make a mean spinach and cauliflower thingy. What’s that egg pie called again?”

“A quiche.”

“Yeah! That’s it!” He grinned. “Is that good enough?”

“Wait a minute,” said the principal. “Did you just say you have a PhD in ancient spell cryptography?”

“Oh yeah, that’s what it’s called. I forgot.”

“How does one forget the name of the program one *majored in*?”

He scratched his chin with a hoof. “It always comes back to me eventually, so maybe it’s more like the information goes away for a while.”

“Well,” said the mare, “if you don’t mind me asking, if you have those kinds of academic credentials, why are you applying for a job at a school that teaches children?”

He sighed. “My band broke up. The drummer left to spend more time with his wife and kids.”

“Yes,” the mare said patiently, “but why are you applying *here* rather than at Canterlot University, for instance?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “I’m banned from Canterlot University.”

This time it was the mare who sighed. “May I ask why?”

“Huh? Why would you need permission for something like that?”

The mare buried her face in her hooves. “Why were you banned from Canterlot University, Mr. Jazz?”

“Um... It’s kind of embarrassing, but...” His voice lowered to a whisper. “I

disagreed with the head of the department about magical static interference.”

“And how did that get you banned?”

“Well the next day,” he said, raising his voice to its normal volume, “I wanted to show her I knew what I was talking about, so I went down to the experimental sound lab and calibrated every emitter to play at discordant frequencies - I set them to an inaudible pitch because I didn’t want to bother anypony - and then I played a saxophone right in the middle, and everything metal in the department turned into chocolate milk.”

The mare stared blankly at him. “How is that even *possible*?”

Jazz shrugged. “I don’t make up the rules. That’s the universe’s job. But if you really want to know...” He went into a very technical explanation about magical sound resonance and chaos theory, for several minutes before the principal put up a hoof to stop him.

She looked at the very short list of ponies who’d applied for this position, then sighed. “I am going to have to go over some very strict rules with you, later, but first and foremost, there will be *no* turning of anything into chocolate milk-”

“Not even ordinary milk?”

“No turning of anything into chocolate milk *with magic*. Especially not expensive equipment,” said the mare. “You’ll get a month of probation before we consider taking you on as a full-time staff member.”

“So I’m hired?”

“We’ll keep the job posting open for another week, but if nopony else suitable replies, we’ll contact you for a second interview.”

“Thank you, Ms... Principal!” He leaned forward to grab the green music shape off the desk and turned towards the door. “Mrroo wrnt reegrrt trrs!” he said, with a mouth full of music. More eloquently, his speech might have been rendered as, ‘You won’t regret this!’

As he walked out the building, he hummed a simple jaunty tune. Each note sent off little wisps of colour and light from the ball of music between his teeth, the music slowly dissipating into nothing. And all around him, the air filled with the pitter-patter of rain in the trees, of things growing, and of things unknown, the music alive again.

Lexicus

Malachite

Marching Dawn

Nightbreaker

North Star

Pebbly Crunch

Peu de la Pouliche

Rune

Solidarity

Somepony Else

Spike -

The egg was a rich lilac, covered in darker purple spots. The Princess walked around the egg once, evaluating it with her eyes and the faint glow of her horn. “This one will do,” she said finally.

“Are you sure?” The dragon arched an eyebrow at her. “That’s only the umpteen hundredth you’ve inspected.”

“Yes.”

“Very well, Celestia.” The dragon placed her talons over her heart. “I grant you this boon, and thus the balance between us lies equal once more. Important ceremony stuff, yadda yadda yadda may we never meet again.”

The Princess smiled. “Thank you,” she said. “Fly high, breathe deep, live long.”

“I hope you’re not trying to raise a dragon army.”

“Your concern is not only misplaced, but tardy.”

“Eh, I guess.” The dragon shrugged her massive shoulders. “Not my problem anyway. Take good care of the little omelette.”

“That, I promise.” And with a flash of fire and sunlight, the Princess was gone.

Tambourine

Tsunami

Twilight Sparkle

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