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The Longest Journey

Chapter 3 - The Long Road's Toll

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Warden's shoulders ground painfully in their sockets as he came upon the gates to Canterlot. His steps still remained quick, and often he fidgeted when the mob of ponies forced him to stand in place. The day's walk antagonized old aches that riddled his body like holes in cheese, and yet the stallion continued his path to the end.

The sun neared its resting place on the horizon, and with its setting the gala was to begin. The walk had given Warden plenty of time to ponder and decide upon how he would get into the social function. The knight had spent a portion of his time considering his options, until he formulated a means to enter the palace: he would simply ask to see Princess Luna, saying he bore an important message committed to memory. He didn't actually *have* a message, so the hope of the guards trusting his word was pinnacle to this whole plan. If worse came to worse, the stallion figured he would be have to muscle his way in, or try to convince the guards to let him see the princess regardless.

Best to keep things simple.

The knight passed through the golden-ivory gates, penetrating the vast sea of ponies that inundated the mountain-top capitol. Even this late in the day, the throngs of shoppers and socialites encapsulated him in the less than wide streets, giving his pace a more lethargic feel than he was comfortable with. A millennium was too long a wait for him to take the time and enjoy the sights of this city.

He groaned under his breath as he weaved through the crowds towards the palace. His knee complained about the effort of this extended travel, but the old knight promised himself he would sit once he reached the palace. This city was unfamiliar to him; it looked nothing like what the Palace of the Sisters did, and yet it had all the grandeur the old capitol possessed during its life.

The grey stallion had reached the palace in under an hour. He found a bench

placed neatly outside the primary entrance that granted him a view of all the nobleponies attending the gala. The crowd of nobles seemingly vibrated outside the set of gold gates that led into the inner sanctum of the palace grounds.

He sat on the bench and observed the nobleponies as the gates opened, admitting them to the inner sanctum of the palace. They streamed in with an unintelligible murmur of conversation and excited cheers. Warden sighed, shaking his head at the mob. He watched as they eagerly swarmed the courtyard, and for the first time in many years, he wondered why today was any different than yesterday.

Luna.

He looked over himself. Sure, his body did not *look* wrinkly and aged like that of an elder, but he was mangled and scarred by a nomadic life of violence and unrest.

Well, when I get past whatever idiots stand in my way, I can finally bucking relax.

He smiled sincerely at the thought for the first time in many years. The joy of the realization that he was so close to the end washed over him, bathing him in a warmth he had not felt since eons long gone. At the same time, nausea skittered lightly in his stomach as the prospect of failing or rejection made him shift in his seat.

The ranger felt his smile shrink as he watched a liveried servant take tickets from the nobles as they walked in the gates. He figured it would be problematic for him to go to the front and ask to see the princess.

There's gotta be a side entrance for servants. I am a servant after all.

The knight nodded at the thought as he rose from his seat. The horde of fancily dressed ponies absorbed him as he walked leisurely into its midst. He followed the stream of bodies, his beaten and worn armor standing out against the colorful array of dresses and suits. His dilapidated armor made him stick out like a sore thumb in the crowd. Many of the nobles eyed him warily, unsure of what to think of this battered individual. Warden gave one particularly snide looking stallion a flat stare, causing him to look away and hurry through the crowd.

The mass of ponies trickled into the courtyard beyond the gate, at which point the stallion made sure to detach himself. He went off to the left, circling around in search of another entrance. Having orbited the palace to the point where he was out of sight of the majority of the party-goers, he found an unloading station for what appeared to be crates of food. Laborers carried the containers of food through a doorway with a unicorn guard on either side. One of them spotted him as he approached and stood alert.

“You there, halt!” the guard called out.

Warden walked up to the sentinels. “I come bearing a message for Princess Luna, I require access to her at once.”

The guard raised his eyebrow. “Oh yeah? The princesses aren’t taking any letters tonight, and what’s with the armor? Are you some kind of actor?”

“It’s mine, it’s a dangerous world after all. Is there anyway you can let me in to see them?”

“We can’t let you enter. Go home before you cause any trouble.”

“You sure about that? There is absolutely nothing I can do to make you step aside?” Warden shook his saddlebags with a hoof, causing them to jingle lightly.

The guard on the left stared at him through narrow eyes, while his partner huffed at the knight. “You heard us, get out of here.”

Not even a bribe? At least their Praetor teaches them right.

Warden gaped at the two guards before shaking his head and turning away. He walked slowly away as ideas formulated in his head. Barely two steps later, he stopped and sighed. He didn’t want to, but the stallion knew what he would inevitably have to do. Possibilities tumbled in his head for a brief moment before he admitted to himself that there was no other way he could think of getting in.

Buck it.

He took a step back, that was all he needed to get close enough.

“Hey! I tho-” the guard on the left began, but was interrupted by a pair of metal clad hooves colliding with his face. The force of the kick lifted him up off his front legs, sending him careening into the door frame behind him. The guard slumped to the ground while his partner sprung at Warden with a flurry of hooves.

The guard struck out with his front hooves, catching the older stallion in the face and neck. Warden blocked out the blows as he initiated a bull rush. With his larger size he easily overwhelmed the guard, trampling him underfoot. Warden finished off the guard with a final kick to the head, rendering him unconscious. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the laborers cowering behind the carts, eyeing him in terror.

“If any of you run off and scream, I won’t be very happy,” Warden said with a dead stare. He backed into the storage room the guards were assigned to, keeping his

eye on the frightened ponies.

The knight turned into the room now, moving past crates of food and supplies for the kitchen staff. Knowing the magnitude of the Grand Galloping Gala, Warden was surprised by lack of servants he thought would be bustling through here. He was faced with two doors, with no clue where either one went. Warden stood, staring at both exits, unsure which to pick.

“Oh what the hell,” he mumbled as he darted into the door on the left. The stallion hobbled down the two-pony wide hallway, following the mouth watering aromas that seemed to replace the very air he breathed. The warm light from the kitchens seeped out of the open doorway into the relatively dark corridor. Warden stalked his way to the entrance, keeping his body inches from the wall. He crept closer and closer to the doorway, watching the shadows of the kitchen staff dance on the wall as they cooked. His ears perked at the sound of hoofsteps. He glanced back down the hall, only to find two armored pegasi cantering in from the storage room.

“There he is!” yelled one of guards.

“After him!”

They shot down the hall, with four more pouring into the corridor from outside. Warden snorted and rounded the corner into the kitchens. Busy staff that were engrossed in their work looked up at the sudden commotion. Some froze in place and others bolted with a scream as their already active workplace was now ablaze with the energy of a criminal escaping the law. Ingredients and completed hors d'oeuvres platters flew through the air as the stampede of armored stallions raged its way past the chefs.

The head chef looked on in horror as she witnessed her kitchen being ravaged in front of her very eyes. “No! My food! My work!”

The sister rulers of Equestria stood at the base of a grand staircase, greeting the river of nobleponies rushing into the hall. The princesses of night and day kept regal smiles and a friendly atmosphere about them -- well, Luna tried to, anyway.

Glancing sideways at her sibling, the midnight mare muttered, “There sure are many of them.”

Celestia laughed heartily, “Well of course dear sister, this *is* the event of the year.

It's not so bad, maybe you will make a new friend or two?"

"I'd much rather be reading," she managed to squeeze out between a false smile as an elegantly dressed noblemare walked by.

"But, Sister, you'd miss the food!"

"Oh, Tia, you know my one true weakness!" she giggled at her solar sibling.

The air of the hall changed as the commander of the guard, accompanied by several of his stallions stormed in from the main entrance.

"Princess Celestia, Princess Luna! I apologize for this intrusion, but somepony has broken into the palace through the kitchen's storage room!" the commander announced to the confused sisters. He was a tall crimson stallion with the build of a tank and a pristine set of silver armor, pronouncing his rank and separating him from the guards. The nobleponies gasped with fear and intrigue. The muttering and whispers of the guests filled the air as the commander turned to his stallions.

"East door! That's the only way out of the kitchens, go now!"

Warden burst through the kitchen doors into a small dining room where heaps of food and drink were stacked. A pair of waitresses jumped at the sudden racket, dropping food trays and their contents back onto the table. The door to the main hall was on the far side of the room, causing a surge of adrenaline to rush through him as he raced around the table. The guards took flight over the room, shooting up into the air and diving down with the intent of tackling their target.

Almost there!

As quick as hope blossomed in his mind, it died with the opening of the very doors he sought. In marched a horde of guards lead by a silver-clad stallion.

"Stop right there, I don't want to fight you bud," the commander said.

The pegasi above halted their dive and landed behind him, completing the circle the guards formed around him.

Warden groaned at the number of armored forms around him, "Ah buck. Alright, I just want to see Princess Luna. I know I kicked the hell out of two of your stallions out there, but they just wouldn't let me in."

The commander's nostrils flared as he gritted his teeth, "Assaulting two guards

while breaking and entering into the royal palace is highly illegal. You're under arrest!"

"Oh no, I'm not going down in that hole, go talk to the princess! She'll be mighty pissed if she figures out you're locking me up!

Aggression left the commander's face and was replaced by a stony calm. "Bind him and give him a cell."

The circle contracted around Warden as the guards moved in. The doors to the kitchen burst open, revealing a red-faced master chef.

"Who the bucking hell do you all think you are, charging through *my* kitchens while I'm preparing all this bloody food for the party!" the wily older mare shrieked at the huddled group of armored stallions.

With a burst of speed, Warden galloped directly at the commander. The guards jerked their attention back away from the chef, some unable to prepare in time. The knight slid through the wall of stallions, snaking between the first two layers like threading a needle. Rushing towards the final line of guards, he let loose a dispiriting roar. The guards wavered at the sound, giving Warden the chance to quickly charge through the opening. The soldier bashed aside an unlucky straggler that got in his way, but one was quick enough to jump and try to pin him from behind. Warden bucked the offending guard, sending him tumbling to the ground. Free from his fetters, the wayward ranger raced towards the door.

A chorus of screams shattered Luna's eardrums as nobles compressed themselves into the corners of the hall, away from the dining room door. Luna and Celestia, standing alertly on the staircase landing, watched as a beaten up pony galloped unsteadily out into the center of the room, looking around wildly.

"What is the meaning of this madness!" Celestia's voice boomed through the room, attracting the eye of the interloper and all the other ponies.

"Luna! Celestia! It's me, Wa-" he cried as a pegasus barreled into him with several more in tow.

"Keep him down and don't let him lose this time you incompetent foals!" the red stallion barked as he followed his guards into the room.

Luna felt the tingle of a memory skitter through her mind.

That voice, where have I heard his voice before?

“Cease my ponies! Let this stallion speak!”

“B-but your highness! He has broken into the palace and injured several of my guards, he needs to be locked up now!” the silver clad commander protested.

“Do as I say! I am your princess, just like my sister, you are subject to *my* orders as well! Now release him!” Luna ordered. Celestia gave her a sideways glance as she took control of the situation.

“Sister, is this wise?” the sun princess gave her a concerned look.

“I have to know who he is, I know I recognize his voice!” the midnight mare turned back to the guards, “Bring him forward!”

Obedying her command, they dragged the exhausted intruder towards the foot of the landing. They set him down, giving him the chance to struggle to his feet. He cast an eye up at the alicorns looking down on him, fixating his gaze on Luna’s ocean eyes.

Her mind bubbled with uncontrolled thoughts, all dominated by the hungry curiosity that enthralled her as she watched this banged up old pony stagger to a standing position.

“You have intruded upon our festivities, brought harm to our servants, and frightened our guests, I demand to know who you are at once!” the lunar princess thundered.

After gaining a steady footing, the bruised and bloodied knight lifted a hoof to his helm, pushing it off his head as the ache in his knee begged him to cease.

“I am Warden Ironwall, Cohort of the Night. I have returned to serve you, Princess Luna, as was the obligation made one thousand and one years ago.”

Whispers bounced off the walls as the nobleponies drew closer to the battered soldier. Celestia remained stiff where she stood, her face betraying none of the shock that crackled in her head. On the other hand, Luna’s jaw was dangling on its hinges, her emotions painted across her wide-eyed face like a mural. The guards glanced at one another, unsure of what exactly they were hearing.

“W-Warden? Is that really you?” the moon princess asked softly, her eyes glistening.

“Indeed it is, I told you I would be loyal until the day I die. I have travelled across

all of the world, from the highest mountains down to the dirtiest of holes our civilization can call home. I have seen innocent ponies die, as well as the not so innocent. I have been the one to *kill* those helpless ponies, and not just ponies! Griffins and wolves and bears alike! All I have fought and killed, and yet all have taken the time to help me and guide me on this journey I have made. I have given and taken more than what I am worth, and here I am now, at your feet once more. All I can ask of you is that you take me up in your service once more, if not as your counselor, then as your friend.”

The nobleponies quickly returned to their muttering and whispers as the lunar princess gawked, but then recomposed herself.

“But Warden, you never left my service to begin with, it was I who left. It would only be fair that you resume your duties, wouldn’t you agree sister?” Luna said, giving her sister a wide grin.

“I do believe that is fair, yes,” Celestia concurred with a regal smile.

The anxiety melted off of his face as the stallion beamed up at the two. “Thank you so much, your majesties. It is an honor to serve under your command. Now, uh, can I get a bath somewhere?”

The lunar princess grinned at him. “But of course! Commander Red Tide? Would you lead Warden to one of my guest rooms? Have the maids clean him up and send him back to me when they are through.”

“B-but-” Red Tide stammered.

“Are you questioning my decision, Commander?” Luna said, giving him a grave stare.

He looked at Celestia, but his pleading eyes were met with a gentle nod towards her sister.

“Well?” the lunar princess pressed on.

“Y-yes your majesty, I apologize for not immediately obeying,” he said, prostrating himself.

The party goers returned to their chatter, dispersing back out into the room while the guards returned to their posts. The crimson stallion turned towards Warden, bearing his teeth in a snarl that he kept out of sight of the princesses. “Come with me.”

The knight followed with a stony face. Deep in his core, however, the waters of relief and fatigue washed over him. Without a second thought, he trudged after the

silver-clad commander, struggling to put one hoof in front of the other.

The doors to Princess Luna's personal rooms stood imposing at the end of the wide hallway. Four dark, armored unicorns with purple plates and slitted eyes stood watch, their serpentine scrutiny liberating any who might hide in the shadows from a stealthy approach. Commander Red Tide showed Warden the way to the moon mare's entrance, giving him a sneer and telling the guards that he was to be attended to. They nodded silently, opening the black lacquered wooden portal to the inner sanctum of the night princess. They showed him into an antechamber, which acted as a hub between a guest chamber on either side, and another pair of black doors, behind which was Luna's personal room.

At a desk in the center of this nexus was a silver coated unicorn with a pair of golden eyes and a turquoise mane. She looked up at him through half-moon glasses, quickly inspecting him with her eyes.

"And who might you be? Somepony of importance if you find yourself here, hm?" she said, nibbling her lip as her gaze traveled all over him.

"I suppose you could say that, my name is Warden. Luna sent me here to get cleaned up," he responded with a nod.

"You are awfully filthy, I must say. She was wise in sending you here," she said, standing up and stepping gracefully around her desk towards him. "You may call me Sun Drop, I'm Princess Luna's personal assistant. Come with me, we will use one of the guest baths."

She batted her eye lashes at him, swiveling her body towards the door on the right. The attendant's flank rolled with each step, drawing Warden's eye downward. Her cutie mark became obvious to the knight, a pen lying on a piece of parchment, as it moved with the rest of her haunch. Her body was voluptuous; with wider hips curving into a narrow waist, that widened out again into slightly narrower shoulders. The mare's flank had a rounded and supple build, but a flick of her tail drew the stallion from his observations. Looking up, he saw her glancing back at him from the corner of her eye with a devious grin on her face.

Sun Drop unlatched the door with her magic, letting the two into the empty guest room. A rush of lavender air engulfed Warden, compelling him to inhale the sweet scent. The intricate mural of the night sky adorning the ceiling grabbed the knight's attention. Its rendition of the constellation Freya, a mare who had toyed with hearts of legend,

beckoned him towards the curvaceous bed on the far side of the room.

A silky voice drew him away. "The bathroom," she called, "is this way, Warden."

Hearing his name, that stallion's ears flicked alertly and his gaze jumped back to the waiting mare. His eyes followed the curves of her back and legs as she whirled towards the bath, inviting him in. His steps followed hers into the bathroom, where a massive in-ground pool ruled the space. The steaming water lapped gently against the edges, as its heat rolled over him, making his armor feel uncomfortably moist.

"These baths are filled constantly from a hot spring inside the mountain. Some of our previous guests couldn't take the heat," she winked at Warden, "but I think the hot water will help us relax your aching muscles." The golden eyed mare cooed, licking her lips.

"You know, it's been a long while since I've had a good bath," Warden said as he began to unstrap the leather binding his armor. Sun Drop lowered her gaze and grinned, closing the curtains behind her.

The exhausted soldier relaxed his body on the luxurious bedsheets. His ragged breathing echoed Sun Drop's as silence prevailed where the noise of lust once held sway. Warden kept his eyes skyward, picking out stars and naming the constellations on the ceiling in his head. The constellation Tyr cast his scrutinizing stare down onto the wet ponies, making him shiver despite the heat of passion he had been enthralled with. Still, the penetrating gaze of the cosmic judge was more bearable than the mare's wily eyes. His stomach churned like the restless ocean, while his mind reeled at the experience he kept replaying in his head.

A sigh escaped his lips as the gears of initiative began to turn. Warden hauled his tired body out of bed, rubbing his eyes and licking his dry lips. Sun Drop watched him fetch his armor from the bath, sitting up on her elbows without a word. In minutes, the knight had donned his armor while the seductress looked on wordlessly. With all but his helmet on, Warden paused. He grasped the final piece between his hooves, running his eyes over the jagged and torn metal surface. With a quick glance back up at heavenly panorama, the gray wanderer gave an imperceptible nod to the celestial judge. He began to remove his armor, stowing away the pieces of platemail in his bag and tossing the pack over his shoulder.

Turning to the door, he glanced back over his shoulder at the silver mare. "I

should be going now, the princess is expecting me back.”

“I suppose that is wise, I’ve enjoyed your company, *Warden*.” She moaned his name, causing a lump to grow in his throat. He huffed, pushing open the door and leaving behind the musky apartment.

End of Chapter 3

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I would like to thank both of my wonderful editors, CartoonGeld and TheManWithTwoNames, without them this piece of literature would not be possible, or it would be awful in the very least. They have put hours of arduous work into polishing the rough image I have forged for you to enjoy.

And while you guys are at it, go read TheManWithTwoNames’ stories:

[Heavenly Turmoil](#)

[Head Full of Cotton Candy](#)

I hope you guys like Discord, he sure does.

-Ek Vitki