

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

**When I began writing this story, season one had not yet finished, so Luna did not have a canon personality at the time. As such, I came up with my own characterization for our favorite lunar princess, and although it may not exactly jive with her canon self as it is now, attempting to “correct” her personality at that late stage of writing to fit canon Luna would have destroyed much of the significance and plot of the story as I had planned it, and would almost certainly have demanded a complete rewrite from the very beginning. Rather, I hope that you can enjoy her role in this story as much as I have enjoyed writing for her for what it is.**

**In addition, it may be important to note that certain events of significance to Equestrian History, i.e. the introduction of Discord, had also not occurred until a very late stage in the writing, and are therefore not featured in this work for reasons similar to that stated above.**

**Rather than change the story to maintain a strict adherence to the canon of the show and thereby create a product that was messy, confusing, and unenjoyable to me as a writer, I thought it better to simply continue writing as I always have, and allow the story to stand on its own for what it is. Thank you for your readership, and I hope that you have as much fun reading this story as I did writing it!**

**-Viktor Lionheart**

Skyfall

Concept and Writing by Viktor Lionheart

Chapter 8: Dreams

Outside the elegantly curved walls of the Ivory Citadel, evening was bathing the land in an amber glow with the last lingering rays of the setting sun. One by one, the walls sprung to life with a thousand tiny lights as the lanterns were lit throughout the castle in preparation for the night watch. Deep in the structure's heart, a small coven of the social elite gathered around a long table, exchanging obligatory tidbits of small talk to pass the time as they waited for the purpose of their gathering to assert itself. The last fingers of warm sunlight disappeared over the edge of the glass ceiling, leaving only the cold illumination of the lanterns as it reflected throughout the chamber's dark, polished walls. The massive conference hall was the height of opulence, its enormous marble columns covered over every inch of their circumference with beautifully carved murals, each telling a different story as it wound its way skyward. But the thoughts of each of the occupants were concerned with other matters of a somewhat less palatable nature. There was much work to be done, and no easy way to go about doing it.

As the echoes of idle chatter gradually subsided, a silent tension descended upon the occupants of the conference hall, settling somewhere between hope and fear. At one end of the table, seated beside the head chair, sat a young white alicorn with a beautiful

swirling mane of many colors. She suppressed a sigh, swallowing instead to clear her thoughts. This was not the first time she had been to one of her mother's sessions, but they never failed to make her uneasy – she often wondered whether she could really comprehend the ramifications of what they would be discussing or whether she even had a right to be involved in discussing it in the first place. Judging by their expressions, many of the other occupants shared Celestia's unspoken sentiment to some degree. Despite her reservations, she found strength in her mother's logic – like it or no, they had been presented with a very difficult and very sensitive situation, and it was their responsibility to handle it as best they could. None of them had chosen this, but they could still choose, this time as a whole, what came next for their world.

Perhaps out of the same uneasiness, it was princess Luna who first broke the silence with her whimpering.

“Shhh-shh-shh-” Celestia gently rocked her infant sister in her hooves as she whispered a tuneless lullaby. One of the delegates eyed the tiny alicorn disapprovingly from his seat at the far end of the table, but said nothing. She knew it wasn't exactly appropriate for a child to be present at such an occasion, but she and her mother insisted that, as a princess, she deserved to be there as much as any of the rest of them. She had just had her third birthday a short time ago, and the queen believed that it was time for her to start becoming accustomed to the duties of the life ahead of her. Luna clutched tightly to a wisp of Celestia's mane, her face buried in her elder sister's chest. She was very shy, even for her age, and she didn't seem too fond of being around so many people at once.

“Now then, If we are all ready to begin, I shall hereby call to order the four-hundred-and-twenty-third conclave of the Unified Equestrian Court of Harmony.”



With a resounding thud, Queen Aurora rapped her hoof against the polished marble surface of the table. The voice with which she spoke was not altogether harsh, but carried a tangible, self-assured authority that seemed to almost immediately earn the respect of whomever happened to hear it. Some may have called her tone arrogant, though those who knew her knew that the authority with which she spoke was well-deserved. However, she only asserted that authority here when it was absolutely necessary. Her crown never followed her into this room, for here, they were all equals, working toward the same goal.

“Is there any urgent business to be presented before the Council?” Aurora paused, scanning the room. “Seeing none, I shall proceed with old business. First on the docket—as we discussed last month, article four, section two of the UECH pegasi relocation effort was to be amended for the purpose of redefining construction standards for the new weather-factory design. Brother Vesper, would you like to report?”

A tall, silver-maned pony stood, flexing his wings as he bowed in the queen's direction. "Thank, you, Sister Aurora." He cleared his throat, producing a thick sheaf of paper from his saddlebag. "Structural analysis of the new recommendations reveals higher than predicted stability, even under outlying wind velocity test conditions. There are some minor design changes recommended by the weather division to further bolster the structures' stability, as well as some promising new designs for future residential projects."

As he spoke, he pushed several papers in the Queen's direction, then busied himself with distributing copies to each of the other delegates. When he had finished, Aurora read aloud the single word written in bold print atop the stack of blueprints before her.

"Cloudsdale."

"We are confident that with the new designs, we shall be able to endeavor upon more ambitious construction projects such as the one detailed in the plans I have just given to all of you. This project will provide homes for several hundred thousand residents upon its completion, and will also be able to supply much-needed work through its weather factories and other suggested facilities."

"Excellent. I shall review these after we adjourn and submit my advice to you via teleshard. In the meantime, please send all information regarding costs and time scale to me at your earliest convenience."

Vesper nodded, retaking his seat.

"I hereby declare the matter of amending article four, section two of the UECH pegasi relocation effort tabled until further review."

Another rap of her hoof.

"Next order of - yes, Brother Argos? Do you have something to say?"

At the far end of the room, one of the delegates had risen from his chair to indicate that he wished to be recognized. One enormous, scaly claw clutched a small, glowing gem that hung at the end of a resplendent emerald chain about his neck.

"Thank you, Sister Aurora. I apologize for the interruption." As he spoke, the dragon named Argos drew himself to his full height, his golden – scaled head nearly scraping the ceiling of the hall, even being as high as it was to be able to accommodate the other delegates of his persuasion. His gravelly, baritone voice boomed throughout the chamber, small wisps of black smoke issuing from his nostrils with each breath.

"I have just received word that the other draconic delegates are just now passing over the Great Forest. They send their apologies for their tardiness, and promise to bring

encouraging news from the draconic reconstruction front.”

“Very well. Thank you, Brother Argos.” With a nod, Aurora summoned one of the guards from the edges of the hall to her side. For a moment, they exchanged whispers, after which the guard gave a crisp salute and marched out of the colossal marble archway to the hall outside.

“As I was saying, next order of business. At the conclave before last, Sister Odysa of the Draconic High Council put forth the motion that...”

She was cut off by a sudden sound like a siren. Without warning, princess Luna’s persistent cries filled the conference hall, earning another nasty glance, this time from several of the other delegates. Celestia redoubled her efforts to quiet her little sister while her mother continued.

“...concerning the zoning laws assigned in accordance with article three, section eleven...”

Luna simply wailed louder, despite the whispering of her elder sister. Aurora sighed, gesturing to the nursemaid at her side who was always present for just this sort of occasion. Immediately, the somewhat portly mare swooped down upon Celestia to take Luna from the conference hall. The moment her teeth touched the little princess’s blankets, however, Luna let out a shriek that caused the mare to clap her hooves over her ears, despite herself. The nursemaid tried again and again to soothe the wailing child, but she simply cried louder and louder, struggling frantically to reach toward Celestia.

“Sister Aurora, if I may suggest-”

“I am aware of the situation, thank you.” Aurora snapped a curt reply at the delegate who had risen in response to Luna’s outburst. She had had that particular conversation with that particular delegate on more than one occasion, and she was not in the mood to have it again. She nodded pointedly at the nursemaid.

“Grace, if you would.”

In a fitful rush, the nursemaid snatched Luna up in her teeth and hurried toward the archway.

“I apologize for the interruption. As I was saying, in accordance with article-”

Before Grace could make it more than halfway to the exit, she loosed a shriek of her own as she was blinded by a flash of light. As she tried desperately to rub the sight back into her eyes, a series of gasps struck the air, mingling with Luna’s cries. Celestia stared down in shock at the lump of cloth that had rematerialized in her lap. Princess Luna squirmed to free herself from her blanket, reaching blindly for her sister, a few sparkles

of light still issuing from the tiny bud of her horn. All of the delegates, even the normally meticulously composed Queen stared at the infant in disbelief.

“Did she just...?”

“How in the world...”

A chorus of similar whispers echoed softly between the delegates for a few moments before Aurora finally remembered herself. Swallowing hard, she attempted to resume her customary mask of cold impartiality, but was unable to completely hide a small sparkle of motherly pride in her eyes as she spoke.

“My goodness...Grace, are you alright?”

The nursemaid stood slack-jawed and wide-eyed, her gaze darting back and forth between Celestia and the end of her own muzzle, as if trying to decide whether she had done something wrong. She shook herself, offering a weak nod to indicate that she was unharmed.

“It seems she desires to remain with you, Celestia. I’m sorry to ask, but would you mind tending to her for a bit? I promise to fill you in later.”

It took a moment for her to respond. Still somewhat numb from disbelief, Celestia simply nodded, carrying her sister past a dumbfounded Grace toward the hall’s massive entrance. As she walked, Luna’s wails subsided somewhat, but still sounded loud and clear in the conference hall until she was well down the neighboring hallway.

In a way, she was glad to be rid of that stuffy hall and all of its even stuffier inhabitants - she never would have admitted it to anyone but her closest friends, but she hated these long, drawn-out discussions. It always seemed to her that everyone had a different way of handling each situation, and they were all bent on proving that their view was the best and only option, and how blind or stupid everyone else was for not seeing it their way. More often than not an issue would become so inextricably quagmired within itself that all discussion turned to whether they should even have been discussing it in the first place. She accepted and respected the fact that dealing with such difficulties was one of her duties as a princess, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. It was perhaps this that she admired most about her mother - despite any adversity or stupidity or other such obstacles, Aurora always maintained a cool, patient disposition, asserting her authority only when necessary to such an effect as to get the others back on track when things got too chaotic. She often mused to herself that without her mother, little would ever get done around here.

At long last, when Celestia was back in her bedroom, Luna began to calm down. Gently, she set herself down on the soft velvet cushion that served as her bed and magically rocked her sister in the air. Eventually, the toddler’s cries gave way to a steady stream of semicoherent babbling, and finally peaceful snoring, one hoof planted firmly

between her lips. Celestia stared at her little sister in wonder. She had teleported. To her knowledge, only a small few of the most talented unicorns had managed the same feat, and more often than not, especially for those with somewhat less experience, it ended in rather gruesome failure. And yet, this tiny little filly had performed a perfect teleport, not just on herself, but on the blankets around her, as well. The little princess slept, completely unaware of the significance of what she had just done. Celestia smiled, affectionately nuzzling the soft wisps of sapphire mane out of her baby sister's eyes. Her mother was right - Luna was truly a gifted child, and she was proud to have her as her sister.

“What in Equestria had you so upset, hm? You made quite a lot of noise for such a little thing.”

“Well you'd cry too, if you had such a dullard for a big sister.”

Celestia leapt to her feet. It took a moment for her to realize that the voice had not come from Luna, but from somewhere behind her. Almost immediately, her expression of shock dissolved into one of knowing mischief.

“How did you get in here?”

From behind the luxurious lace curtains surrounding Celestia's bay window, a tiny, blonde-maned filly emerged wearing a look of deep self-satisfaction.

“Oh please, don't insult me. No locked door stands a ghost of a chance against Frankie the Prankster!”

Celestia glared at the filly with mock umbridge, speaking in an exaggerated imitation of her mother's stern, official tone.

“You should know better than to enter a princess's quarters without her permission. I trust you are aware of the penalty for such an intrusion?”

The pony named Frankie swooned, thrusting her forelegs forward in desperation.

“No! Please, anything but that! Throw me in a dungeon, banish me to the Great Forest! Just please, *please* don't talk me to death with all of your boring official princessy stuff!”

For a moment the two simply stared at each other before simultaneously bursting into a fit of giggles. Frankie, or Francesca, as she hated to be called, was one of Celestia's closest friends, despite their sizeable age difference. The two had known each other for years, and as a result, Celestia had become quite accustomed to her friend's mischievously precocious disposition. Her reputation for her ability to sneak past the most attentive of guards, turn up in places where she was not supposed to be, and cause a general ruckus wherever she went earned her the moniker Frankie the Prankster, or just

Frankie for short. Francesca was the only daughter of one of the noble mares in the High Council, so not being able to get out much was one thing that she and Celestia had in common. Whenever she could, which was at least once a month, Frankie would accompany her mother to the Citadel so that she could visit and play with Celestia in her scant free time. Celestia had been told that Frankie's mother condoned their time together mostly out of the hope that some of her decorum and etiquette would rub off on her daughter, but to be honest, she found Frankie's reckless adventurousness refreshing, even if it was a bit alarming at times.

"So what, you finally wised up and ditched those stiff's in the meeting?"

"Hardly. As much as I might complain, I do enjoy being able to help my mother in her duties, you know. No, Luna was very upset about something, so mother had me take her out of the meeting."

"I thought there was supposed to be a nurse for that?"

"There was, only Luna had other things in mind."

Celestia walked back over to where her sister lay nestled in her blankets on the velvet cushion, beaming with pride.

"She teleported. She teleported right out of the nurse's mouth into my lap."

Frankie's smug grin disappeared. "Get out."

"It's the truth." Celestia chuckled to herself. "I couldn't believe it at first, but one moment, she was on her way out in Grace's teeth, and the next, she was back in my lap again." You should have seen the look on her face..." With some effort, Celestia attempted to reenact the nursemaid's flustered response, much to the delight of her filly friend. The two shared another laugh at the poor mare's expense before they were interrupted by an unexpected voice.

"Now, now, it isn't proper for a princess to revel in such petty amusement, much less to laugh at another's misfortune."

Immediately, their laughter gave way to guilty quietude as they gazed into the disapproving, translucent eyes of Celestia's father, who had suddenly appeared in the now open doorway to Celestia's room.

"... but if her reaction was anything like the face you just made, I doubt even I could have helped myself if I had been there."

His stern expression melting into a crooked smirk, Chronus laughed, a loud, boisterous, barking laugh. The two relaxed slightly, though his sudden appearance had put Celestia a



bit on edge. Since he didn't technically have feet, his movements were always silent and this often had the effect of surprising anyone with whom he initiated a conversation. Although her father was not known for his sense of humor, he did allow himself to take some pleasure in this. On occasion, when whimsy struck him the right way, he would indulge himself with some tired joke such as "You look like you've seen a ghost!" before returning to his typical businesslike demeanor.

"Forgive me, girls, I didn't mean to surprise you. I merely wanted to find out what all the fuss was about."

His eyes finally finding the tiny bundle in the center of the room, Chronus drifted over to Luna's side.

"Was what you were saying true? Did she really teleport?"

"Yes, father. I don't know how, but she did it. I guess she must have been really upset about something, but whatever it was, she seems to be over it now."

"Amazing...simply amazing." Chronus beamed down at his daughter. "I knew she was special, but this..."

Celestia felt a strange finger of guilt stab at the corners of her mind. She wasn't quite sure from whence it had come, but it prodded persistently at her conscience the whole while that Chronus gazed down at her little sister. Perhaps it was a slight tinge of youthful jealousy at the fact that Luna had always been the subject of her father's praise almost since the moment of her birth a little over three years ago. Ever since then, strange things had happened around her. If she got upset, or sometimes while she slept, objects would levitate around her bedroom or smash themselves into walls. On one occasion, Celestia had seen her soundly napping sister floating down a hallway on a bubble of magic, completely unaware of her transported state. She ignored the feeling, kneeling once more beside the baby princess.

"You're back early. I thought you were supposed to be in the Dragonlands until tomorrow?"

"The construction of the new embassy was proceeding ahead of schedule, so my presence was no longer required. And speaking of where certain ponies are supposed to be..." He turned to face Frankie, his features tightening slightly. "Miss Francesca, I do believe you're now a little over an hour late for your lessons?"

Francesca scowled, kicking the floor with one hoof. Whenever she traveled with her mother, she was also typically accompanied by a tutor and a small group of her friends among the children of the other pony delegates. All of their families lived near each other, so it was only natural that they traveled together as well. While the delegates went about their business, their children would stay with their tutor, the renowned Professor

Lionel Brarian, for lessons on history, etiquette, political procedure and the like. Francesca was well - known for her habit of skipping out of class whenever she could, much to the chagrin of both her mother and the good Professor.

“Lessons, schmessions. All we do there is sit in little cramped chairs and stare at dusty old books for hours and hours. It’s sooooo booring!”

“Perhaps you would find the books somewhat more engaging if you bothered to *read* them rather than simply staring at them. I trust you’ll hurry to Master Brarian at once?”

Frankie muttered something under her breath, but even she knew better than to refuse a request made by Celestia’s father. She nodded glumly, promising Celestia that she would drop by as soon as she was done, and plodded dejectedly out of the room with an intense scowl on her face.

“Speaking of lessons, I trust your own studies have been progressing well despite the mischief of your friends?”

A note of excitement crept into Celestia’s features. She rushed over to a stack of thick notebooks on the table by her window.

“I finished all the ones you gave me, and I thought I’d look through some of Starshine’s theories on molecular reconstitution as a follow-up. Watch this!”

Filled with the prideful excitement of a child who’s learned a new trick, Celestia turned to her window, concentrating hard on the huge stone statue of her uncle Relius that watched over the gardens below from its perch on the garden archway. With a spark and a sound like thunder, the statue flashed a brilliant shade of pink before turning into solid gold. Celestia beamed proudly - she had been practicing on smaller objects and was quickly becoming adept at the skill.

Chronus’s eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly above a slight frown.

“Very nice, little one.” He conceded, with a less-than-enthusiastic tone. “It seems you’ve learned much.” A little too quickly, he added, “Have you attempted any of the spells detailed in Borovitch’s research?”

Celestia stared at her father for a moment in silence before remembering to hide her disappointment. What had she been thinking? She shouldn’t have expected to impress him after what her little sister had just accomplished. Her excitement dissipated, she answered honestly in a monotone.

“I started reading the first volume, but I’m afraid I haven’t read enough yet to understand it very well. I can transport objects, but I can’t teleport just yet...”

Chronus nodded to himself, as if he knew what she had been about to say. “I see. Well then, I suggest you waste no time in reading further while your friend is in class. Best not to fall behind.”

He offered what he seemed to think was a comforting grin, but it only made Celestia feel a pang of shameful anger, just for a moment.

“I’m so happy to see you both doing so well. However, I’m afraid duty calls me away again for the moment - I’d best get to the conference hall before they finish without me. Study well, little one.” Chronus turned, his horn glowing faintly as he closed the door behind him, leaving Celestia alone with her sister.

Celestia turned to her window, gazing down upon the sparkling golden statue of Relius. She scowled, her horn sparking with light. With a loud crack, the statue returned to stone, wobbling slightly on its pedestal as it settled back into place. She plodded over to her bed, thumping down somewhat heavily next to her sister. Luna whimpered softly, and Celestia magicked her into the air once again, rocking her gently to and fro.

Slowly, Luna’s enormous eyes fluttered open, her hooves stretching outward in exertion from the tiny yawn that escaped her lips.

“Cewsstia...” Luna smiled, repeating her sister’s name as she began playfully tugging at her mane. “Cewsstia...”

In an instant, all of Celestia’s bitterness evaporated. She chided herself for allowing herself to feel such jealousy. Her baby sister was to her the single most important thing in this world, and gazing into those brilliant blue-green eyes of hers reminded her of just how lucky she was to have her.

Luna giggled softly, the happy rambling and sputtering of youth music to Celestia’s ears. Nonetheless, being in her bedroom was suddenly making her feel claustrophobic, and she was certainly in no mood to study at the moment. She rose to her feet, hurrying out the door with Luna bouncing along on her back.

The damp, refreshing scent of Spring greeted her as it wafted up to the walkway overlooking the courtyard below, just outside the door to her tower. Celestia strolled leisurely along with no particular destination in mind. She knew well enough that what she was looking for would reveal itself when it was ready. She ambled about the castle, enjoying the sights and sounds of her resplendent home and the surrounding gardens, until she at last found herself sitting on a balcony at the top of one of the highest towers. The room to which it was attached was small and disused, the rough equivalent of an attic. Bits of broken porcelain, the last fragments of ancient and faded tapestries, and the smell of dust filled the chamber, all forgotten by time and left here for the fulfillment of some petty sentiment or for lack of a better place to store it. Something about the remote location and the aged feeling of the chamber and its contents comforted Celestia -

perhaps it was that here, nothing ever changed, or if it did, it did so imperceptibly slowly. Perhaps it was that being surrounded by the fragments of somepony else's memories cast some shadow of the happy meaning they once carried onto her. It didn't matter - this was her secret, special place, and she always seemed to end up here whenever she had a lot on her mind. Luna seemed to like it here too - the two had spent many a sunset watching the moon rise, and Celestia would always point to the brilliant silver orb in the sky, saying "That's your moon, Luna. That's what you were named for. Isn't it beautiful?" at which Luna would giggle excitedly, reaching toward the sky as though she could touch it. Sighing contentedly, she set Luna down on the ground beside her to allow her to toddle about to her pleasure.

Behind a faded portrait of an ancient, gray-haired mare, the something Celestia had been looking for finally decided that it was ready.

In a flash of gold, it leapt from its hiding place to wrap itself tightly around the back of Celestia's neck, digging one appendage resolutely into a specific spot right behind her ear.

Having momentarily forgotten her original intention in setting out, Celestia was unprepared for her attacker's strike. She whipped back and forth, struggling to pry the creature from her mane, giggling riotously the entire time.

"Gah! Stop, stop it! I hate it when you do that!"

Finally, the creature released its grip, cackling victoriously to itself.

"I *know*. That's what makes it so much fun!"

Prankie bowed deeply with the air of a famous magician, beaming with her ever-present smirk. She was obviously quite proud of herself for her successful strike. Having known Celestia as long as she had, she had developed the skill to aim with sniper-like precision at Celestia's most ticklish spots. Celestia had known full well that when Frankie had left her bedroom, she had no intention of returning to class. Sure enough, she had been followed until she let her guard down, and that precise moment had been when her tiny friend appeared.

"So what did old Groanus want this time?"

Celestia allowed herself a smirk at her friend's remark.

"The usual. Don't get me wrong - he's my dad, and I love him, but sometimes he just makes me crazy. It's always study, study, study with him, but no matter how hard I try, it just never seems to be enough."

"Aw, what does he know? He's just fulla hot air." She blinked thoughtfully. "Heck, he

is hot air. What's the use of keeping yourself cooped up with some boring old book written by some guy whose name ya can't even pronounce? I'll betcha none a' those guys would know fun if it bit 'em in the a-"

"That's enough, Frankie. Not that I don't agree, but I'm afraid I must draw the line at the use of such language."

\  
Frankie just shrugged, hopping forward to look over the edge of the balcony.

"It's so pretty from up here"

Celestia smiled. Her friend was right - from their perch in the tower, the entirety of her home stretched in every direction like the petals of an enormous pale flower. Even atop the battlements, there were hardly any jagged edges - everywhere she looked the architecture bulged with smooth, gentle curvature that caught the light in just such a way that it seemed to make the castle glow with a radiance all its own. The Ivory Citadel was unrivaled as a fortress, but it was also perhaps the most beautiful structure she had ever seen, even aside from the Emerald Keep with all of its brooding grandeur.

Frankie lingered for a grand total of eight seconds - by the standards of her attention span, that was quite a feat - before finally becoming bored and turning back to face Celestia. She pouted, stamping the ground to draw her friend's attention.

"Whadda you wanna do? Any fresh meat to play with?"

She was, of course, referring to the new recruits that had been the target of their last escapade. They were still finding chickens in the barracks every so often. Some of them had even been kept as pets, much to the chagrin of their superior officers.

Celestia smiled thoughtfully. "Fresh meat, no, but I do believe there's still plenty of fun to be had with the *old* meat, too."

Frankie grinned, lowering herself to the ground on her forelegs like a playful dog.

"Awesome! I've been planning something great for a while now - you're gonna lov-"

The end of her sentence was drowned out by a sound like an avalanche. The tower quaked beneath them, sending the cracked remains of an ancient vase to shatter on the stone floor of the tiny room. Far below, where once shone the beautiful glass ceiling of the conference hall, a smoking, jagged hole now gaped like the mouth of an enormous beast, its long black tongue snaking greedily into the sky above. Within its maw, a faint orange glow crackled to life, illuminating the shards of the shattered ceiling against the rapidly darkening sky. Celestia simply gaped at the sudden blossom of smoke for several moments, unable to register what had just happened. Suddenly, Frankie spoke, her voice no longer full of her perpetual mischievous vigor, but heavy with a knowing dread.

“What...what was that?! Is that...?”

From all around them, a chorus of angry and fearful murmurs bubbled up from the castle as guards poured from every direction toward the source of the blast. It hit them both at the same time, but only Frankie found the wherewithal to scream.

“Mommy?! That’s the conference hall! Mommy’s in there!”

Celestia looked on in horror. Her mother was there too, and dad...Luna dove under her sister, her cries echoing deafeningly in the tiny room. Without a word, Celestia tightened Luna’s blankets around her, fastening her sister securely to her back, and the two ponies bolted down the stairs, leaping off of the third floor landing in the direction of the remains of the conference hall. As they ran, Celestia looked about frantically for some indication of what was happening, but all she could see was the cascading throng of guards, armed and clad in golden armor, each emblazoned with the seal of the conjoined sun and moon that waved from every banner in the Citadel. Finally, Amidst the sea of glinting steel and the cacophony of shouts, a pony bearing the silver shoulder bars of an officer spotted them. He rushed across the hall to the princess’s side, panting heavily. Celestia and Frankie wasted no time in voicing their concerns.

“Lieutenant! What’s happened? What’s going on?!”

“Mommy! Is mommy okay?!”

The two spoke in unison, but the guard barely gave them time to finish.

“I don’t know, princess - there’s been an explosion. You can leave this to us - we need to get you to the vault *now*. Linebeck! Herdier! Get your men over here!”

Gesturing frantically as he bellowed at a small group of guards, he began pressing Celestia bodily toward the stairs.

“What are you doing?! Unhoof me at once! I must get to my parents!”

Celestia summoned as much authority into those words as she could muster, but it did nothing to discourage the Lieutenant’s determination to get her down those stairs. She struggled to no avail - he was surprisingly strong, despite his relatively small stature.

“Do you hear me? I order you to stop!”

“Mommy! Where is she!? Lemme through!”

Frankie was positively hysterical now, flailing at the guard that held her. With a sudden jerk, she slammed a tiny hoof into the guard’s face, causing him to drop her in surprise.

The instant her feet hit the floor, she bolted into the throng, effortlessly ducking under the horde of guards as she made her way toward the conference hall.

“Frankie?! Frankie, *NO!*”

Without thinking, Celestia wrenched free of the group of guards around her, Luna still bound tightly to her back by her blankets. She knew there was only one place she could be going, and she knew it would be far too dangerous for her to go alone - she took off, soaring over the heads of the guards toward the conference hall, frantically scanning the crowd below for any sign of her friend’s shock of yellow mane. No sign of her - just a sea of panicked faces. Finally, Celestia spotted her friend’s tail between a pair of guards and pulled, just as another tremendous crash boomed throughout the castle. The sound was much closer, much louder now. Out of nowhere, she felt a frightening tug at the edge of her consciousness, telling her to turn around. The princess reacted just in time. Behind her, where she and Frankie had just been hovering, the hallway erupted in a cascade of molten brilliance, the cries of the guards caught in its path silenced before leaving their throats. In the space of a second, at least thirty guards had been vaporized by the blazing wave of death that now painted the hallway black and orange with the last smoldering streaks of flame that covered the floor, the walls - the entire hall, vast as it was, still shimmered and burned with blistering heat.

“Retreat!”

“Pull back!”

The tide of flesh and steel instantly changed direction beneath her, flowing now down the long marble stairway to the hall below.

“Princess! There’s no time! You must come with us *now!*”

Celestia faltered a bit in midair, still shaken from her brush with death, but only hesitated for a moment before bolting back toward the lieutenant and his entourage. Immediately, the reality of the situation reasserted itself in her mind with the force of a stampeding elephant. Cold logic muscled all other thoughts out of her mind - There was nothing she could do for her parents right now, and Luna’s safety had to take priority. She forced herself onward, anything to get Luna and Frankie away from those flames. Together, they rushed down the stairs toward the bottom of the castle, the guards behind them hastily rallying to form a perimeter around the smoking remains of the hall beyond.

Luna’s screams echoed amid the chaos as the little princess clutched to her sister for dear life. All around them, the sounds of angered shouts, clashing steel, panicked cries, and crackling waste mingled into a steady rumble, but above it all, so loud it nearly shattered their eardrums even from its considerable distance, Celestia heard a tremendous, bellowing roar - a sound she knew all too well, a sound she had prayed never to hear again. It was a battle-cry, the song of war that each dragon sang just before he plunged

into the breach. It was a song of death, of hatred, of rage...

But none of that was what frightened Celestia, for she knew the deeper meaning of that song's blood-soaked history. As it slowly dawned on her that she was in fact fleeing for her life, she remembered the true meaning of that ancient ululation with vital terror.

It was a song of victory.

=====

Fluttershy hummed a merry tune to herself as she strolled through her garden, stopping here and there to select a flower to add to the basket hung around her neck. It was a lovely spring day, the last faint traces of a recent storm giving way to a cascade of warm, soothing sunlight. She loved this sort of day more than any other, when the sun shone reflected like a thousand tiny diamonds in the still damp grass, and the rich, earthy aroma of plant life permeated the air. She always thought the world seemed so fresh and clean after a good rain.

As she walked, a pair of hummingbirds darted across her path in a twirling dance, circling around and about each other as they flew. She simply sat and watched them for a few moments, admiring the effortless grace with which they hovered to and fro. She hummed a little more loudly, and the two tiny birds began to twirl about her in rhythm with her song. She smiled to herself, trotting to the next flower patch with a spring in her step. It was her single greatest joy in life to be able to share such a connection with the creatures around her home. She never saw her duties in tending to all of her animals as work - to her, each and every one of them was a close and special friend, and she brimmed with happiness each time she heard a grateful chitter or happy squeak at her gestures.

For several minutes, Fluttershy bounced happily among the sea of vibrant colors, surrounded by the sounds of her animal friends. Her basket now nearly full of some of the most beautiful flowers her garden had to offer, Fluttershy had decided that it was time to head back toward her home when something in the corner of her vision caught her attention. She turned, and gasped. There, on a small, grassy knoll, stood Angel, holding the most beautiful flower she had ever seen. Its petals were enormous, curled about each other in an elegant silver spiral bloom. The tiny white rabbit waved energetically, gesturing proudly toward his prize.

"Oh Angel, its simply lovely! Wherever did you find it?"

She bounded toward her companion, imagining how beautiful the bouquet would be with this new addition. Angel bounced happily back and forth on his hind legs as he waited for his mistress to come near. Strange, Fluttershy thought, she was running as fast as she could, but Angel still seemed so far away...farther than he had when she first saw



him there. She tried to run faster. Angel ceased his bouncing, now tapping his foot impatiently. He was still so far away - had she really misjudged the distance by that much? Fluttershy ran and ran, rapidly running out of breath, but no matter how fast she moved, Angel remained fixed in his position on his tiny hill. Angel was getting annoyed now, stamping his foot more insistently and poking at his paw as though he were wearing a watch.

Fluttershy panted - she couldn't help it. Her strength left her, her pace slowing, but Angel was still as far or farther than he had ever been. Something else was strange, too - the sun no longer shone in a cloudless sky, but was rapidly becoming obscured by Dark, heavy clouds. She would have to get them both inside before it started raining again. Nonetheless, Angel's distant hill remained illuminated by some unseen source.

"Angel...I'm sorry...just...just let me....catch my breath..."

Fluttershy stumbled forward. She suddenly felt weak. She hadn't thought she had been running for that long, but she now wanted nothing more than to collapse on the spot. Slowly, she struggled to move forward across the vast expanse between them. Angel let out an exasperated squeak. It was then that Fluttershy first noticed it - she could just make it out in the bright light that enveloped the tiny white rabbit.

The flower was moving.

Slowly, its brilliant silver spiral began to unfold itself, the stem curling and uncurling in Angel's mouth. For some reason, perhaps out of his agitation, Angel did not seem to notice.

Fluttershy tried to warn him, but she had not the spare breath to do little more than whisper. Suddenly, the flower didn't look so beautiful. Something about the slow, purposeful way in which it seemed to be moving frightened her.

The flower continued to twist about, its spiral now almost completely unfurled. As the petals separated, tiny green rootlets began to wind their way out from the flower's center like the feelers of some predatory insect. The petals no longer shined as they once had, but began to shrivel and brown, wilting away one by one.

Fluttershy was certain now - there was something very wrong with that flower. She desperately wanted to warn him, to say anything to get him to notice the flower's movement, but her body refused to allow her the energy to speak. She couldn't even force herself to move forward anymore. Each of her hooves felt as though it were made of solid lead.

The flower's movements quickened. Finally Angel seemed to notice what was happening, but it was too late. Like a snake leaping to strike at its prey, each of the green rootlets lunged forward, wrapping themselves tightly around Angel's face. Through the

thick mesh of vines that now enveloped his head, Fluttershy could hear Angel's terrified squeaks. The stem changed quickly now, too - it grew longer and longer, wrapping itself in great circles around Angel's body, binding his paws, preventing him from struggling as it began to suffocate him with horrifying efficiency. Crimson thorns erupted across the surface of the stem, stabbing into Angel's flesh. Fluttershy heard the muffled shriek of his agony as he twitched in the steadily tightening web of the flower's embrace.

Finally, Fluttershy found the energy to scream, to run. She bolted toward Angel, shouting his name over and over again, running faster than she ever had before. At long last, she seemed to be gaining ground. The distance between her and her suffocating rabbit seemed to evaporate under her hooves as she lifted off the ground, flying now at full speed. Tighter and tighter, the flower wound all around him, its thorns digging deeper and deeper. Angel's cries began to weaken.

Several things happened at once. The flower's movements suddenly ceased, the entire length of its stem fading to a dry, cracked brown before falling away from its prey in a dead husk. Fluttershy arrived just above Angel, panting heavily, desperately searching his body for some sign of life. Everywhere she looked, his once pristine white fur was torn and marred with the long, bloody trails left by the thorns. His eyes searched about blindly, his chest rising and falling weakly with each shuddering breath.

“Oh, Angel no! NO!”

She scooped him up in her hooves, looking desperately around for any sign of another presence, for anyone at all who could help. She was alone. All around her the once bright, grassy field was now enveloped in a thick, dark haze. Angel sputtered as his tiny, shuddering paw reached toward her face.

“Angel hang on, just hang on! It'll be alright, I promise, everything will be alright!”

Slowly, Angel's milky eyes turned to lock with Fluttershy's pleading gaze, As he stared at her, Fluttershy noticed that he seemed to be muttering the same sound over and over again beneath his breath, but she couldn't make sense of what he was trying to tell her.

“Angel, don't try to talk. Please just stay with me!”

Despite her words, Fluttershy leaned closer to her friend in a desperate attempt to understand him, fat, hot tears rolling down her cheeks. There was nothing she could do, no one she could call upon to help. Angel was dying, and she knew it. She lay her head against his tiny chest, willing him to live with all her heart. That was when she heard it.

“*Murderer*”

Fluttershy recoiled, staring silently down at Angel's motionless body. His eyes were still fixed with hers, but as he gazed at her, they shone not with the last desperate struggles of

encroaching death, but with sheer, blistering hatred.

“*Murderer*”

One tiny paw pointed accusingly at the end of her snout. Angel’s voice was loud and clear now, repeating the same word, again and again, louder and louder.

“*Murderer, murderer, murderer...*”

Fluttershy stared downward in speechless horror. In all the years she had known him she had never witnessed such anger in his eyes.

“Angel...Angel, no, I...I didn’t do this...I could never do anything to hurt you...why would you say something like that?”

“*Murderer.*”

“Angel, stop it! Why are you saying that!? This...this isn’t my fault! I tried to warn you, I tried so hard, but I couldn’t-”

“MURDERER!”

This time, a chorus of other voices joined in with Angel’s ghastly chant. Fluttershy whirled about - in every direction, creatures of all shapes and sizes, all of her little animal friends, slowly emerged from the murk. Each set of eyes was like a heated dagger aimed directly at her heart. Their voices were so loud - they wouldn’t stop. They just kept repeating it endlessly, inching closer with every iteration.

“My friends...no, no, *no!* This is all wrong! I didn’t do this! Why?! Why won’t you believe me?! Please, help me save him! *Please!*”

No change. Closer and closer, louder and louder.

“Don’t just stand there! He *needs* you! *I* need you! I didn’t do this! Why won’t you listen?! Please! *I DIDN’T DO THIS!*”

Angel’s chanting suddenly stopped, but it did nothing to discourage the relentless advance of the wall of animals. Fluttershy turned back toward her companion to find a new horror before her. Angel’s body began to crack and crumble, like clay that’s been left out in the sun. As he slowly fell apart, his eyes lost none of the vital loathing they carried toward his mistress, his murderer. Fluttershy squeaked in panic, trying desperately to pick up all of Angel’s pieces, but the more she struggled, the more he simply fell through her hooves. At long last, the final traces of his body collapsed into dust, drifting lazily to the ground below. Fluttershy had little time to register the despair she felt before she became aware of a sharp pain stabbing at her sides, her ears, all around

her. The pair of hummingbirds swarmed about her head like a cloud of enraged bees, the other creatures nearly upon her now. As they came close, they too began to fall to pieces around her. Great chunks of fur and flesh cracked and melted away, and yet the shambling horde did not slow in the least as it moved mercilessly toward its prey. As they crumbled, the creatures fell upon her from all directions, burying her body in their dust. She tried to scream, but the dust choked her lungs. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe, couldn't lift her limbs. They were so heavy - wave after wave of choking death heaped itself upon her, up around her throat, her mouth...

“MURDERER, MURDERER, MURDERER...”

Slowly, she felt herself dissolving, fading away amidst the fathomless layers of dust. She was drowning in death, her body numb, her mind unable to do anything but wish for the end to come, for some release to this nightmare. As her eyes darkened under the mounting pile, she saw the last wan light of the sun peeking through the clouds above. Through the gloom, it looked to her like a great eye, an enormous, silver eye, gazing down upon her, unblinking, unwavering, judging her, sentencing her to her doom as a God would look upon an insect. She felt the dust flow into her mouth, through her nostrils, her ears, even her eyes. It poured into her, worming within her like a sea of maggots, chittering and biting, burning white hot along every inch of the inside of her body. They refused to let her die - she could feel their will, their hatred stabbing from within...

“*MURDERER, MURDERER, MURDERER...*”

With a shriek, Fluttershy awoke, scratching frantically over every part of her body her hooves could reach, trying to claw away the things that crawled within her skin. But they were gone. There was no Angel, no creatures, no giant silver eye, no dust. Just cold, smooth stone upon which sat one very terrified yellow pegasus. She struggled to catch her breath, still not entirely sure of what she had just experienced.

“...a...a dream?”

Cold. She suddenly became aware that wherever she was, it was freezing, and she clutched herself, rubbing her forelegs as she tried to make sense of her emotions. She cast about in the darkness, fearfully searching for any sign of the wall of eyes that had surrounded her moments ago. Unsympathetic silence greeted her in every direction.

It was too dark to see more than a few feet in any direction, but judging by the way the sound of her panting echoed in the dark, she was in an enclosed space, and a rather large one at that. She also noticed that the floor upon which she sat appeared to be smooth and polished, so she knew that she was probably not in a cave or other such natural structure.

She shuddered, half from cold, half from exhaustion, her breath escaping her in

great wisps of steam. The clouds of breath sparkled slightly as the microscopic water droplets within it caught the light of some unknown source high above. Wincing a bit as she craned her neck stiffly upward, she could just make out the shining points of a small group of stars through a tiny hole in the darkness high above her.

She closed her eyes, thinking hard. Angel's faced painted the inside of her eyelids, that same hateful glare burned into her vision. Her body was no longer being invaded by the sea of dust, and some small, distant part of her registered relief at the silence, but the rest of her suddenly longed for something, anything, some sign of life to fend off the crushing emptiness she felt. Slowly, she laid herself down on the stone below, staring at nothing.

All at once, it hit her. The chamber exploded with the sound of Fluttershy's sobs. Her mouth hung open in a pathetic, silent scream, tears pouring down her muzzle. She pounded the floor with her hooves, simply too exhausted to do anything but wail in futility at the weight she felt squeezing mercilessly in her chest. She understood no part of it - her rational mind balked and recoiled as the memories of all that had happened to her over the past few hours blazed through her consciousness with stinging clarity, wordlessly wondering why, why, why. What had she done? How had this happened? How could it be real? Angel was dead...*dead*. She saw herself, sitting on her couch at home, in the circle of guards in the conference hall, attacking Pinkie as she rushed to her aid, strapped to the bed as Dr. Grey smashed Angel to pieces. In a waking nightmare, she witnessed the rage that had burned within her as seen through the eyes of those she had hurt, transforming her into something terrifying, some warped, sickening monster that was nonetheless undeniably *her*. Over and over she told herself it wasn't real, it *couldn't* be real - she never could have done any of those things. But no matter how she flailed at the memories that tore through her like the claws of some sadistic beast, they remained, coldly, cruelly, victoriously marching onward in an endless loop. Like an infant, she cried and cried, hoping against hope that the rest of the world would drown away beneath the flood of tears, her hooves grasping at the dark for some source of comfort, some piece of home to let her know she was not alone.

In the shadows, something reached back.

She didn't properly register what she was doing at first. It was not until she noticed the tiny creature's warm breath on her neck that her sobs began to fade, and she began to feel the weight of its body as she pressed it against her chest. It didn't matter what or who it was that she held in her hooves - it was alive, and she sensed that it needed her just as much as she needed it. For several minutes, the two simply clutched each other, Fluttershy keeping her eyes tightly shut to soak in the creature's reassuring warmth, the feeble yet empowering rhythm of its heartbeat against hers. She stopped sobbing, then stopped sniffing, and finally, slowly, she opened her eyes to see who it was that she was holding.

Two brilliant orange orbs greeted her, so bright in the darkness that she did not at

first see the body to which they were attached. The creature was small and youthful in appearance, but what exactly the creature was, Fluttershy could not say - she had never seen any animal like it before, even on her occasional forays into the Everfree Forest. It had a long, slender neck and a pointed, angular face, its snout ending in a narrow, somewhat droopy tuft of whiskers. Its four limbs looked far too long and thin to be able to support its weight, and forced the creature to arrange itself somewhat awkwardly even as it leaned against her. The ears, too, were disproportionately endowed, two enormous winglike extensions, drooping down on either side of its bald head. Its tiny wings clutched tightly to either side of its frame, quivering slightly. The tail was perhaps the most bizarre, it was rather short, and it ended in a shocking tuft of soft, fine hairs that were the same vibrant shade of orange as the creature's eyes. To Fluttershy, it looked as though somepony had tried to combine a giraffe with a greyhound, and perhaps some sort of waterfowl, but hadn't exactly taken adequate care to make sure it was well put together. It gazed pathetically up at her for a moment, then averted its eyes, suddenly pulling away to sit at the edge of the faint pool of light issuing from the opening far above.

"...s....sorry..."

Fluttershy gasped. She was surprised enough at the creature's appearance, but the fact that it could speak caused her to wonder briefly if she was still dreaming.

The creature sputtered weakly for a few moments, as though trying to say several things at once and deciding not to finish halfway through. Finally, it locked eyes briefly with Fluttershy again and simply repeated its apology.

"...sorry..."

Fluttershy felt her sadness slowly being swept away by a distantly familiar warmth, growing within her as she gazed at the tiny beast. The creature just seemed so...pathetic in every meaning of the word. Something about the way it held itself suggested that it expected to be attacked by the pegasus before it at any moment, and yet it couldn't stop glancing at Fluttershy as though it were pleading for her help. She could not have forced herself to be frightened of such an animal - everything about it cried out for the comfort of another. Slowly, the emptiness within her seemed to fade slightly as she forced herself to speak.

"Hey...it's okay. You don't have to be scared. I'm not going to hurt you."

The creature retreated farther into the shadows, its eyes glinting in the starlight. It offered no response save for its persistent whimpering. The habitual greeting that she employed whenever she met a new animal asserted itself, its automatic familiarity lulling Fluttershy gently back into her comfort zone.

"I promise, little guy, I just want to be your friend. My name is Fluttershy. Can you tell

me yours?”

The creature’s eyes widened suddenly, its tiny form lurching backward at the sound of her words. Its mouth hung open as it struggled to find its voice.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But, um, if you want, that is, if you don’t mind...I-I wouldn’t mind holding you for a little while longer. It’s pretty cold in here - you must be freezing.”

The offer was not entirely unselfish. She didn’t understand why or how, but holding that little creature had somehow made her feel safe, or at least slightly less afraid. Right now, Fluttershy needed someone, anyone, just so that she wouldn’t be alone with her memories. It seemed to relax slightly, its enormous eyes searching Fluttershy’s face for a moment before turning to stare resolutely at the floor, its skinny limbs quaking absurdly beneath it. Finally, without warning, it bolted toward Fluttershy, leaping into her hooves.

Fluttershy chuckled reflexively. The sound echoed coldly in the dark, but it relaxed her a bit nonetheless. At the same time it felt odd - somehow, as soon as the laughter had left her lips, she had felt vaguely ashamed. She tried to ignore the feeling, focusing instead on tending to the strange newcomer.

“There now, it’s okay...” She affectionately brushed the creature’s fur as it quivered in her grasp. She looked up again to the stars, speaking half to it and half to herself. “It’s all...going to be okay...”

“...U...U-Unum...”

Fluttershy glanced down at the source of the voice.

“What?”

The creature slowly lifted its gaze to look into Fluttershy’s eyes. It seemed to have lost some of its nervousness, if only to be replaced by a heavy sadness that made its eyes sparkle in the dim starlight.

“U...Unum...”

Fluttershy’s face clouded with confusion for a few moments before she finally understood.

“Oh! I think I get it...That’s your name, right?”

The creature named Unum nodded, repeating itself a bit more confidently, almost as though trying to convince itself that it was correct.

“Unum.”

Fluttershy smiled. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Unum. I’m sorry if I frightened y-”

“No!”

Fluttershy blinked in surprise. Unum’s mood had suddenly and inexplicably changed into something like determination. Noticing her reaction, it regressed slightly, repeating itself a bit more quietly.

“No, F...F-Fluttershy. You don’t have to be sorry. You haven’t done anything wrong...”

She fixed the little creature with a puzzled gaze. This...thing was becoming odder by the second, she thought. Perhaps it was just the creature’s choice of words, or the resolved tone in which it had spoken them, but somehow, she sensed that Unum...*knew* her, though she was sure she would have remembered meeting something like him...or her, whichever it was. At any rate, it seemed to be warming up to her - that was by far the most it had spoken to her in the past few minutes. She had been about to ask what in Equestria was troubling it when she was startled into silence by another voice.

“Friends already, are you?”

Unum recoiled violently at the sound, its eyes falling to rest fixedly on the floor.

“W-W-W-Who’s there?! W-Where are you?” Fluttershy scanned the darkness in vain. The voice had not sounded particularly harsh, but she didn’t much like the idea of someone or something that chose to speak without revealing itself.

“Sorry about that. Did I scare you?” Slowly, a tall, slender shape melted into existence at the edge of the light.

Before Fluttershy stood a pony that...wasn’t exactly a pony. Its body structure was similar to that of an average colt, and yet it was far too skinny to be considered healthy by any stretch of the term. In fact, it appeared to Fluttershy more like a skeleton than anything else, which did little to ease her apprehension. However, her attention did not linger for long on the appearance of this additional strange newcomer, for on its back, soundly asleep, was a comfortingly familiar shape.

“Spike?! *Spike!*”

“Shhh...” the skeleton-pony hissed, placing one emaciated hoof over the thin protuberances that served as its lips.

“He’s only just fallen asleep. The little fellow was up all day waiting for you to wake up.” Slowly, it lowered Spike’s slumbering body to rest next to Fluttershy on the floor.



As it moved farther into the light, Fluttershy got a better look at the skeleton-creature. It's body was almost completely hairless save for the tuft of greasy brown hair that served as its mane, covered instead with faintly glimmering scales, similar to those of a fish. It's eyes appeared enormous atop its slight frame, and shined a thin, watery blue beneath their heavy lids. Despite the creature's frightening appearance, Fluttershy found herself calmed somewhat when she looked into those eyes. Those were not the eyes of a monster - they seemed to carry the weight of countless ages, at once kind and powerful. Somehow, looking into those ancient eyes, she felt she could trust this creature. Finally, Fluttershy began to relax again, thankful for the appearance of a familiar face.

As she looked down at Spike's peacefully snoozing body, the reality of the situation began to assert itself through the haze of emotion that had enveloped Fluttershy until now. She gazed once more at her surroundings, or at least at what little of them she could see. A flood of questions sprang to her mind, and she voiced the most demanding of these first as she turned to face the new creature beside her.

"Um, if you don't mind me asking, who are you? Can you tell me where I am?"

The newest creature's face was completely expressionless, but its voice carried a reassuring warmth, as though it were smiling.

"Who..." It tapped its chin thoughtfully. "As for who I am, I suppose you could call me an ally for the time being, though that may sound a bit presumptuous on my part. If a name is what you seek, you may call me whatever you see fit - I've never had much use for names in the past. As for where you are, I believe this was once the Gallery."

"...Gallery?"

"Yes, Gallery. This was once part of a structure known as the Emerald Keep."

Fluttershy leapt backward. Every hair on her body stood on end as a wave of fear coursed through her. Suddenly, every inch of the darkness around her seemed full with a nest of unknown horrors just waiting to pounce.

"You *idiot!* You've scared her!"

With sudden vigor, Unum shot back into Fluttershy's hooves, gently stroking one hoof with a long appendage in an effort to calm her. For an instant, Fluttershy tried to resist, but her efforts were quieted by a single look from those brilliant orange eyes.

Fluttershy quaked with terror, trying with all of her strength to remain calm. The Emerald Keep...Acheron must have brought her here, but why? Who were these creatures? Why was Spike here? What was that fiend planning? Her friends... With sickening velocity, her mind reeled with the images of the myriad of horrific fates that could await her friends in his twisted hands.

Suddenly, she felt an adamant resolve flowing into her from some unknown source. She glared at the skeleton-pony, searching it for any evidence of a threat.

Oddly enough, the skeleton-pony seemed embarrassed.

“Oh my...I’m sorry, that was rather crass of me, wasn’t it? I apologize...I’m afraid I’ve never been known for my tact, despite my best intentions. I assure you Fluttershy, I have no intention of harming you or your friend.”

Fluttershy wasn’t convinced. Whether it was the tugging persistence of her overwhelming guilt, the fear of Acheron’s treachery, concern for her friends, or the last wrathful instinct of a cornered animal, she felt a strength bubbling within her the likes of which she hadn’t felt for quite some time - the same strength she had felt when she had saved her friends from the dragon on the mountain years ago. The creatures before her were just that - creatures, and she knew better than anypony how to handle creatures. She spoke in a low, even tone, determined to take command of the situation.

“You know Acheron, don’t you? And don’t you even *think* about lying to me, mister.” Slowly, she advanced on the skeleton-pony, her eyes trained on its like the crosshairs of a rifle. “You know about the Emerald keep, which means you know about Acheron. Why am I here?! What did you do with my friends?! You’d better tell me *now* or I’ll...I’ll...”

In the end, she opted not to finish her sentence, choosing instead to stomp her hoof pointedly on the ground, drawing herself to her full height.

The skeleton-pony blinked, its features flexing almost imperceptibly into something akin to an expression of surprise. Its perception of the pegasus before it had been turned on its head in the space of a second. Where once had sat a terrified, meek, completely unthreatening little mare now stood an imposing matriarch, brimming with intimidating authority. Under the heated gaze of those suddenly steely eyes, it had the fleeting impression of a child who has done something bad and was about to be reprimanded by its very disappointed mother. For a few moments, it stared blankly at Fluttershy, transfixed by the change it had just witnessed.

“My goodness...that is truly impressive...I mean it - I’ve rarely seen such strength, especially considering all you’ve been through...”

Fluttershy faltered slightly, just for an instant. Even aside from its outlandish appearance, this pseudo-pony was unsettlingly bizarre. Its speech, its posture...everything about it seemed strangely detached from its surroundings.

“What are you talking about? Answer me! Where are my frie-”

“They’re alright! They’re all fine, I promise!”

Fluttershy looked down in surprise. It had been Unum who cut her off. The little creature stared incredulously at the skeleton-pony, reprimanding it with its eyes. Shaking its head in condescending disbelief, it turned back to face Fluttershy, speaking more slowly.

“Please, you must believe me, They’re all unharmed. Only you and Spike were brought here. The others were all left just as you remember them in the hospital.”

Fluttershy backed away from Unum, half-shrouding herself in darkness in the process. Slowly, she felt her resolve ebbing away under a tide of bewilderment.

“How do you know that? How do you know Acheron?”

Unum opened its mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the skeleton-pony.

“I wonder whether you’d believe us if we told you.”

Fluttershy glared at the creature with renewed vigor. “I knew it...you do know him! Start talking!”

The creature blinked slowly, deftly maintaining its frustratingly aloof demeanor despite the fury of Fluttershy’s gaze.

“Well?! What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Forgive me for answering a question with a question, but what exactly do you intend to do if we are, in fact, allies of Acheron?”

“I...what?!” Fluttershy struggled to hold onto what was left of her rapidly waning confidence. The creature’s eyes were not so quite so kind as they had been a few moments ago, but now radiated with a cold indifference. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, mister, I’m going to get *very* upset with you, and you *don’t* want that to happen!” Fluttershy stomped the ground again, though the gesture now seemed somewhat anticlimactic. For some reason, her stare seemed to have absolutely no effect on the creature, and it was causing her to lose ground quickly.

Unum gazed pleadingly at its significantly larger counterpart. “P-P-Please...s-s-stop playing games...just tell her-”

“Tell her *what*, Unum?” The skeleton-pony emphasized the last word as though it were the punchline of some cruel joke. Unum’s meek plea was immediately silenced by the creature’s harsh tone. “That’s what I thought. Unless you have any further *objections*, I will do this *my* way.”

“What...what are you talking about? What aren't you telling me?” Despite her best efforts, a note of fear was beginning to creep back into her voice.

The creature casually glanced back up at Fluttershy, inhaling deeply before it continued.

“Let's assume the worst. Let's say we are a part of Acheron's plan, and you are our prisoner. What will you do? Go.”

Fluttershy simply stared. She had no idea whatsoever how to react - no matter how hard she tried, she could not read anything from the creature's blank, unwavering expression.

“Surely you have something in mind? Or was all of that bravado I just saw mere bluster?”

The creature's hairless eyebrow twitched tightly upward. “Let's review the facts, shall we? Your friend, Angel, is dead, yes?”

All that was left of Fluttershy's tenuous grasp of the situation vanished instantly. It was as though someone had struck out her knees - she collapsed to the floor upon hearing Angel's name.

“A...An...gel...h-h-how?” How in Equestria did it know about that?

The skeleton-pony advanced, its face still an unreadable mask. “How does that make you feel? Say it. Angel is dead. Go on, say it.”

“I...I-I...s...stop...stop it...”

The memory of Angel's loathing gaze pulsed painfully within her. Fresh tears began to bead in the corner of her eyes. She clapped her hooves over her ears, shaking her head violently from side to side, trying desperately to shake the gaze of those horribly familiar eyes.

“Do you feel nothing? Was all of that strength you just mustered merely a façade? Are you really so weak that you can summon no defense for your friends?”

“Stop...please...I didn't...I couldn't do it...it's not...my fault...” Fluttershy could barely speak through her sobs. She was beginning to hyperventilate. Why? Why was this creature doing this? Was this...her punishment?”

“Angel. Is. *Dead*. Say it.” Despite its expressionless front, the creature's voice had suddenly become strikingly intense, almost angry.

“No! No, no, no...Stopistopitstopitsto-” Her eyes fell upon Spike, still fast asleep. All of her friends...what was going to happen to them?

“Is this all that you’re really capable of? I suppose you’re going to let his death go in vain, then.” It was speaking more forcefully now, mocking her, provoking her, needling her when she was at her most vulnerable.

Unum gazed fearfully at the creature, shaking its head slowly. “Please, don’t do this...she’s already suffered so-”

“What will you do? We are working with Acheron, Angel is dead, and your friends are all in mortal danger, and all you can do is sit there and cry. Is that really *it*?”

Fluttershy simply whimpered, curling into a tight ball on the cold stone floor, wishing with all her might to just disappear.

The skeleton-pony advanced again, looming directly over her, his voice now booming throughout the chamber with cold intensity.

“*Pathetic*. Your friends need you and you’re too wrapped up in feeling *sorry* for yourself to act.”

The creature slammed his hoof into the ground, inches from Fluttershy’s face, drawing its head down to her level, boring into her with those pale, cold eyes.

“Is that really it? Is running from the truth all you can manage? I should think the lives of your friends would matter a bit more to you than that, but then, if this selfish display is really how you act after losing Angel, after losing someone who was *supposedly* your very best friend, it seems that isn’t so, *is it?!?*”

Fluttershy cried into the darkness that assaulted her from within her own tightly clenched eyelids, trying desperately to drown out the voice that stabbed into her already bleeding heart with all the grace of a rusty knife.

The skeleton pony stomped as hard as he could on either side of Fluttershy’s face, now bellowing at the top of his lungs at point-blank range.

“IS THAT REALLY IT?! WHAT WILL YOU DO?!”

Finally, without warning, Fluttershy felt truly angry. It scared her at first, but her fear was quickly swept away by a warmth she thought had left her for good. For an instant, however brief, she saw the smiling faces of her friends flash across her vision - it was just enough to give her the strength to act. She was tired of games, tired of lies, tired of feeling helpless - she needed to know where her friends were. She needed to know they were safe.

Fluttershy’s sobs ceased abruptly as she slowly uncurled herself to face the creature standing over her.

“I don’t know if I can do anything... I’ve hurt my friends...I’ve hurt all of them, but they didn’t leave...” The warmth within her grew, pulsing slightly like the heartbeat of a newborn animal. She saw her friends sitting all around her hospital bed, remembered Pinkie’s smile, even through her wounds, remembered Rainbow’s tearful confession of guilt. Why? Why had they not left her? Why had they not hated her? She could have killed them, all of them, and yet they stayed with her. Why?

“They...even after all I’ve done...” She saw Angel, crumbling to pieces on the table across from her bed. Angel had known...Angel had tried to save her, and she...she had killed him... she had *killed* her best friend...the others didn’t know...if they ever found out...Slowly, the heartbeat grew stronger, faster, her thoughts moving more quickly, more purposefully. She would never be able to face her friends again - she knew that they could never forgive her...but if she was here, then...Acheron’s voice flashed through her memory.

“To what lengths would your friends go to rescue you should they become aware you were in mortal danger?”

“They would try...they would try to save me...all of them.” Fluttershy’s eyes wandered aimlessly about, blind for the emotional quagmire that struggled to unknot itself within her heart. She raged at herself with a fury she had never before experienced, the heat of her passion mingling with the steadily building pulse to climax in a drumbeat, a steady, pounding, relentless drumbeat that drove her forward to the conclusion she knew was right. She squeezed her eyes shut, consumed by the force of that beautiful, terrifying rhythm. Slowly, one, then two, and finally a steady stream of tears began to pour down her face. It was clear. Nothing else mattered. Her eyes opened once again, burning with a brilliance that dwarfed that of the morning sun in all its fiery grandeur, the object of their focus as nothing but an ant under a magnifying glass.

This time, the skeleton-pony actually backpedaled at the fury it witnessed in those eyes. From that tiny little Pegasus girl emanated a power unlike any it had felt before. As a small semblance of a grin spread slowly across its features, it knew that it had accomplished its goal.

“They won’t forgive me...they can’t, and I don’t blame them. But I will *not*. I repeat, I will *NOT* let you hurt them.” She stepped forward victoriously, the drumbeat now a thunderous roar that cascaded through her consciousness with wave after wave of power. This was not the power she had felt in the conference hall, but something far greater...it was not fueled by hate, or rage, or greed...Her friends were the most important thing to her in this world, and even if they never wanted to see her again, she would always love each and every one of them with every fiber of her being.

“You can hurt me, you can taunt me, you can kill me if you want...but you will not lay a hoof on my friends while I draw breath.” Even as she spoke the words, Fluttershy

registered some vague tinge of surprise at the fact that she heard them spoken in her own voice.

Both Unum and the skeleton-creature gazed onward in utter awe. Slowly, a sharp, staccato rhythm began to echo throughout the chamber.

The skeleton-creature was clapping, his hooves banging against the floor in a steady rhythm. Its eyes once again shone with a knowing kindness, positively beaming at Fluttershy with something that could only be construed as pride.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. I must say, Fluttershy, you are truly an inspiration. I think perhaps, you may just be able to help us get out of this place.”

Fluttershy didn’t budge. For once, no tiny shadow of fear plucked at her resolve - nothing would move her now.

“Don’t you *dare* patronize me. Tell me what you’re planning *right now*.”

The skeleton-creature nodded solemnly. “As you wish. The truth then.”

He stepped backward, staring pointedly at Unum. Slowly, the tiny creature moved away from Fluttershy to stand in the center of the circle of light, directly beneath its taller superior.

“Unum, *was it?* Why don’t you tell the good lady your, or should I say *our*, real name? Explain to her why you lied.”

Unum gazed pathetically at the floor. It swallowed hard, taking several steadying breaths as it mustered the tremendous effort needed to overcome its very apparent apprehension. Finally it spoke, measuring out each word in a slow, unsteady tone.

“I’m sorry, Fluttershy...more than you can possibly know, I’m sorry for everything we have done to you and to your friends. Everything that has happened has been our doing, albeit indirectly. Please, whether you can forgive us or not, know that the two of *us*, at least, never wished for any of this to happen, and that we vow to do all in our power to rectify what the others have done.”

With a final, steeling breath, the tiny animal prepared itself for the oncoming storm.

“I...we...do not simply *know* Acheron as you would understand it. In a way...

It paused, searching for the right words.

“...We *are* Acheron.”

=====

=

Chaos. Celestia ran and ran, fleeing from the roars of battle that echoed all around her. Even she did not know for how long they ran - all that mattered was that they get to the vault - there they would be safe. There they could form a plan. As they darted through the endless halls, leaping over piles of smoldering wreckage, ducking this way and that to avoid the terrors that bellowed after them at every turn, the lieutenant shouted orders to the group in general, orders that Celestia only half-heard, her body automatically reacting to every syllable. The Ivory Citadel shuddered from its very foundation with each distant explosion, driving them ever onward, ever downward.

At long last, past a final length of the countless identical hallways through which they had passed, a long marble staircase appeared in the distance, beckoning them to their salvation.

Their pace quickened with each step, the appearance of their one hope for survival breathing new life into their aching limbs, when suddenly...

Whipping about, Celestia staggered back as the wall behind her exploded, sending shards of stone flying in every direction with deadly force. Through the hole where the wall once was tumbled a gigantic, writhing mass of teeth and scales. Two dragons lashed at each other with their spines, their claws, their tails, at anything they could reach. Barely ducking beneath a mighty swing of one dragon's tail, Celestia and her entourage of guards dove to cover just as the tail collided with one of the hall's columns, sending it crumbling to the floor. Taking advantage of his opponent's missed strike, the second dragon, his golden scales glinting in the lantern light, struck a devastating blow to the other's jaw, connecting with a thunderous crack as the bones therein shattered. The gold dragon leapt forward, roaring in a frenzied rage, his teeth sinking deep into the second dragon's throat, sending great splashes of hot, crimson vitality in every direction. Slowly, his victim's movements weakened, then ceased altogether.

Argos extracted his teeth from his attacker's throat, wiping the gore from his chin with an enormous claw. His breathing became labored as the battle-heat left him, and he now clutched at a patch on his hind leg where a large swath of scales had been torn away. He cursed loudly, limping toward the stairs, wincing with each step.

"Brother Argos?"

Argos spun about toward the source of the voice, his teeth bared in an angry growl, his powerful legs leaping apart into a defensive stance.

Celestia jumped back in fear - she had no idea what to expect after everything she had seen in the past few moments.

"Ce...Celestia?" Argos blinked, his magnificent golden eyes focusing on the little



creature before him. Suddenly his face contorted in an odd spasm as a series of staggeringly different emotions burst through his mind in rapid progression. At first he smiled, then scowled in deep thought, then shook his head, finally settling on a look of nervous relief.

“Oh Celestia, by the heavens, thank goodness I found you! We have to move *now*. I’ll explain-” He paused, his eyes locked on the terrified filly who was firmly attached to Celestia’s back beside a similarly-disposed Luna.

“Who-”

“She’s the daughter of one of the delegates - Sister Augusta. Do you know if they made it to the vault?”

At the mention of delegates, Argos’s eyes darkened suddenly, flicking back and forth between the princess and her charges. He cleared his throat nervously, refocusing on Celestia’s question.

“I don’t know. It happened so fast...” he shook his great head, his shoulders sagging somewhat. He looked at her with eyes drawn deep with sorrow. “...I don’t know how to tell you this, Celestia...we’ve been betrayed.”

“Be...Betrayed? What do you me-”

An explosion shook the castle from somewhere not far away. A sudden flash of light...

“*DOWN!*”

With almost crushing force, Argos’ colossal wing closed around Celestia, pressing her against the ground just as a white-hot lance of energy ripped through the air where she had just been standing. Argos howled in agony as the blast sliced through the fleshy membrane of his wing, leaving a red, smoldering hole. No blood issued from the wound - it had been almost instantly cauterized by the heat of the attack.

Through the circle of light that shone through the hole in Argos’s wing, Celestia saw an immense shadow looming behind a curtain of tenebrous smoke. Near the middle of the shadow, a hole in the smoke was just closing where it had been blasted apart. Within that hole, just for an instant, Celestia had seen a tremendous crimson maw, still glowing from the bolt of molten death it had just hurled in their direction.

“No time! *Move!*”

In a single, blindingly swift motion, Celestia was overcome with vertigo. Argos deposited the princess and her escort roughly on his back and, with a single beat of his mighty wings, he took off, soaring down the stairs to the chamber below.

Behind them echoed a roar of purest rage, followed by a sound like an oncoming storm. The other dragon was chasing them. There, at the end of the enormous space that unfolded at the bottom of the stairs, stood a colossal set of steel doors. The entire chamber was at odds with the rest of the Citadel - here, no trace of artistry, no inkling of excess, not one iota of frivolity made itself apparent. Everything around them sparkled dimly with the dull fluorescence of rough granite. The chamber rushed past them with alarming speed - Argos seemed to be struggling to remain airborne, and he was having difficulty controlling his velocity. The roars grew closer.

Celestia squinted against the blinding flash that leapt past them, impacting on the far wall with a mighty splash of heat on charred metal. Volley after volley of fiery brilliance rained upon them from the rear, Argos doing his best to avoid them, but his energy had already been all but spent. His reactions slowed, his already perilously low altitude dropping even further with each beat of his wings.

“Lieutenant! Hold them steady!” Celestia cried, thrusting a whimpering Luna toward the guard pony beside her, then doing the same with Frankie.

Her hooves now free, Celestia swallowed hard, turning to face the raging beast behind them. Through the haze of billowing smoke that poured from its nostrils, Celestia locked eyes with a mountain of an animal, by far the largest dragon she had ever seen. Under normal circumstances, such a juggernaut would have appeared slow and clumsy, but the terrifying velocity and deftness of grace with which he followed after them belied his great size. With each beat of his wings, Celestia was blasted with a wave of stinging hot air mingled with a scent akin to burning rubber, great bands of steely sinew propelling him powerfully forward, ever faster, ever closer. She swatted aside her fear, thinking of the two terrified children behind her, and concentrated.

Slowly, a pinkish light began to envelop her horn as she charged the spell. With all the force she could muster, she poured herself into the magic, aiming directly between the dragon's eyes - she would only have one shot at this. The dragon's jagged maw opened once more, his colossal lungs inflating with a sound like grating stone on steel, the flame jets beneath his tongue dilating in preparation for the final volley.

Suddenly, Celestia was blind. The spell she had been charging sputtered and dissipated as she cast about in a panic for any indication of what had happened. Before she knew what had hit her, Celestia was flying through the air, vaguely aware of a stabbing pain in her temples. She could hear nothing save for a high-pitched ringing, all sounds drowning before they could reach her ears as though she were submerged in water. With a sickening crack that she could feel, but not hear, she skidded to a halt just before the enormous steel doors to the vault. Her entire world was pain. All she could do was writhe on the floor, all rational thought blasted asunder by the agony that stabbed within her left foreleg like countless shards of glass. Celestia struggled to move, her body screaming in protest. Luna...where was Luna?! Frankie?!

With a sharp crack, Celestia's hearing returned, just in time to be nearly shattered again by the roar that erupted from some indiscernible distance. Behind her, through the adrenaline - clouded haze that obscured her vision, a great, smoldering pile of wreckage loomed where their pursuer had been only moments ago, a gigantic crimson claw peeking out from beneath a mountain of shattered stone. Argos lay on his side, roaring in agony as he attempted in vain to stem the flow of blood that issued from the shattered remains of his tail.

Only two ponies remained from her entourage of guards - The pegasus named Linebeck was shouting something to her as he motioned to the guard next to him from his position near the doors, and the pony she recognized as Herdier limped slowly toward where she lay. All that remained of the others were four shapeless, blackened lumps that were indistinguishable from the char in which they lay around the floor of the chamber.

Slowly, Celestia became aware of a faint tugging sensation on her mane. Craning her neck painfully backward, she saw both Frankie and Luna doing their utmost to drag her broken body toward the door. Her heart leapt at the sight of them, her eyes lingering for only a moment before jumping up to focus on the doors behind them, so close now. With newfound energy, Celestia struggled to her feet, ignoring the pangs from her leg. Linebeck's voice snapped into focus as she found herself standing among the wreckage. He was cursing at the top of his lungs, an endless stream of semi-coherent, strangled shouts interspersed with the names of the guards who had until recently been alive and well. He yanked again and again on the door with all his might, and yet they refused to yield so much as an inch for all his furor. As quickly as she could, Celestia hobbled over to him, gently pushing him aside as she focused with some difficulty on opening the magical lock that held them shut. A single thought drove her forward through the pain, through the numbing terror that still surged through her like a tide of ice.

*Safe. I must keep them safe.*

With a heavy click that sounded to Celestia like a chorus of angels, the mighty doors began to slowly swing open. Immediately, she pushed the children inside, then told the two guards to follow suit, Linebeck nearly stumbling over himself in a panic.

She turned about as another ear-splitting roar shook the cavernous chamber. Argos still writhed in agony, clutching blindly at his tail.

“Argos! Argos, don't worry, I'm coming!”

At the sound of her voice, Argos's struggling seemed to ease momentarily, his eyes blinking rapidly to clear the pain-induced haze from his vision. He shuddered as he tried desperately to focus on the tiny, white form approaching him, his breath coming in weak, rapid bursts.

“Argos, don’t try to move! We’re almost there! We’re almost-”

She was cut off by the sound of a thunderous growl, coming from the far end of the chamber. To her horror, the giant crimson-scaled claw that poked out from the pile of wreckage began to twitch.

“STAY BACK!”

Argos had finally found his voice, snapped to attention by the realization of what had made that sound. His eyes cleared, and he gazed imploringly at the young princess, trying to urge her backward as he fought for the breath to speak again.

“GO! Leave...leave me...I’ll hol-...hold him off...”

Celestia froze, glancing fearfully back and forth between the eyes of her savior and the rapidly crumbling pile of rubble behind him. Her pulse pounded in her temples, screaming at her to make a decision, but her body refused to obey.

Argos gritted his teeth, a small trickle of blood now issuing from his mouth as he forced himself into a semblance of an upright position. In the light of the flames behind them, something hanging at the end of the dragon’s beautiful emerald necklace sparkled like a tiny star. He clutched the object, panting heavily. Behind him, a cascade of stone fell away to reveal an enormous, shredded wing.

“Argos, please, don’t move! I can get you out of here, I just...I need to..” Even as she spoke, she knew there was nothing she could do. The look in his eyes told her that he did not have much time left.

“Take it! Take...take it and...go!”

With all the strength her could muster, he tore the object from his necklace and flung it toward the doors of the vault, where it disappeared amongst the shadows between them.

“Destroy...the Stones...they’re after...the *Stones*.”

“What? What do you m-”

Suddenly, a great pile of granite burst from the mountain to reveal a roaring mass of teeth, followed by a pair of eyes that burned with mindless hunger.

“GO!”

Finally, Celestia’s wings found the will to open. Closing her eyes, she took off toward the vault, willing herself not to look back, forcing herself not to think about what was about to happen to the brave dragon behind her.

Just before she reached the far end of the chamber, Celestia's eyes popped open, her will failing at last. Glancing behind her, the last thing she saw as the doors swung slowly shut were the beautiful golden orbs of Argos's eyes, staring directly into hers. He choked, a spout of blood trickling from between his fangs, and drew himself shakily to his feet as his aggressor closed in for the kill. With a mighty effort, he inhaled, inflating his lungs to the fullest, and aimed himself at the doors of the vault.

A mighty crash as the doors' colossal inner bolts fell back into place, and then a strange, warm glow, coming from the doors themselves. Linebeck and Herdier leapt away from the doors as they began to radiate an intense heat. Finally, after a few tense, adrenaline-fueled moments, all was silence, and the heat from the doors seemed to fade.

Celestia struggled to catch her breath, wincing as the pain surged through her for a second time. Safe...they were safe...

"Princess, are you hurt?!" Herdier searched her body with frantic eyes, lingering on the foreleg she held gingerly in the air.

Luna huddled under her sister, gazing upward with enormous, concerned eyes. Slowly, as Celestia began to gather what remained of her wits, she attempted to put pressure on her leg. She was rewarded with yet another wave of excruciating pain. There was no doubt about it - it was broken, and quite badly.

"I'm - *gah* - I'm fine." Celestia lied, panting as she struggled to hide her discomfort. "Luna! Luna, don't move!"

She scanned her little sister's body for any wounds, any sign of injury, but to her surprise, the filly was completely untouched. Not even a single mote of soot marred her resplendent purple coat. Celestia simply gazed at her sister in wonder. How? How had she avoided injury? They had been right next to that blast...

And Frankie...the princess's heart leapt into her throat once more as she realized that Frankie was nowhere to be seen.

"Mommy?! Mommy, stop hiding! Where are you?!"

Behind them, a small crowd of ponies huddled fearfully in the corner of the room, the children of the delegates standing in a tiny cluster at its center. Frankie hopped about, searching every inch of the group for any sign of her mother, but to no avail. With a sinking dread, Celestia realized that that not one of the faces in the cluster of ponies belonged to any of the delegates, nor did any of them belong to her mother or father. There should have been many more ponies here by now, which could only mean one thing...

“*Mom!* Where’s my mommy?!”

“Frankie *-ungk* - hah...Frankie...come here...come here. Let me see you.”

Immediately, all of the children ran forward, all insistently asking whether Celestia had seen any sign of their parents. Professor Brarian rushed forward to quiet them, but his soothing ululations were lost in the din. Frankie merely shouted louder, determined to be heard.

“MOMMY, STOP HIDING! COME OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!”

It was no use - no matter how Celestia called to her, the child was completely hysterical. Almost as though her panic was an airborne pathogen, it seemed to spread through the other children with terrific speed, their noise becoming nearly unbearable as each tiny voice struggled to make itself stand out over the others. As quickly as she could, Celestia shuffled over to her tiny friend, extending a wing to caress her shoulder.

Frankie turned about slowly, her eyes drowning in tears.

“Where’s mom...where’s my mother?!” The child sputtered, clinging to Celestia’s good leg with wide, empty eyes. Despite Frankie’s panicked state, Celestia could see that she, too, was physically unharmed. It didn’t make sense - judging by their proximity to the blast, both Frankie and Luna should have gotten just as injured, if not more so. She shook herself inwardly, trying desperately to calm down as much as she could - it didn’t matter how they were safe, so long as they *were*.

“EVERYPONY QUIET, NOW!” At the sound of Celestia’s voice, the cacophony died instantly, giving way to a tide of pleading, anxious stares. The princess panted heavily, wincing from the exertion of shouting as loudly as she had.

“Linebeck! Are you alright?”

The young, shivering guard pony tensed slightly, surprised at being addressed by his name, and nodded.

“Herdier? What about you?”

The second guard nodded solemnly, his eyes still lingering on the doors.

“Both of you, tend to the others. Make sure they’re alright and find out what you can about the delegates.”

“Frankie. Frankie, look at me.” Gingerly, Celestia knelt to bring her face level with the weeping child. “Look at me, Frankie.”

Reluctantly, the child obeyed, struggling to squelch her sobs. Though she said nothing, her eyes begged Celestia as only a child could do - she begged her to help, without knowing how she possibly could, imploring her to offer some shred of comfort as though Celestia was her last hope in the world.

“All of you, listen very carefully.” She gazed silently for a moment at the children, hoping to instill some modicum of confidence in each of them with her eyes. “I don’t know how, or why, or what exactly is happening, but I can promise you, all of you, that you are all perfectly safe here.”

She inhaled deeply. No use hiding the truth, she told herself. “I’m sorry, truly I am, but I don’t know where your parents are. *However...*” Celestia spoke quickly, once again silencing the wave of voices that had momentarily threatened to overwhelm her. “Do not fear. I will find them and bring them back here to you, I promise.”

From across the chamber, Herdier’s head snapped around to goggle at the princess.

“*What?! Princess, you can’t be-*”

Herdier’s outburst was almost immediately silenced by the sound of a muffled roar just outside. There was a brief pause, then a deafening chorus of screams as something incredibly heavy impacted on the other side of the door with all its considerable might.

“The doors! Get away from the doors!” But Celestia’s voice was but a tiny drop in a vast sea of noise.

Like the beat of a war drum, the invisible beast rammed itself against the door again and again, shaking a great rain of dust from the ceiling of the vault, yet the doors gave no sign of flexing in the slightest. Finally, with one almighty crash, the chamber shuddered, the beast roared again, and then all was silent.

“Is it gone?!”

“I wanna go home!”

“Mommy!”

Celestia struggled to keep her injured leg aloft as the children surged around her, all trying desperately to cling to her at once.

“Quiet! Everypony, be quiet, *please!*”

No response. She tried again and again to make herself heard, but the dragon’s failed attack had pushed them all beyond the capability of reasoning. Raw instinct mandated that they cling immediately to the nearest available authority figure - namely, her - and

she was powerless against the panic that held them in its grasp.

Suddenly, as Celestia found herself being backed into a corner, she and the tide of children stopped moving. All around them, a familiar, warm, blindingly bright light. In an instant, that strange, soothing light seemed to have swept away the childrens' fear to replace it with silent awe. Slowly, as the light began to fade, growing dimmer and dimmer, the wordless cries of a single, tiny voice drifted into their awareness until once again, they were surrounded by the dull shine of the reinforced steel walls of the vault.

Little princess Luna sat by herself in the corner, having been pushed aside by the tide of children, wailing piteously, a soft white glow still emanating from her horn. Celestia stood dumbstruck, staring in awe at her little sister for the second time that day as recognition dawned on her. That was the same light, she thought. That was the very same light that she had seen just before they had been blasted off of Argos's back. Could Luna have possibly...?"

Without making the conscious decision to move, Celestia's body walked automatically forward, as well as it could, to her little sister's side. Luna spun about, clutching tightly to her big sister's mane, still weeping at the top of her lungs as Celestia bent down to nuzzle the little princess, cooing softly. After a few moments Luna finally began to calm, though for the time being she refused to relinquish her grasp on her sister's mane.

For the first time, Celestia became aware of the otherwise perfect silence of the vault. She gazed about her at the children, all of whom were now too engrossed in the little purple pony beneath her to remember their recent terror. She capitalized on the opportunity, clearing her throat.

"Linebeck! Herdier! Help me with the doors!"

The guards exchanged a puzzled glance before rushing in unison to the princess's side where they stood watching her anxiously for any indication of what she intended to do. Celestia closed her eyes, reaching out with her magic, carefully exploring with a myriad of tiny fingers of magic that probed every inch of the doors before her. She examined every nook, every cranny, every bolt and tumbler, searching for the evidence to support her hypothesis. Satisfied, she backed away from the doors, asking the pair of guards to attempt to push them open.

After only a moment's hesitation and a commanding glance from the princess, the guards obeyed, pushing with all of their strength, causing a few frightened gasps from the crowd behind them. However, any fears were quickly quieted as it became apparent that no matter how they struggled, the guards would not be able to force them open.

"Linebeck, Herdier, that's enough, thank you."

The pair of guards collapsed, exhausted, to the floor. Celestia turned about triumphantly,



drawing herself into an authoritative stance as she prepared to speak to her subjects.

“Friends, children, all of you, I ask that you please listen very carefully to what I am about to say. The castle is under attack, though I cannot yet say for sure the identity of our assailants or their purpose in coming here. Nonetheless, all of us that are here today are safe, and for this blessing, for our very lives, we owe a heavy debt to one brave soul who was willing to sacrifice himself to ensure our safety. It is with a heavy heart that I say that the dragon we know as Brother Argos is dead, killed in battle as he carried us here. The loss that we all feel at his passing will ache for years to come, but know this - he died bravely, and he died happily, protecting those he loved. Because of him, the danger has passed for now, and it is our duty to ensure that his sacrifice does not go in vain. These doors...” Celestia pointed to the monolithic doors behind her. “...Will never open again because Argos, in his final moments, used the last of his strength to fuse the hinges, sealing them shut now and forever. I can assure you that no manner of beast could force its way through those doors now, and that all of us are perfectly safe. In the meantime, I need all of you to proceed into the tunnels beyond and make your way out of the citadel.”

As she finished her speech, Celestia glided over to the far wall, touching her horn to the smooth metal. Instantly, the wall dissolved into thin air, revealing a secret passageway beyond.

“That said, I will now go to retrieve those that are not yet among us. I-”

“But princess, your wound! Surely we would be better suited for such a task!?”

Herdier had recovered himself, staring incredulously up at her. Celestia met his eyes with a calm, cool gaze - She had made the decision before they had even arrived at the vault, before they had met with Argos, that if the others were not at the vault when she arrived, then she would go after them herself. Now, especially after what Argos had said...

“Destroy...the Stones...they’re after...the *Stones*.”

While she had not recognized the dragon that had chased them, she knew that Argos’s cryptic warning could only mean one thing. The draconic delegates had betrayed them, and they were trying to get to the Stones, for which purpose she already knew, though she dared not admit it to herself. With a sinking dread, Celestia also knew that this meant that her parents were stuck in the center of all of this, and that they were even now in mortal danger, if they were still alive. She needed to save the other delegates, but she also needed to make sure her parents were safe.

“Even if I did let you do this, how would you leave this place? Through those doors, perhaps?”

Herdier sputtered, searching desperately about for some excuse.

“...But...then...how will you...?”

“The answer is clear. First and foremost, it is my *duty* as princess to do all in my power to protect my subjects, regardless of what that may mean for my personal safety. However, I am also the only one of us who can leave this room through the way in which we came.”

Celestia swallowed hard, trying to convince herself that she could do what she knew she must.

“I will teleport to the others. I will teleport outside the vault and I vow to you, all of you, that I shall not return until I have done all in my power to return your loved ones safely to you.”

A faint pressure on her leg. Celestia looked down. Frankie gazed imploringly up at her, clearly terrified at the thought of being left alone, but even more afraid of what may be happening to her mother at this very moment.

“Promise? You promise you’ll come back?”

Celestia knelt to face the child, speaking more softly.

“I promise, Frankie, I’ll come back for you, for all of you.”

“And mommy? You’ll bring mommy back, too?”

Celestia’s eyes darkened for just an instant as she hesitated to answer. Finally, she smiled, affectionately nuzzling Frankie’s forehead.

“Yes, Frankie, don’t be afraid. I promise that you’ll see your mother again.”

Behind her, Celestia suddenly became aware of a soft ringing sound. Turning slowly about, a small glinting object lay half-obscured in the shadows, pulsing with a gentle hum. As she walked over to Argos’s discarded teleshard, she heard it -

It was her mother’s voice, and she was screaming.

=====

Twilight wrinkled her nose. The cottage smelled dank and foul, the faint traces of animal droppings punctuating the air. The scene was oddly chilling - there was no evidence of a struggle, all of the furniture and odds and ends that Fluttershy kept about her living room completely undisturbed, but somehow, Twilight felt as though she was being watched.

Suddenly it hit her - it was deathly silent. No peaceful snores, no quiet tittering of the myriad of tiny animals that usually inhabited the room could be heard. As far as she could tell, the cottage was entirely empty.

“Spike!? *Spike?!?*”

A note of panic crept into her voice as she began searching frantically for any sign of her friend.

“Spike, where are you?! Answer me!”

Soon, the air rang with the calls of Twilight and her friends as they fanned out across the cottage’s living space. It was not a particularly large house, nor were there many rooms to search, so it was not long before-

“Twi! Everypony, up here! Ya need tuh see this!”

Applejack’s muffled cry came from directly above them, in Fluttershy’s bedroom.

Immediately, the three remaining ponies abandoned their search and ran upstairs.

“Applejack?! Applejack! What is it, what did you find?”

Applejack was silent, facing away from them toward Fluttershy’s bed. As she slowly stepped aside, they saw that she was reading what appeared to be a piece of tattered paper. Applejack’s expression was grim as her eyes scanned the last few lines of hastily scribbled text. The moment that she had finished, Twilight magicked the paper out of her hooves and began to read it aloud to the group.

Back in the Mendwell memorial Hospital, Pinkie stared into the darkness, shivering slightly in the cold of the nearly empty hospital room. Thought it did not happen often, this was one of the few occasions that actually got past Pinkie’s normally unflappable good mood. She was afraid.

“*heh...haha...*”

One of the three guards that sat around her bed forgot himself momentarily, shooting a puzzled look in her direction before crisply snapping back to attention.

It was no use - without the laughter of her friends, her own attempts seemed pitiful and cold. She thought of her friends, hoping against hope that they were safe, that they would find out what happened to Fluttershy. She sighed heavily, telling herself over and over that they would find her safe and sound, that everything would be alright, hoping that at some point it would actually begin to sink in.

Out of nowhere, Pinkie felt a strange twinge in her left ear. Slowly, the ear began to spin about, gradually gaining speed before it was joined in its spastic twirling by the other ear. The strange, itchy twinge spread to her muzzle, her lips folding in on themselves involuntarily as she began to pucker. This wasn't like the last time - her ears twirled furiously, her lips scrunching so much that it began to hurt. With sudden, invigorating, terrifying clarity, her pinkie sense climaxed in a single, blindingly clear idea, almost as though it were a vision.

“Miss? Miss Pie, are you alright?”

The guard that had glanced at her before now abandoned all pretense of impartiality, searching her with eyes full of concern.

Pinkie struggled to speak, but her spastically convulsing face allowed her little more than a panicked mumble.

“Don't just stand there! Corporal, go and get a doctor! Sergeant, help me with-”

“*Danger!*” Pinkie gasped for breath, tears suddenly spouting from her eyes. One thought screamed in her mind, and she struggled to make the guards understand the direness of the situation.

“Something's wrong! They're all in terrible danger! I need to get to them *now!*”

Twilight wrapped the paper tightly around itself and tucked it into place between the ever-present books in her saddlebag. For a moment, the ponies simply stood there, immobilized in the heavy silence, before each of them, in almost perfect unison, lifted their gaze from the floor to lock with each other in grim determination. Without a word, they all dashed out of the cottage, none of them harboring even the slightest shadow of doubt as to what they would need to do. Fluttershy was in trouble, and she needed them - that was all that mattered as they pounded on into the night, away from the empty cottage, away from everything they knew as safe and warm.

In the darkness, hidden away from the ethereal radiance of the full moon, the springs began to tighten. The grand trap that had been laid so many centuries ago trembled with anticipation like a tremendous, hungry beast as its prey drew ever closer to its final fate.

A madman hid in the shadows, anticipating the advent of his revenge, silently spinning wild fantasies in his empire of solitude. A group of friends hurried blindly onward, never knowing whether what awaited them at the end of their journey would spell their salvation or their doom, only aware that they must push on, whatever the cost. A

troubled girl struggled against the chains that pulled her inexorably toward the price of her love, nonetheless knowing that only one thing could save everything she cared about. A fallen angel stood locked in combat with a demon of her own creation, trying to convince herself that she deserved to win the battle before her.

In that timeless darkness, there echoed a sound - at once a song of triumph, of death, of fiercest passion, of deepest sorrow. The beast laughed to itself as all of the pieces took their final places, oblivious yet ready to fulfill the plan of the master player.

On that night, all the creatures of Equestria slept, just as they would on any other day, dreaming peaceful dreams, sighing contented sighs, completely unaware of what the morning would bring, of how extraordinary tonight actually was. For tonight, the song of their lives was building toward its final crescendo, all of its components falling together at long last. Tonight, the future of all life in Equestria would be decided by the few, the tormented, the brave, the mad, the lost, and the weak. Tonight, the world would change.

As the creatures of Equestria slept, the sun marched ever onward toward the dawn, wondering to itself what sort of world would be revealed by the touch of its morning light.

**Next: Chapter 9: Checkmate**