

Shadows of the Sun

By theamberfox

Chapter 5

“You know, Goldenroot, I think you live just a teensy bit too close to the council assembly.” Vortex said, glancing out the window near the door.

“It saves me a lot of walking.” Goldenroot said, looking up into the dark, clouded sky as he headed out the door. “Besides, I don’t like spending too much time outside on a day like today.”

“Almost makes me happy that we’ll be spending nearly the entire day arguing in a stuffy room.” Vortex joked, smiling as she slipped out behind him.

Rain was pouring down and soaking the path beneath them. The two ponies walked towards the council assembly, dodging the large puddles that accumulated in the cavities of the road. The water rippled in the pools as the droplets randomly broke the surface and sent tiny waves crashing against the shore like miniature lakes.

“It’s not that stuffy.” Goldenroot replied, grinning at the Pegasus. “I have to admit that this is a fairly dull part of the process. Mostly everything about the law is written in the records already. We’re only checking over the wording and making sure we don’t leave any loopholes.”

“A few of us are going to feel pretty apathetic about the whole thing. We’re all getting the boot if the law is accepted and then we have to decide whether or not we want to come back.” Vortex said, kicking a small rock along the path.

Realizing that she was referring to herself, Goldenroot stopped in his tracks and turned to face the blue pegasus with a concerned look. Her mane lay flat against her body and her tail hung uselessly between her legs, wet from the downpour.

“You’re not going to run for re-election?” he asked quietly.

“I’m still thinking about it.” she answered, sending the rock hurtling into the bushes nearby and gazing up at the huge structure in front of her.

The building that housed the council’s assemblies was almost completely characterless. Only recognizable by the illustrious stained glass windows at the entrance, it was essentially a large stone rectangle with a peaked roof. The building had sustained damage from the storm that had ravaged the city only a few days ago, but it was minor and only a few shingles were missing. The repairs had obviously been marked as a low-priority objective since it was difficult for the building to become any less attractive from a few scuffs and scrapes. It was just plain ugly and there wasn’t much that anyone

could do to change that.

Vortex turned her head and smiled brightly at the stallion. “I want to continue working in the council, but it’s for all the wrong reasons. I just don’t think my heart really belongs in politics.”

Goldenroot pulled the heavy door leading into the building open, and stood to the side. “Well I’m certainly going to miss you if you leave.”

“You’re not going to lose me that easily. I just wouldn’t be in those boring council meetings anymore.” Vortex said, walking through the opening Goldenroot had created.

Goldenroot smiled happily at her reaction and followed after her, letting the door close behind him. The interior of the building was decorated with several tapestries and potted plants, but they were worn and unevenly spaced. It almost reminded Goldenroot of the corridors in Wind Dancer’s mansion, but the tasteless arrangement rushed the memories away. To add even more distinction between the two areas, the government building had large, wide hallways that allowed many ponies to walk among them without disturbing each other, vastly different from the restricted passageways in his fellow council member’s house.

“You had your own ways of making things interesting.” he said.

“So did you.” Vortex laughed. “You must have blown up at Dancer and the general a dozen times each.”

“Lord Crescendo had his fair share too,” Goldenroot smirked, “although it was definitely a lot less often.”

“I can’t believe you actually made Dancer cry about the luxury tax increase.” Vortex said, laughing more loudly.

She then attempted to mock Wind Dancer by raising her voice and putting a hoof to her chest dramatically. “Oh boo hoo! You just don’t understand my needs, Sir Goldenroot! I have to wear expensive make up and spend three hours on my hair every morning!

“Hahaha!!”

Vortex’s overenthusiastic laugh echoed through the spacious hallways. It was odd, the hallways were wide for a reason, but that reason was hiding in the shadows, unwilling to reveal itself. A building that was usually clamouring with activity, was completely vacated and the pair hadn’t seen anyone since they entered, not even the guards that diligently patrolled the halls.

“I didn’t mean to offend her.” Goldenroot said, ignoring the oddity and grinning stupidly at her impression. “I just got really caught up in the moment.”

“She gets offended way too easily anyway. She’ll be offended the moment we walk through this door.” she said, trying to shake the water out of her mane and tail. “We’re late and totally drenched. That’s all the reason she needs.”

Goldenroot flinched as Vortex flicked water at him. When she stopped, he turned his head to look at the clock just outside the room. It was fifteen minutes past one and he was late for something for the first time in ten years, but he didn’t really mind. He was in a good mood today. Everything seemed to be working in his favour lately and he didn’t feel like getting upset at something so minor.

Ignoring the water in his own hair, Goldenroot opened the door to the council assembly and smiled at Vortex, waiting patiently for her to walk through the entrance. Speechless, the dark blue pegasus simply glared through the opening and into the room. Concerned, Goldenroot gradually turned his head and peered through the doorway. The room was almost completely empty. The great table, with all its intricate carvings that had been so delicately preserved over the years, was gone and replaced by three figures, which Goldenroot immediately recognized as Princess Celestia and her royal guards.

“Princess Celestia, is something wrong?” Goldenroot asked anxiously, water dripping from his soaked body and pooling on the floor beneath him. “What are you doing here and where is everyone?”

“I was waiting for you two.” she said, calmly smiling back at them. “You’re both late. The others have already been notified.”

Goldenroot displayed a very confused expression, “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“Do not worry, Sir Goldenroot. They’re probably just sitting at home, enjoying all the nice rain we’re having.”

“Why aren’t they here, in the assembly?”

“The assembly doesn’t exist anymore.”

Goldenroot stood in silence for a moment. Celestia’s words just seemed to flow so effortlessly that it was difficult to grasp the severity of what she had just said. *The assembly doesn’t exist anymore..?*

“I don’t understand.” Goldenroot said, giving her a blank stare.

“Your services are no longer required, Sir Goldenroot. Please go home.” Celestia

said, turning around to face the back wall.

As he became aware of the situation, Goldenroot's momentary disbelief disappeared and was replaced by a strong hostility towards the princess. The council, which had existed for a thousand years, had vanished in an instant and taken with it all the progress he had worked so hard to achieve. He strongly believed that the council was the most important part about the government, even more important than the princess herself. The council served as the representatives of the country's diverse inhabitants and gave voice to their plight. Even without the commoners, it was the essence of the equality Goldenroot believed in.

"You can't do this! We're an essential part of the government. You can't just remove us from the equation!" Goldenroot shouted.

Sensing the aggression, the two guards moved in front of the princess and glared at Goldenroot. Undaunted by the pair of golden armoured ponies, Goldenroot walked closer, fire burning in his eyes.

"Calm down! We don't know the whole story." Vortex intervened, trying to remain composed. "Princess Celestia, how can you just tell us all to go home? Goldenroot has a point. We've been a part of this government for a thousand years."

"I can show you the official records if you like, but technically every action of the council was considered to be treasonous and punishable by law for acting against the current ruling monarch of Equestria." Celestia replied. "You don't have any power... You never did."

"What about everything we've done? Everything we've accomplished!?" Goldenroot exclaimed. "You created us to help you!"

"Please go home, Sir Goldenroot. I don't want to have to use force."

"This doesn't make any sense, why are you doing this now!?"

Celestia lowered her head. "Because I was wrong. Twilight helped me realize that. The council forced me to deviate from the path I was destined to follow. I was born to lead this nation and I can't place that burden on anyone else. The council was an artificial creation that I used as a scapegoat. It was all just a lie."

Goldenroot stopped moving and stared at the princess. She was carrying all the blame for the drought on her shoulders and she made no effort to conceal her misery. Celestia's pain stung like daggers in his heart and he was ashamed that he had lashed out at her. She didn't deserve that and she didn't deserve to carry the weight of an entire nation by herself.

“Princess Celestia, please don’t do this. I know we failed you during the drought. We failed Twilight Sparkle and we failed Equestria, but we can still help you fix this.” Goldenroot said, cautiously approaching the princess. “You don’t have to do this alone. I know that it might feel that way sometimes, but it’s not the truth.”

“It’s not just the drought, Goldenroot!” Celestia shouted. “Ever since that day a thousand years ago, everything that we’ve done was wrong... I’m hurting the ones I care about the most. The council was a mistake and I intend to fix it.”

“Princess Celestia...”

“Please Goldenroot...” Celestia interrupted, lowering her voice slightly.

She gently turned around to face the pale green stallion with an intimidating gaze. Suspicious, Goldenroot looked past her harsh stare. This wasn’t the princess he remembered. He knew that somewhere, deep inside, she was scared of what she was doing.

Celestia closed her eyes and looked away. “This isn’t easy for me to do. I know that you think you can help, but you have to trust me. I’m tired of pretending that everything is just going to all work out in the end. These are my mistakes and I alone will correct them.

“So please... Just go home, Sir Goldenroot.”

The pale green stallion stood motionless, watching the princess still hanging her head. She looked so weak, so helpless, but what could he do?

Vortex moved beside Goldenroot and placed a hoof on his shoulder, causing him to break his stare and face the pegasus. Her comforting gaze met his, the amber eyes glistening in the faint light and calming his nerves.

“Come on.” she whispered. “There’s nothing we can do now.”

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“So the council is just... gone?” Twilight asked, quietly staring out the window.

The two ponies were sitting on the strange green couch in Celestia’s bedroom. They were both trying to relax, but only Twilight really seemed at peace. She just sat there, watching the sun approach the horizon through the window.

“Yes.” Celestia replied. “I thought about what you said and, although they don’t

believe me, I'm sure it was the right thing to do.”

“It just seems strange... What will you do now?” Twilight asked curiously as she turned to face Celestia. “I mean, now that they're gone, can we really fix the drought?”

“I am going to make it my primary objective. I won't let Equestria suffer any longer than it already has.”

Celestia paused and smiled at Twilight. When she had gone missing, Celestia was turned into an empty shell of what she once was. But now that she had returned, everything Celestia lost had returned at twice the strength it once was. She finally had the courage to make a difference in the world, a feature she lacked ever since the council was first created and Luna was exiled.

“But before I can act, I need your help.” Celestia said. “I need to know what happened in Prance. If we can do anything at all to prevent this from happening again, I'll need to know every single detail of your journey.”

“Of course, but you have to promise me that you will listen right to the very end.” Twilight smiled weakly. “Not everything is pleasant.”

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The centerpiece of the castle was an enormous obsidian tower that shot hundreds of feet into the sky. It was the focal point of my journey and the very reason I had endured everything up this point. In truth, I didn't know what lay waiting for me inside that massive construct. I wanted answers to the questions I had and solutions to the problems at home, but even now, when I stood at the very doorstep of the capital, everything seemed so far away.

“You're from Equestria, aren't you?” a black stallion in silver armour asked pryingly as he walked away from the city gates and towards me.

Surprised, I uttered a quick reply, “Yes, but I thought...”

“We wouldn't speak your native tongue?” he scoffed. “Don't be so naive. You don't seem to realize it, but we rely on trading with the citizens of Equestria and since your government is so unwilling to communicate with us, we have to interact with the merchants on your border directly.”

“I'm sorry...” I apologized, astounded by his reaction.

“Don't bother with this idiot.” a yellow mare in identical silver armour said,

walking up beside the black stallion. “He’s not going to help you.”

The black stallion frowned and glared at the mare, scolding her in his language. I was getting better, but I still lacked the basic comprehension that was necessary to understand what he said. From what I gathered, the stallion was very upset with the mare, but that could be recognized from his body language alone.

After a minute or two of what I assumed was cursing, the stallion turned and glared harshly at me before returning to his place at the side of the gate. The yellow mare just rolled her eyes at the display and walked closer to me.

“He’s just not very fond of outsiders.” she said, “It’s not your fault.

“Now, judging from your personal items, you’re not a merchant yourself, but from that ugly little battle wound you’ve got there, you could be an adventurer. Though I haven’t seen any adventurers since vigilantism was outlawed so that makes me wonder...”

She paused briefly before continuing, “What are you doing here, traveller?”

I fixed my posture and tried to smile at the mare. After my last encounter, I wanted to get straight to the point in a very professional manner.

“My name is Twilight Sparkle. I was sent by Princess Celestia of Equestria to see Le Roi Pierre of Prance.” I answered almost mechanically.

“Well you managed to pronounce his name completely wrong, but I know who you’re talking about. I don’t know what business you have with him, but Pierre is our king and if you really were sent by Celestia, then he’ll want to see you right away.”

“Why don’t you refer to him with his full name?” I asked, blinking.

“‘Le roi’ means ‘king’ in our language, so it’s not really his name, but his title.” she replied. “It would be...”

She paused and looked off into the distance with a blank stare, searching for the right word to say.

“Redundant?” I said hesitantly.

“Yes!” she exclaimed excitedly, pointing her hoof in my direction, “It would be redundant to say that King Pierre is our king. See, we both have a lot to learn about each other. Now please, follow me, I’ll take you to see King Pierre.”

I followed the yellow mare into the castle and through the winding streets. Unlike

Canterlot, nothing was very well organized and it was difficult to really get anywhere. Streets mysteriously ended or looped around to where they started. Various shops lined the streets, making it extremely difficult to follow the guard as she navigated through the crowds to the black pillar that cut its way out of the skyline like a knife.

“I forgot to tell you my name, Twilight.” she said, turning around and talking loudly through the crowd. “I’m Catherine.”

These ponies have really strange names, I thought as I bumped my way through the dense mob.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Catherine!” I yelled in response.

“Hahaha!” Catherine laughed. “Okay, I get it. This isn’t really the place to talk. We’ll be at the tower shortly.”

There was a large cast iron gate barring the way to the tower’s entrance, each individual metal pole ending on both sides with a sharp spear-like tip. Compared to the constantly flowing mass of ponies on the opposite side of the gate, the tower’s courtyard was nearly empty. Two tall, black iron statues were visible on either side of the pathway leading to the entrance. One resembled a pony holding a magnificent banner, flowing in the wind, while the other depicted a different pony standing on its hind legs with an elegant crown and cape.

I picked out the words I understood as Catherine spoke to one of the guards standing adjacent to the gate. “Please... Twilight Sparkle... Princess Celestia... Le Roi Pierre”

I’m really going to have to work at this.

The guard nodded and laughed at a joke that lay far beyond my understanding as they pushed open the gate. Smiling, Catherine motioned for me to follow her inside, giving me a better view of the courtyard. Around the statues were several flowerbeds, containing brilliant ruby and white blossoms arranged in several appealing patterns.

“Interesting statues.” I thought aloud, ignoring the perplexing arrangements of flowers.

“The one with the cape resembles our king. Every time a new king takes power, we change the statue.” Catherine replied, slowing her pace to walk beside me. “The other represents our battle for freedom against barbarism, greed and anarchy. It is a reminder of everything we believe in and what our ancestors worked so hard to accomplish.

“Hundreds of years ago, Prance was a set of four nations, constantly on the brink of war with each other. They fought over the resources that were uniquely plentiful to

each separate nation. One nation had rolling hills and huge tracks of fields that produced a bountiful crop every year. Another had steep mountains and caverns filled with precious minerals. The third had massive, crystal clear lakes and the last had immeasurable forests filled with all kinds of wildlife.

“They could each survive on their own resources, but their avarice took over and one year, when the hostility between the nations was especially high, our original king, Florence, rose out of the darkness and disparity. He dreamed of a single, prosperous nation that was free from the conflicts that constantly ravaged the nations. With a tongue as sharp as a dagger, he cut into the very souls of the nations and united their inhabitants under a single banner.”

Catherine stopped and pointed to the banner the statue held. It was a simple cross that divided the flag into four equal portions.

“You can’t tell from the statue, but our flag is a white cross through a deep blue background.” she continued, glancing in my direction. “It symbolizes how, despite our differences, our similarities prevailed and unified our nations.

“As a filly, the legend of Florence and the four nations touched my heart. It showed me that the light of the good in the world would always conquer the darkness of evil. That’s why I became a soldier. I wanted to protect everything that he believed in, even if it cost me my life.”

“Catherine... That’s beautiful.” I replied sincerely, smiling at her.

“If you fight for what you truly believe in, you can do no wrong.” she said, smiling back. “But I digress, let us continue.”

We walked towards the great black doors that led into the pillar, guarded by two ponies in recognizable silver armour that opened them as we neared. I followed Catherine closely as we stepped through the doorway and into the tower. The interior was very open. Several doors were placed in a pattern around the main hall, with a great staircase leading up into the building. Each floor had a separate, identical chandelier that illuminated the levels of the tower as we ascended.

After a long gruelling walk up the monotonous staircase that seemed to narrow as we climbed, we reached the top floor. A small room with a set of cast iron doors, it was guarded by two very large ponies. Towering above her head, one of the ponies smiled as Catherine approached.

“Catherine, it’s not every day that I get to see you here.” he grinned.

“Always a pleasure, Daniel.” she replied, returning the smile.

“And who have we got here? It wouldn’t be the Equestrian that King Pierre has been expecting?” he said, looking in my direction.

Still panting from the staircase, I cracked a smile. “Actually, yes... I’m glad to hear... That he was expecting me... I’d hate to show up unannounced.”

“Twilight Sparkle. It is an absolute honour to meet you. As you may have noticed, I have been brushing up on my Equestrian for the occasion.”

“I’ve been trying to learn some...”

“But Miss Sparkle! You are injured” he interrupted, rushing in closer as he noticed the bruises around my mouth.

“Oh it’s not that bad. I’m fine really.” I said, smiling weakly. “I ran into some bandits on the way here.”

“I know of them.” He said sternly, inspecting the bruises. “They wait on the border, jumping across to the other side when either nation tries to prosecute them. They are evil, terrible ponies. I myself have had to show them the error of their ways a few times, but there will always be more.

“Did they steal anything from you? King Pierre will be furious if he finds out that anything has been taken from you.”

“No. I...” I paused for a moment before continuing, “...Dealt with them.”

He smiled brightly. “You are no doubt a splendid mare, Miss Sparkle! I would love to hear more about you, but we should really take you to see King Pierre.”

He turned around and motioned to the other guard. They pulled the two doors open and revealed the large room inside. A single pony sat at a desk on the far side of the room against a massive window that stretched across the wall and overlooked the city below. Decorated with elaborate paintings, packed bookshelves and a set of smaller statues, identical to the ones outside the tower, it was absolutely stunning.

As we walked towards the desk, the pony lifted his head and smiled as the doors closed behind us. “It is nice to finally meet you, Miss Sparkle. I am hoping that you aren’t too tired of greeting all these new ponies by now.”

“No, no. Of course not, your highness.” I replied, bowing my head.

“Bah! You needn’t take such formalities with me, Miss Sparkle, we really haven’t the time.”

I raised my head quickly as he got up and walked around the desk. He was a ruby red pony, with a white mane and tail, the exact same colours of the flowers outside.

“But we do have enough time to show you to your room.” he continued, walking past me and towards the door. “For your convenience, I have found a room for you on the bottom floor so that you needn’t climb those awful stairs every time you want to leave.”

My jaw nearly fell off at the thought. *I have to walk down the stairs again!? I just got up here! I’m exhausted!*

He stopped suddenly and turned around. “Haha! I jest, Miss Sparkle! Although your room is indeed at the base of the tower, I won’t make you walk that distance so promptly.”

I closed my jaw and smiled in relief. *Oh, thank Celestia!*

He walked back towards the desk and sat down. “Please, have a seat, Miss Sparkle. And so as not to bore you during your duties, you may return to your post, Catherine. I hope you don’t mind the exercise.”

“It is no trouble at all, my liege.” she replied, turning around and heading towards the door.

Pierre waited for her to leave. He smiled brightly at me while we sat in silence.

“I was informed that you have been having problems with a drought.” he said, breaking the silence. “I am truly sorry that you have had to endure such a devastating curse.”

“I’m worried about my country.” I said honestly, “I felt so useless at home. I came here, not because I was ordered to, but because I wanted to. I want to do whatever it takes to help my country and I am honoured that you are willing to help me.”

“I sincerely hope that you will be able to find a solution to your problem here in Prance. I do not yet know how we can help, but I will send someone to escort you around the country to the various production facilities and give you access to the royal library. It is unfortunate that you cannot yet read our language; it makes the entire process much more unpleasant.”

He stopped and smiled, turning his head to the side as he lost himself in his thoughts.

“You are well acquainted with Catherine, no?” he asked.

“Yes. She’s a very nice pony.”

“She is. I will have someone replace her at the gate and send her with you.”

Once again, he just stopped and smiled, turning his head again. It was a little unsettling. It felt like he just died for brief moments as he contemplated his actions.

“Now, as unfortunate as this is, I’m not sure how much more I can help you right now so perhaps it is finally time to show you to your room.” he announced, breaking the awkward silence again.

I have a feeling that I’m going to learn to hate these stairs, I thought as I flashed a fake smile.

~

“Your princess said that you lived in a library at home.” Pierre said, opening a door. “I thought you might feel less estranged to the tower if you settled here.”

The room was utterly gigantic. As I walked through the library, my jaw hung open and my eyes widened with admiration. It took up an entire floor of the tower and contained hundreds of shelves of books and records. The library at home was nothing like this, not even Celestia’s royal library.

“Do not worry about the others. I forbade access to the library while you are here. If anyone enters, it will only be for an absolute emergency and I will make sure to let you know beforehand.

“I have tried my best to secure a proper sleeping chamber in the corner of the room and the facilities are just around the corner.”

“Why are there so many books here? I’ve never seen a library so vast...” I asked, ignoring the plush bed and large desk that Pierre pointed to.

Pierre lowered his hoof and smiled at me. “We do our very best to document everything we can and encourage the literary arts within the country. Our library contains virtually every book produced in both of our nations as well as many others. It would take decades to read every book in the library and almost as many to learn the languages to read them.”

I salivated slightly as I looked around the room. *So much knowledge...*

“If you are ever hungry, please contact the guard outside your room. He will have the tower’s chefs prepare something for you.” Pierre said, smiling as he noticed my

expression. “His name is Daniel; you may have already introduced yourself to him.”

“Thank you so much, Pierre.” I said, trying to wipe my mouth inconspicuously.

“If you need anything else, let me know immediately. These are dark times, but that needn’t prevent you from enjoying your stay.”

Pierre turned around and walked out of the room, leaving me to stew in my thoughts. They were all very nice ponies, but they weren’t really helping me right now. I had no idea where to start. I could begin by visiting the different areas of the country, but I would just be wasting my time if I didn’t have a plan. I could start by reading the books in the library, but I would need to know what to read first. It was all becoming increasingly complicated and the amazing library I stood in wasn’t really helping.

But under the veil of uncertainty, one thing was absolutely crystal clear. If I wanted to discover the truth about this nation and solve the drought at home, I would need to learn their language and I would need to learn it in less than a day.

Author's notes:

Hello again.

I really enjoyed writing this chapter and I hope you enjoyed reading it. I'd like to extend a very special thanks to my editor, Specter Von Baren, for taking the time to read it over as many times as he did. Without your help, this story would not be nearly as interesting.

I'm not really looking for pre-readers anymore, but if you really want to help out, I'll see what I can do.

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

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