

"I think I found her!"

Cunning looked up through the rubble, barely getting so much as a hint of starlight. By now, the lunar eclipse was over - Celestia's gamble for extra power now fading into the night. She had been so blinded, she didn't question the situation at hoof. The simplicity of the "assassination attempt" was believable enough for her to even consider the obvious illusion for what it was. Had she done so, she would have noticed his perfect pawn: Bright Light's body.

It wasn't fully capable of sustaining false life for more than a night, but it served as a perfect distraction. He disguised it perfectly as the captain - his magical throw allowed him to change the illusion after he fell into the pit, into one of himself. The shield let him secretly channel his own magic for the fake, though going hoof-to-hoof with Celestia was not his best decision. Despite his nearly exhausted magic supply, his plan had proved perfect:

He was now Princess Celestia, Goddess of the Sun.

Cunning had to contain his giddy excitement from breaking his ruse. The guards above him had already found where he was buried - as the Princess, of course - but the best part of his plan was yet to come! When they found Bright Light's body, those simple minded fools wouldn't even question that he tried to save the princess. Bright Light would be declared a hero and any suspicion he may have aroused while impersonating him would be dropped.

He heard the heavy stones being shoved to the left and right. They were frantic in their search. Most importantly, these guards had no magic left, if they even had magic at all.

"Princess!" one of them shouted, tossing one of the rocks to the side. Some of the others shifted and pressed down heavily on Celestia's shoulder.

Cunning cursed in his head, fouling his good mood. He didn't need more bruises than the ones he already made himself.

"Ugh," Celestia moaned in pain, shifting out of the way of the rock. It didn't help much.

"I found another one over here!" Another guard called.

"Leave the dead for last - we need to secure the princess."

Celestia smiled weakly. She recognized that voice - Nightwind. At least he was still alive. She needed a bodyguard who she trusted explicitly. Someone who would tell her everything.

Perfect, Cunning thought.

"Night... wind..." Celestia's whisper barely floated through the rubble.

The first piece of rubble between her and the surface moved away, nearly blinding her with torchlight. *Fires*, Cunning thought. *No, a single fire.*

The city was burning. Canterlot was becoming nothing more than ash. Were he in private, Cunning would have outright screamed at his own failure to address the necessity of leaving the city intact. He suppressed his urge to frown at the bright light, squinting to see through it. It was unlike him to miss that minor detail.

"Princess?" Nightwind came into her field of vision, a look of concern plastered to his

features.

She tried to lift herself, but she was still securely held in the pit of rubble. Several tendrils of magic closed in around her, lifting her gently from the pit, onto the small clearing above.

Doctors were sprinting back and forth from several field tables. The screams of the suffering and dying filled the air, as did the thick scent of blood. The majority of the heavy stones were being rebuilt as makeshift walls to enclose the throne room. Another explosion rocked the castle.

"Can somepony put out the damn fire already? We don't want the whole castle sliding down the mountain!" Nightwind barked. A few pegasi carried the dented scrying pool out of the clearing, filling it with clouds as they disappeared over the wall.

Cunning nearly laughed from satisfaction. Canterlot was less prepared than he originally thought - which meant there would be far fewer survivors. It was a much more believable attack to begin drafting troops against his brother, or, whoever he could manipulate the public into thinking was helping him. He would get absolute control.

Celestia coughed, clearing some of the dust from her mouth and lungs. Nightwind helped her to her hooves, leading her slowly to the only cushion in the clearing. *Part of her bed*, Cunning thought.

Celestia eased her injured body onto the cushion. "What... What has happened?"

"As soon as your fight with that impostor concluded, the magic in the throne room went haywire and blew up the whole central part of the castle. Shortly after, several huge explosions rocked the town. It was a well planned trap which tore us apart. They wiped out the majority of the guard. Most of the fighters in the fray are volunteer citizens and unicorns from the school under the leadership of a... Shining Armor. Twilight Sparkle's brother, I believe."

Cunning passed that thought back and forth through his brain for a while. He wasn't aware she had any siblings. But with her out of the picture for now, Twilight's brother could be an asset.

Shouts of joy started to echo faintly from below. The bubble was going down. Celestia tried to take off, but Nightwind put a hoof on her shoulder.

"We've won." he said relieved.

"At what cost, Nightwind?" Celestia whispered. It was time for Cunning to play it up. "I should have stayed in Manehattan, where I was supposed to be. It's my fault this city is aflame."

Nightwind looked up to her. "Somepony set this trap up for you. It didn't matter when you returned - you would have had to eventually."

Celestia nodded, closing her eyes. "Where have Luna and Dusk gone?"

"Dusk has been taken to Ponyville," Nightwind began carefully. "Luna is missing."

Nightwind watched the color drain from her face. She looked physically sick and began to tremble. He'd seen that look in her eyes before... in Luna's

"Princess. Please. I know it's difficult, but-"

"Difficult?" Celestia screamed. "Difficult is sending your sister to the moon for a thousand years! Difficult is falling asleep for what you think will be another thousand years, only to be brought back to witness my half-sister murder my beloved student! Then I lose her to the loss of her child,

and now..." She was practically choking on her words, when she calmed herself, centering her focus once more. Her last thoughts were barely audible. "At least she was still here when Dawn was taken."

Nightwind had taken several steps back, as did many of the other guards. The memory of the night Dawn was taken still burned into their brains - none of them wanted to be the target of her wrath. But now, Nightwind approached her. He whispered, "You're right. I don't understand. But you can't leave us like your sister did. Equestria still needs you, starting with the survivors of Canterlot."

She nodded. Finding some sort of resolve, she motioned to one of the other guards. "Find me a quill and ink. I have a message for all of Equestria to hear."

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Big Macintosh had finally exhausted his daughter's fever, spending hours tending to both her and his wife with a wet cloth. Sometime earlier, Fluttershy's fever went down, which allowed him more focus on Early Blaze.

He squeezed the water out of the warm towel before tossing it into the wash bucket by the sink. He was too tired to deal with cleaning it now.

He rose from his chair and walked to the front door. A bit of fresh air wouldn't hurt. Besides, it would give him time to assess the damage. There was a reason Luna went silent.

The fires lit the mountain up as if it were a torch. Smoke rose into the sky, covering the mountaintops and spreading out like ash from a volcano. It was a mess. He gaped at the sight of the distant destruction, speechless.

He walked through the orchard to get a better look, but even so, it wasn't less gruesome, or less horrid to look at. It was like watching the start of the end of the world. Since Luna was silent, it might as well have been. Except, he could still feel the magic she granted to him.

"Big Mac, I presume?"

The red earth pony looked back down from the burning city. Two of the newcomers to town were walking up the hill to join him. He was a bit confused, "Eeyup..."

"True North and Ocean Breeze. We're new in town. Looking for a winter locale away from home-" Ocean Breeze began, before receiving a quick elbow to his ribs.

True North rolled his eyes. "The night is long with darkness nigh-"

Big Mac smiled, "But with these hooves the darkness dies. Evenin' boys."

True North trotted over to the stallion, shaking his outstretched hoof. "We've been looking for you - one of our own is on the way from Canterlot, but she's apparently hurt bad."

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow. "Y'all have enough magic to lift her?" They nodded. "I can prepare a room if that's what you're asking."

"We need you to come with us. Princess Dusk only knows you."

"Where?"

"The south orchard, but-"

Big Mac was off immediately, tearing through the trees on the farm. He could barely hear the other stallions as they slowly caught up to the workhorse.

"Through here!" Mac shouted, leaping over the fences that confined the road that ran through the two fields. He felt the sizzle of magic and cast a glance back to see the remnants of a teleportation spell.

Within minutes, he found what he was looking for, as well as a wingblade pressed against his neck.

"The night is long, with darkness nigh..." Big Mac whispered, trying to keep his throat from pressing up into the blade.

The terrifyingly huge wing slowly lowered to the ground. He was so transfixed with the blade, that he didn't notice how wounded she actually was.

Arrows hung pierced through her wings, each of which was missing several tufts of feathers. Her armor was torn to pieces in along her sides and along her legs; some of the plates were just plain missing. It was hard to distinguish her white coat through all of the blood and soot that was caked in her fur.

Just under her body was Dusk, shielding her eyes from the perceived conflict. Big Mac leaned down until he was near her normal eye level. "Miss Dusk?"

The frightened filly peeked her head over her hooves. Big Macintosh smiled back. Instead of saying anything she pounced one of his legs, giving him a big hug. Mac stroked her mane, loosening some of the dirt and embers. Some of it was singed in places. Once he loosened his grip she quickly went back to Cloud Skimmer. She leaned up against one of her legs in an attempt to keep her standing. In a few moments, Ocean Breeze moved in to take over, while True North's magic began to examine her wounds.

"Early Blaze's been home sick from school. If you'd like, you can stay at our house for a while. I'm sure she'd love to see you in the morning."

Dusk nodded quietly. Big Mac gently guided her away from Cloud Skimmer, only to have her push against him. She looked back worriedly at the white pegasus, who looked close to collapsing.

"Don't you worry none about her. They'll fix her up and bring her to the house in a little bit."

Finally, Dusk relented, following the gentle stallion back towards his home.

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Rainbow slowly lowered her wings to her sides, wincing in unbelievable amounts of pain. She had never flown over such long intervals before - absolutely never for an entire day. But since the night Twilight returned, words like "ordinary", "normal", or "usual" had been thrown to the winds.

She snorted, she may have set records and not even known it. A small jet of green flames

poured onto the small campfire, causing her to shy away.

"Sorry," Spike apologized.

Rainbow shrugged, more than happy for the extra warmth. "How much l-longer is it gonna t-take?"

"Almost done. Cover your ears again."

Rainbow complied, forcing her teeth to stop chattering. Through her hooves she could still hear his claws scraping through the ruby on the ground. The cacophony of noise finally ended and Rainbow rubbed her ears as if to further stifle the long-gone screeching.

"Is that really necessary?" Rainbow asked.

"For now. When I get better at these symbols, I won't have to use gems as a medium for magic." Spike lay the crystal on Twilight's forehead, speaking a few words under his breath. The ruby glowed a deep red, illuminating that part of the cave. "I don't even know if this will help."

Rainbow nodded. They never had time to press him for an explanation as to why his magic may not work. Part of her didn't even want to know why, for fear of losing Twilight again. Another sacrifice she could never return... she would never be the same.

"I hope that gem o' yours works. Otherwise that fire will go out and we'll freeze to death," Applejack called, as she re-entered the cave. Her coat was frosted over in places. She muttered something about it still being October, as she crossed the short distance to the fire. The frozen sticks neatly bundled on her back were unceremoniously dumped on the stone floor by the fire. "This is all we're getting out of those dead trees."

Spike blew another gout of flames into the fire, giving it a little extra life. "I haven't started that one. It took a little longer to make the ones for Dawn and Twilight."

Applejack lay down next to Rainbow, huddling her frozen coat as close to the fire as she dared. Spike reached into his pack - of which, Rainbow had only noticed an hour ago - and produced a small opal. Etched on its surface were three small rings, connected in pairs by four simple lines. He tossed it into the fire and closed his eyes.

"**Ha'ari**," Spike growled.

The fire slowly shrank down to a small blue flame, before bursting and wreathing the whole makeshift fireplace in flames. The two ponies shielded their eyes from the sudden brightness, but it gradually faded back to normal.

It was noticeably warmer in the cave, perhaps even worth calling comfortable. "Whoo-ee. Whatever that was, it definitely did the trick. I feel almost as fit as a fiddle," Applejack sighed.

"What was that thing that you said?" Rainbow asked, intrigued.

"Ha'ari."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Ok- What does it mean?"

"Oh," Spike said, scratching his head. "There's not really a good word for it."

Applejack brushed some of the melted water from her coat. "Well it's certainly warmer in here. I guess it means 'warm' or 'hot'."

"Well... yes and no." Spike seemed to toy with the idea for a moment, tapping his claws on

the stone floor. “The word is kind of like a chapter in a book. I imagine being back in the library sipping on hot cocoa next to the fireplace. The house is all warm and Twilight is curled up with a good book.” His speech slowed as soon as he reached the unicorn’s name. His features fell.

The other ponies looked back at the the mother and daughter, bundled up in whatever clothes they could find. Their bodies were neatly tucked beside Spike’s massive body, filling up on the warmth from his scales.

“Will they be ok?” Rainbow whispered. She almost smacked herself for it.

“Twilight will. But... I don’t know if we can help Dawn.”

The filly was taking shallow, wispy breaths. Her coat was dull, almost losing its color. The scratches were nearly invisible now - but they knew it was that green liquid from the statues.

“I’ve never heard of a poison that lasts centuries, let alone millenia. That stuff might be so old, we don’t have a written cure anymore.” Spike stroked the filly’s mane with the back of his claw, while eyeing the emerald hanging loosely around her neck. It was starting to crack along the edge in a few places. Not a good sign. “I don’t know how long this spell will work - but I don’t have any emeralds to make another one. It’ll keep the poison at bay until we reach the city.”

“How far are we?” Applejack asked.

“Three days. The second you passed out of Gryffon territories, you set off all sorts of spells. The King has always been wary of the Empire moving back to their old cities. I’m not sure why,” Spike shrugged.

“Probably what still exists in there,” Gilda landed in the entrance to the cave, brushing off the few icicles that accumulated on her cold weather uniform. She hefted her pack to the fire before setting it down on the ground. “I found enough Icefire bushes to make a meal of berries. Except for you Spike. There’s probably only enough to constitute a snack.”

He shrugged, popping a gem into his mouth, smiling. “I’ll manage.”