

The Days Just Don't Get Any Shorter

By Terse

Chapter One

_____Princess Luna felt more than a little antsy, barely able to keep her hooves under control as they beat a fierce tapping rhythm on the ground in anticipation.

The first delegation of the morning were due to arrive very soon. They'd chosen to travel through the deepest darkness, during the earliest hours of the morning, in an expression of reverence for her, the Queen of the Moon. She was very much grateful for that, but having to wait outside the gates of the city, in the cool midnight air...she couldn't help but shiver, even wrapped up as she was, and the dead silence of the world around her as it stood still was eerie. Almost unnerving.

The twinkling stars in the night sky high above her head captured her attention. They served as a faithful reminder of why she couldn't spent her days lazing around her rooms, doing nothing, but sometimes she couldn't help but wish they'd leave her alone. Tonight was one of those nights, and their unflappable joy was beginning to get on her last nerves.

Boredom had settled itself in her mind earlier on, boredom and an insatiable desire for a late night snack, but she had brought nothing to alleviate either, and pinging blasts of magical energy at flies, buzzing their careless way through the evening air, could only really amuse the absent-minded princess for so long.

"Where are they?" She sighed, trailing off. The sky above shook ever so slightly, moon and stars tittering with mirth, and she silenced them with a glare.

Luna was not in the mood for japery. Not tonight.

She had been told to expect a distinguished envoy from the northern kingdoms, and that worried her. With some wrangling of the court schedule (and a hefty bribe for her sister's administrators), she had found time to catch up with modern geopolitics, and what she'd learned of the Northern Lights, as they had been called in her day, made her nervous.

The Northern Lights were ancient remnants of her domain, the legendary Sky Chambers. At the peaks of the highest mountain ranges in the world were staircases of natural light, commonly referred to as auroras, which all creatures could ascend in order to reach the sky, and confer with its celestial bodies. She had, long ago, held a unified court there, for all creatures to voice their concerns, and in so doing, there had been a comfortable peace, born

from communication and understanding.

The Northern Lights themselves, sadly, rested in the capital cities of three distinct kingdoms, two of which were highly unfriendly to the ponies of Equestria she so loved.

The smallest of the three mountain ranges, Narcissus, circled the impenetrable fortress-cities of Caninada, home to the barbaric wolves. Polar wolves, forest wolves, Diamond Dogs, any vicious, ugly, smelly, overgrown canine Luna could name that wasn't a dog of some form hailed from there. Carnivores, the lot of them, disgusting mongrels she wished she could wash her hooves of. Why they chose to worship her, she would never know. She had only allowed a select few to enter her court, and the rest had been barred from her presence without opportunity for appeal. Had her hatred of them earned her some twisted form of love in return?

The other mountain range, only slightly larger than Narcissus, she had affectionately deemed Wastes. No one else found it so hilarious as she, and the fact that the name had stuck, at her urging, was her personal finest prank, to this day. Wastes bordered the oceans, and was lush with vibrant winter plant-life. Dotted across its ridges were diverse settlements of all kinds, some of which made Canterlot look small, and millions of foreign creatures, not the least of which were ponies, chose to call the hills home, dedicated to preserving the last remaining aurora under the watchful eyes of their nomadic gryphon guardians.

Without her maintenance, most of the world's intrinsic astral magic had fallen apart; now she could begin to repair them, but that one had been cared for by dedicated teams of magicians from every corner of the planet, and she could not bear to take the work of generations away. Everything about Wastes was contrary, and she took pride in the fact that for once, something of hers had defied the strange magic of the fateful name.

The last of the Skytops had terrified her when she was a filly. The centre of her court, the seat of her majesty, and the pillar upon which the moon itself rested, Yggdrasil (named long before she had discovered it) carried her wisdom like fruit, apples she would learn to bequeath upon others when she finally came of age.

And, to her lamentations, protected at the base by a race of fierce, mighty lizards, that called themselves the Nidhoggr.

Or, in the language of ponies, dragons.

Luna had never been too fond of dragons. Their bellicose nature, unrivaled magical abilities, high-invincibility and excessively long lifespans made each practically a god unto itself, and far too arrogant to serve a frail, gentle-looking alicorn. The kings of the dragons were even worse, akin to stars, fiercely loyal to their people and isolationist to the core. They had jealously guarded Yggdrasil in the days of her reign, content to deny all passage to anyone not of Drakish blood, and she hadn't had the courage to stop them.

“Obviously that means I’m happy to sit back and let you bully my little ponies into submission,” she muttered under her breath, eyes still trained on the long road that wound away into the distance, far out of her sight. “I’m really only their patron deity, feel free to eat and enslave them as much as you like! Jerks.”

She couldn’t help but spit. It was a disgusting habit, to be sure, and certainly one unbecoming of a princess, but she’d stopped caring about royal appearances long beforehand. In the middle of her own night, if she wanted to be a boor, she had every right to be!

Above her, the stars shifted, as if to make way for the moon as it passed through their ranks. The soft glow of moonlight, a reflection bounced off a shimmering scale in the distance, caught Luna’s attention, jumping back into awareness.

A dragon, gigantic and proud, approached from the distance, flanked by an entourage of wolves, gryphons, ponies, and numerous other strange creatures from the cold north. Behind them, a flock of smaller dragons followed, a dazzling array of multi-hued, chromatic monsters that made her gasp in awe. Even in the low light, they were magnificent, and her eyes followed their movements with diligent attention, carefully drinking in the sights.

For all their faults, dragons were hers, through and through, each a star in the planet’s sky, and she couldn’t help but love them as though they were her own children.

As they drew nearer, Luna blanched. She hadn’t thought of anything meaningful to introduce herself with, though obviously they knew who she was. In fact, anything resembling a coherent thought had been chased out of her mind by shock, and now she had nothing save a mouthful of tongue and a head full of empty.

“Fantastic,” the alicorn sighed, drawing herself up to her full height. She didn’t have an impressive stature like her sister, but she’d still show these northerners a thing or two about dignity. And poise. And all that other malarkey she hadn’t taken the time to remember.

With a skip in her step, Luna trotted towards the envoy, ready to take on all comers.

“Good evening, sir dragon and company!” she called out into the night, smiling as brightly as she could. The envoy stopped dead, every last member silent as the void, save one fluttering dragonling that couldn’t seem to sit still, perched upon the lead dragon’s head.

“Who goes?” cried the wolf stood on its hind legs, next to the lead dragon, in a shaky, stuttering voice. “Show yourself! The great Duke Shortspine demands it!”

Such rudeness! Luna couldn’t help but fume. Still uncouth, wolves, though the peculiar tone of fear in the speaker’s voice seemed heavily out of place.

"Calm yourself, Harley," the leader rumbled, a deep baritone that soothed Luna's spirits and seemed to do the same for the rest of the group. "Surely we are being greeted by an emissary of the Moon Goddess. There is naught to fear." The dragon stepped forward alone, raising a single great paw, as if in offering. "Ho there, mighty pony, servant of the illustrious Divine of the Night! I am Shortspine, of the Lunar Clan. These," he continued, sweeping his arm in the direction of the group accompanying him, "are my vassals, loyal children of the Lunar Clan. We come to pay respects to the great one."

Luna couldn't help but titter. Could they not see her in the darkness? "Oh, Shortspine, of the Lunar Clan, how age has stricken you! Once so proud, have the years taken their toll too early?"

Confusion registered quickly on the faces of most of the envoy, the wolf Harley in particular struggling to contain some sort of impotent rage. Luna understood the feeling. She was the same, to anyone who spoke foully of her sister.

"Milord," Harley stuttered again, "this is unacceptable! Who dares speak so rudely to you? Do they not know their place? Have these ponies not been taught to show respect for their betters?"

"We are all equals in the eyes of the Divine," Shortspine laughed back, a clarity in his eyes and a smile on his face that Luna knew meant understand. "Though I did not expect those eyes to be cast upon us so soon."

"What are you talkin' about, papa?" the high-pitched chirp of the young dragon awkwardly sat in between Shortspine's titanic horns made everyone giggle, including the Princess. A baby, no doubt, probably around Spike's age. "You said we was gonna meet the Princess! Where is she?"

Around the dragon, others chimed in, a low cacophony of mixed sounds that slowly rose in volume until Luna could barely make heads or tails of her own thoughts.

"Silence, please," Shortspine rumbled again, voice tinged with a slight edge, and with a few squawks of dissent, the group eventually quietened. A pall of fear and anticipation had fallen over the envoy, very much a reflection of her earlier mood, and now she couldn't help but bask in the delicious irony of the reversal.

"Shortspine, you haven't changed," Luna chuckled, slipping into a more relaxed tone. Summoning rays of moonlight to illuminate the world around her, she appeared, bursting into a shower of glorious, silvery light. The envoy looked on in awe.

The elder dragon bowed, snout practically touching the earth. "It is a pleasant surprise

that you remember me, my queen,” he sniffed, raising a paw to pluck the youngest of the group from her perch on his head. “It does my heart a world of good to see that you are well.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Luna couldn’t help but laugh at that, too. “You know the years can’t touch me. When you’re bones, I’ll still be beautiful!”

“As you were so wont to remind me, in my golden years,” came the reply, light and jovial. Luna couldn’t help but enjoy the company. It had been so long since she’d last seen a familiar face, and much as she wanted to get to know the new world better, her memories often came and stole her away, back to the past.

Shortspine had been an important part of that past. A thousand years had flown by in the blink of an eye, but despite the age in his eyes and the dull, matte colour of his once-brilliant brown scales, he felt the same, full of vibrant joy and good humour. As one of the stewards of the dragon kingdom, and one of her closest aides, they had been inseparable friends throughout his youth; now he had grown up, into a powerful, wizened snake, with a child all of his own.

They shared an embrace, if only for a moment. As they parted, the child flew down to meet her, crushing her in an iron grip.

“Hi, Princess!” the dragon crooned. Her scales were brown too, almost identical to her father’s, but her tiny shape and girlish glee said enough. “Papa told me all about you! He said you were like his mommy! Does that make you my grandma?”

“His mommy?” That was a little perplexing. The age gap made sense, she’d known Shortspine since his birth, but she’d never mothered him. At least not any more than anyone else. “I think I’m a bit too young to be your grandmother, honey, but I can try,” she crooned back, unable to halt the spread of a wide grin across her face.

The little dragon brightened up, and immediately settled itself on Luna’s back, arms wrapped around her neck. It made her feel fuzzy inside. It’d been so long since anyone had treated her the way she’d once been so used to.

“I have been told your leave of absence was the fault of the ponies that ignored your beloved night,” Shortspine said, as the other members of the envoy moved forward. Twelve in all, counting the young dragoness and the elder dragon. Three gryphons, two wolves, seven dragons. Quite the group. “The Lunar Clan has done as much as it can to uphold the sanctity of your domain in the time you have spent...” There was an awkward pause in Shortspine’s speech for a moment, as though he was struggling to find the right words, before he continued. “Away.”

Luna shrugged her withers as best she could, carrying a weight. “A lot has happened, but I’m feeling much better now.”

“Magnificent! Then allow me to be the first of the Lunar Clan, and the Nidhoggr, to welcome you back.”

Behind the brown dragon, the rest of the envoy bowed deeply, though none so deeply as the wolf Harley, whose remorse she could practically feel radiating from her blushing face.

“Thank you,” Luna whispered. She could feel the tears welling up in her eyes. “What can I say, it’s good to be back. Though I can’t say I approve of what you’ve been doing since I was banished.”

“My lady,” Shortspine said, pacing back a few steps. Luna moved forward to match, glaring into the dragon’s eyes as her mouth contorted into a fierce snarl.

“Killing ponies for sport? Enslaving smaller races? Burning nations to the ground? I leave for a thousand years and I come back to this?”

“My queen,” Shortspine stammered, raising both paws in a gesture of submission, “I promise you the Lunar Clan has not involved itself in the secular affairs of lesser-”

“Not involved itself?” Now the blue alicorn was livid, eyes aflame with rage as she flapped her wings and rose into the air, now eye level and matched with the dragon. He shrank under her gaze. “Wolves, dragons, gryphons, you were bad enough when I left, now I come back and all I hear are horror stories! What have you been doing, not involving yourself? I left you with a duty to the world I created!”

“Divine Queen Luna,” the wolf Harley interjected, placing herself between the dragon and the enraged pony, “I promise you we’ve been doing everything we can-”

“Oh? Really?” Now she dropped, falling to the floor in order to meet Harley eye to eye. The wolf practically melted under her gaze. “Now you’re telling me wolves are righteous moral crusaders? I don’t believe it! You were the worst of the lot!”

Now the three gryphons stepped forward, accompanied by a penitent-looking wolf. Luna didn’t give them a chance to interrupt.

“I’m happy to be back,” she growled, “but I’m not happy about the way you’ve been leaving everyone to their own devices. I wanted to fix things when I became Nightmare Moon!” All twelve of them, dragons, gryphons, wolves and all, lowered their heads at that, out of shame. Luna hoped they carried on feeling that shame for the rest of their lives. Perfect comeuppance for shirking their duties to the Lunar Clan! “Eternal night would have meant the Lunar Clan wouldn’t have to compete with the Solar Clan. We could have made the world a better place! But here I am, listening to excuses!”

With no warning, Luna deflated, falling to the ground in a heap.

"But the ponies are no better," she mumbled, raising a hoof to her eyes to wipe away the beginnings of tears. Shortspine, above her, did the same. He seemed on the verge of a breakdown. "No one cares any more. It's all about me, me, me. Celestia tries to fix things, but she can't. Her influence has kept the world stable, but she can't just change creatures' hearts."

"No one can," Harley supplied, crouching next to her to wipe away beads of sweat from her brow. Luna stopped to take a good look at the wolf. A polar wolf, with unusually white fur, and pretty teal dragon's eyes. Very much the spitting image of the priestesses of the Lunar Clan from a millennium before. "The Lunar Clan has done its best to keep the world safe, but no one wants us any more. Religion has been left in the past."

"As it should be," Shortspine sighed, carefully reaching down to lift Luna to her feet. Grumpily she nodded at him in thanks. "Dogma serves its purpose and dies when it is done. That was always the rule, was it not, Princess?"

"It was," Luna said, turning away to begin her trot back to the castle. "That, and 'everyone's a jerk'."

With a harrumph, Shortspine paced after her, the rest of the envoy in tow.

"A thousand years of skyward exile is enough to make anyone go mad," Luna grouched, sipping daintily from a fine china cup gripped in the air by her magic. The fierce, midnight-blue glow that surrounded the cup, emanating from the Princess' horn, was bright enough to illuminate the balcony on which the group sat; Shortspine looked more than a little nervous. Such casual expense of power was a quick and easy way to remind everyone of your deific nature.

"You lived on the moon, Princess?" With the way her baby teeth had grown in, the young dragoness (whose name was Snagglefang, she'd learned) had difficulty speaking, even in Drakish. Her words came out twisted, 'rolling r' sounds turning into 'double-us' and even amongst her other speech difficulties, her sibilant noises, the trademark of all Drakish creatures, were thick and muffled. A lisping dragon? The thought warmed Luna's heart. "That's amazing! What did you even do up there?"

"Slept, mostly," the alicorn answered, dredging up what few memories she could recall from her short stint on a gigantic slab of rock floating through space. "When I was awake, I told myself stories. I imagined entire worlds, all my own personal playgrounds, and with my magic, I brought them to life."

“Wow!” Snaggle looked stupefied, a wide grin fixed onto her face. “What were they like? Did you fight crime? Slay monsters? Make it big as a musician? Find cures for diseases? Write books? Dance? Sing?”

“Calm down, my dearest,” Shortspine chuckled, petting his daughter on the top of her head. She gave him a petulant frown, crossing her arms, but relented. Her list must have run out of items to rattle off, Luna thought.

But it was an important question. She couldn’t remember much of her time on the moon. A mixture of incandescent fury, blind envy and immeasurable regret had frozen her in a single point in time for so long: the moment in which Celestia had finally unleashed the absolute power of the Elements of Harmony against her. Her defeat. Her loss. Her suffering. Sorrows innumerable, impossible to be rid of. She’d spent a great deal of time enacting her revenge in her thoughts, and plotting her eventual return. All ultimately pointless, but it had helped pass the time.

When she hadn’t been ruled by rage, or simply too tired to stay awake, she’d spent her time in dreams. Often she’d dreamed of romance. Finding the perfect stallion, or the perfect mare, and living comfortably together...journeying across the uncharted frontiers of the planet with a partner, loyal, handsome and true...being swept off her feet at her debutante ball...so many fancies, illusions gone by in moments that had kept her entertained. Whether Nightmare Moon or Princess Luna, she was still a pony, if not a mortal one. She had hopes, dreams, wishes, none of which were appropriate to share with a child who hadn’t yet learned that boys didn’t have cooties.

“I dreamed of many things,” she cooed, horn glowing ever so slightly. The youthful dragoness yawned, blearily blinking the dust out of her eyes, and Luna upped the ante ever so slightly. “But to dream, I had to sleep, and it’s time for you to do the same, little Snagglefang.”

With that, the dragon girl fell into a dead faint, thin, tiny body rising and falling with the rhythm of her breathing. Luna felt a genuine smile etch itself on her face, and in front of her, Shortspine wrapped a gauntleted paw gently around the child.

“It’s early,” the elderly dragon sighed. “The rest of the delegates shall be arriving soon, no doubt.”

“Looking forward to it,” Luna said, magically conjuring a brush and mirror for her mane. “I won’t be doing much, but I’m expecting today to go off with a bang.”

“Foresight?”

“A little,” the Princess answered, smirking, “and a little bit of my sister’s tales. Now off

with you.”

And with that, she ushered the two dragons off the balcony, closing the doors behind them.

“Show-off,” Shortspine muttered, stalking away with his child in hand.

Hours later, at the other end of the castle, a white alicorn was jerked from her slumber by a sudden ringing in her head. Fumbling with the objects on her bedside dresser, eventually she wrapped her hoof around a spherical, golden locket, and with as much magical force as she could exert with a migraine that could kill an Ursa Major and enough fatigue to stop the Equestrian economy dead, managed to get it to shut up.

Princess Celestia had not been having the easiest sleep. It had been many a year since she'd last summoned the many ambassadors of the numerous foreign states, nations, principalities, and empires of the earth to a proper political summit. With her mind preoccupied by her sister's sudden return, amongst many other, much less appropriate thoughts, she couldn't help but be distracted; distraction had led to mistakes, enough that the nobles of the Upper Quarter were calling for a blanket ban on all red crayons. Regardless of composition! It infuriated her that so many foals and artists would lose out because of one silly drunkard.

Well, one drunkard and thirteen battalions of royal guardsponies, but she couldn't afford to focus on the administrative errors. Not with the threat of political fallout looming grim on the horizon.

Late to bed, early to rise. The same routine for longer than she could remember. She didn't need sleep, but she'd become reliant on it for the opportunity to escape her duties to the everyday world. Waking up was always a challenge.

With a small flourish, Princess Celestia sprang from her bed, ready to start the new day.

Then she promptly collapsed.

Two minutes later, after a short struggle to draw breath, she'd mustered up what little willpower she could, and tried again, lifting herself from the floor.

No luck. Down for the count. Her legs were simply unable to hold her up.

“That isn't good,” Celestia mumbled, focusing on casting a spell. From her awkward position on the floor, it was difficult to get a good bead on the sun, but eventually she managed to set it on its course and get it rolling, ready to start the new day.

“What is wrong with me today?”

Unable to answer that difficult question, she popped off another quick cantrip, one she hoped would alert her sister to her situation.

“Good morning, Twilight!”

The sudden splotch of pink that plastered itself across the lavender unicorn’s blurry, waking vision heaved her from the bed, and with a loud thump, she landed on the floor. Dazed and confused, not a good start to Twilight’s day if ever there was one.

“Morning, Pinkie,” she grumbled, grabbing onto the side of her bed with her hooves and slowly pulling herself up.

Yesterday had been a long day. The trip to Canterlot wouldn’t usually have been an issue, courtesy of the hot air balloon, but with a group of seven ponies (well, six ponies and a dragon) that was simply far too large for one trip by air, they’d been forced into travelling on foot. The journey was always gruelling. She’d done it once before, when she’d had no other option, to make her fortnightly visit to her parents; that had led to her spending the entire time in bed, recovering...this was worse, simply because she wouldn’t have that luxury. Sleep wasn’t something she could afford on such a big day.

The Princesses had been in some sort of crazed frenzy when she’d seen them last. Of course, compared to anyone else that meant “complete, idyllic calm”, but a lifetime of experience had taught her to see when Celestia was worried. Luna, on the other hand, made it obvious. She had been uptight the entire time, snappy and cold, and when she’d shattered a steel mug of ice-water with her magic, entirely accidentally, spraying everyone with chilled liquid, Twilight had given in and gone off to bed.

It wasn’t that she didn’t care, but she’d been irritable herself, and Luna clearly needed rest. If she was in a better mood today, Twilight would be able to congratulate herself on a job well done.

“What are you doing, sleeping in so late? Everyone else is already awake and ready to party, silly!”

“Party?” Twilight couldn’t help but groan. “What time is it?”

“That’s a good question!” The excitable ball of energy that was Pinkie Pie crossed her forelegs, falling back into a sitting position. One that looked excruciatingly uncomfortable for

anyone who wasn't Lyra, at least. "There aren't any clocks in here. I wonder why? Are the ponies in the castle afraid of time? Oooh, maybe they're angry at the people who make the clocks for some reason! Or maybe it's a conspiracy to stop the flow of time!"

"Pinkie." The unicorn held a hoof to her face, and sighed. "This is a guest room. There should be a clock right outside. Can you check while I get up?"

"Of course, Twilight!" The pink earth pony bounced straight out of the door, a literal spring in her step. Twilight had to admire her ingenuity.

In the meantime, with a quick burst of spells, she made herself presentable. Hair brushed and cleaned, coat shined, formal attire donned. By the time Pinkie had made it back (carrying the clock in her mouth, nearly giving Twilight a heart attack) she was pretty much ready to take the day on.

"Sorry it took me so long, Twilight!" Pinkie said, spitting out the clock. Twilight watched it intently, horror slowly creeping into her eyes as it rolled around on the floor, eventually settling down in between them. "I couldn't work the screws because I'm not a unicorn and I don't have any ultra-cool magic, so I had to rip it off! I hope you don't mind!"

"What..."

"What is it, Twilight? Is everything okay? You wanted a clock, right?"

The lavender unicorn couldn't work her head around it. How could she possibly be so dense?

She gave up. Too early in the morning to think about existential questions.

"I just wanted the time, Pinkie!"

"And now you have it! Job well done, everybody go home!" And with that, Pinkie pranced out, still wearing the same goofy grin she'd had on ever since she'd assaulted Twilight in her bed.

Twilight's horn glowed as she propelled the clock at the door, hoping to catch Pinkie on the back of the head on her way out. No luck. With a pronounced sigh and a glare at the spot where the pink earth pony had stood a few moments prior, she pulled it back, glancing at its face.

Seven thirty. Later than she'd have liked, but early enough to avoid a tongue-lashing. The merchants would be setting up their stalls outside, in the castle gardens, and the first delegation, from the mythical Solar Clan of the Southern Reaches, wouldn't be around until

midday. She had time.

Trotting over to the window of her room, she opened the latch, throwing it open. She could stand to get some fresh air into the room, and it looked like a bright, sunny day, as usual. The pegasi had started their work very early, and some were still visible in the skies above, darting through the slowly-dispersing cloud cover as they worked their weather magic.

All in all, things looked to be going well.

Several stories below, she spotted the first of the stalls coming to life in the palace garden. A unicorn, accompanied by two towering gryphons, was carefully setting up an array of unusual bottles and beakers, full of brightly-coloured liquids of all kinds. Some she recognised. She'd played around with extract of dragonfruit in the past, and the crushed sapphire paste was an important reagent in several of her more powerful spells. The trader even had a barrel of Toxic Kick, which was a shock. She'd been fairly certain any Toxic brews had been banned and criminalised in Equestria for nearly four years. She'd have to go and get some later. Otherwise, much of it was new, exciting and bizarre, and the studious young mare made a mental note to go and check the stall later, perhaps speak to the apothecary.

Others were beginning to seat themselves across the gardens as well. Little wooden stalls staffed by the intelligent crows and ravens from the oceans of the far east, carrying bits and bobs of all kinds that looked more like tourist souvenirs than anything of substance. Gigantic magical affairs woven from steel and stone, surrounded by the deer and rams of the far south. Even a zebra or two had travelled across the world to be at Canterlot, apparently, considering the hut that had just popped up out of nothingness by the central fountains.

An ethnic affair if ever there was one, Twilight thought. She'd have a lot to learn today about the many different cultures of the world, if she had anything to say about it. She refused to stay cooped up inside the castle, dealing with stuffy old dignitaries from the nearby pony nations. Today was her day to be edified!

Deciding to take a trip down to the courtyard, Twilight winked out of the room with as much precision as she could manage.

Celestia was not in the right mood for a crisis at all.

Neither was Luna.

After a quick consultation with the younger Princess, Celestia had come to several conclusions. The first was the one she couldn't deal with most of all. During a particularly lucid dream sequence in the night before, possibly the product of a tired mind and more likely just

some freak occurrence caused by her subconscious desire to be anywhere but in Canterlot today, her magic had gone haywire, sapping her of her energy. A thousand years of pure, constant exertion had been challenging enough, but now the last reserves of strength she'd been relying on were completely gone.

"The perfect day for a national emergency," Luna sighed, carefully raising a dry woollen cloth to Celestia's sweat-sodden brow. The elder sister groaned, grateful for the comfort.

"I feel terrible, Luna," was the response, quiet and remorseful. The blue alicorn sighed.

"You work hard enough, Cel," she chastised as best she could, wiping away more droplets of sweat as they cascaded down the white alicorn's face. Her sister liked to play jokes, but this felt like the worst sort of prank had been played on her; confined to her bed with a fever like a child, useless at the worst of times. Sickening in the literal sense. "Just stay here for a while. I'm sure Twilight and I can handle a few foreigners."

"Can you?" Celestia coughed, then sneezed, then choked, all in quick succession, barely able to cover her mouth with her hooves in time. "I'm putting you in such a difficult position, Luna. I only wish I could be of more help."

"What do you want me to do, sister, drag you to the throne room?" Luna tittered a little at the thought. "I could hang you from the ceiling by some ropes, turn you into a little puppet. Dance, oh mighty Queen of the Sun! Dance for the lesser critters! Put on a show!"

Frantically waving her forelegs in the air, Luna summoned a tiny apparition of a puppet Celestia, and made it dance. The elder sister couldn't help but laugh quietly, throat hoarse and head fuzzy.

"I don't think I would put on the best of performances." Luna passed her a glass of water, which she greedily gulped down. "You are welcome to try, of course, dear sister, but I highly doubt the Solar Clan would be happy about it."

"Stuffy old stiffes would probably go mad," Luna mumbled, gently easing the glass from Celestia's hooves and refilling it. Her sister would probably be in for a long, rough day, did she need to have it any worse, constantly worrying about the foreign dignitaries? The Lunar Clan had kept the global peace for long enough in her day, she could handle it again now. "I promise, sister, everything will be fine."

"I trust you, Luna," Celestia smiled weakly, "and I have faith in my little ponies. It's chance I don't trust."

Luna couldn't argue with that.

Things were not going well in the courtyard. Barely two hours since the crack of dawn and Twilight was already having to deal with an enraged ape merchant and an enraged apple merchant. She couldn't help but obsess over how the addition of two extra letters could cause such a great schism, but here it was, right in her face, and Applejack was doing very little to help.

"Shucks, I'm sorry, sugarcube, but this here feller's startin' to grate on my last nerve!" Twilight had never noticed before, but Applejack's accent thickened ever so slightly when she allowed herself to get worked up. It was almost funny. On the other hand, she was not in the mood for laughing. The day had already begun piling stress on her aching withers, and things looked to be on the road to even further disaster.

Twilight, on some level, did sympathise with the ape. He looked like he'd had a far worse time of it than her earth pony friend. His fur was twisted and matted, covered in soot, his eyes ringed with bags and bloodshot...probably hadn't slept in days, trying to get everything sorted. This would be a big day for anyone intending to make money. Unfortunately for him, she knew for a fact that Applejack had laid a stake on this plot weeks beforehand, and anyway, apes didn't sit right with her. Call it prejudice, but they reminded her too much of the creatures from the storybooks she'd read as a child, that spoke of strange, eldritch beasts from far in the past, that terrorised all the world's indigenous creatures with their magical powers and genius intellects. Nightmare material.

"I not find that be to amuserating in the leastest! Tell why you take paid-for spot, now, earthen horsie!" Twilight had difficulty making heads or tails of what the ape meant through his accent, an unintelligible mishmash of inappropriate emphases, incorrect words, and garbled gibberish. The language barrier was difficult enough for the poor thing, but his anger was clearly making it even worse; luckily for everyone involved, she was something of an omniglot. Twilight Sparkle, here to save the day!

"*Good day, sir,*" she said, tongue slowly coaxing the words out of her mouth. Foreign languages were challenging, considering she'd rarely ever had opportunity to actually use them in conversation, but with some effort she recalled the proper speech patterns, though they still didn't make much sense to her. Apes spoke brutishly, a mixture of slurred words, loud yelps and clacking, chattering sounds that her jaw simply did not feel made for. He probably had difficulty understanding anything. *"I'm not quite understanding this problem. Would you mind explaining for me?"*

"Uh, Twi," Applejack chimed in, confused, "what in tarnation are you saying?"

"Quiet, Applejack," the purple mare shot back, eyes still trained warily on the ape. "Speaking in Apesque is hard. I need full concentration for this."

"Twilight, sugar," Applejack sighed, as though she was talking to a foal, "he's a gosh-darned foreigner, and he speaks Equestrian. Why go through all that bother?"

Twilight's jaw dropped.

"Seriously, Applejack?"

"Yeah, I'm serious!" Applejack stomped her hooves on the ground, and snorted. Twilight still couldn't close her mouth. The shock was simply too much. "He comes here, from his high-falutin' foreign joint, all the way outta Equestria, and has the buck to tell me the spot I paid for with the bits I earned in a year's back-breakin' work belongs to him? Horse-feathers!"

"Applejack, I'm surprised at you!" Now Twilight was livid. "I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding! I expected better from the Element of Honesty and my most dependable friend!"

"I'm bein' honest," she sniffed, eyes downcast as she glared at the ground. "Don't like apes. They're weird. Granny Smith used to tell us tales about 'em. That they eat foals, 'n' they kill other creatures for sport."

"Still here, I stand!" The ape screeched in a whining, nasal tone, flailing his elongated arms around wildly in the air-

No, Twilight, the voice in the back of her mind that just barely counted as a conscience chastised her, you're letting your internal narration turn specist. Stop it.

"I'm so sorry, sir," the unicorn replied, unable to stop the slow spread of a blush across her cheeks. "My friend isn't the most tactful of ponies-"

"Now who are you goin' and callin' not tactful?" Applejack looked even angrier at that, almost like she'd been betrayed. "I got all the tact I need when I ain't dealin' with no' lyin', stinkin' ape!"

"Lying! Stinking! Ape! You offend with sharper tongue! Ponies all ingrates! Rude! Vile! Incurrigatable!" At that point, the ape's diatribe had degenerated into a long string of the most horrific slurs Twilight had ever heard. Now Applejack and the ape were screaming at each other, locked in a death-match, and Twilight couldn't help but back away out of fear.

Things were beginning to get hectic. A small crowd of creatures had gathered to watch the show, and at their front sat Pinkie Pie, in a convenient deckchair, munching on a mouthful of popcorn. Next to her, Rainbow Dash had perched herself on the floor, and had her hooves wrapped around a bag, mouth buried deep inside.

On Pinkie's other side, Fluttershy was watching in speechless awe.

"Now you listen here, 'cause I'm only sayin' this once more before I buck you right on out o' this here garden!" Applejack stood face to face with the ape, who had crouched in order to look her in the eye. Twilight's stomach dropped, and she could practically feel the colour draining from her face. What to do, what to do?

"Woohoo, you tell him, AJ!" Rainbow Dash hollered from what could ostensibly called the stands. Fluttershy looked like she wanted to intervene, eyes drawn into a narrow glare, but she sat still, as frozen by the anger as Twilight was. The rest of the crowd were in mixed states of approval, some outright cheering, others fuming with barely-concealed disapproval. Only Pinkie looked neutral, thoughtful as she eyed the two fighters.

"This is my stall, I paid for it! It's mine!" Applejack was practically pouting. For all her strength, Twilight couldn't help but see a small, weak mare pitting itself against an imposing, terrifying monster, and with that image burned into her subconscious, her horn began to flare, sparks flying from her mane and tail, fur slowly changing to an ashen white.

She stepped forward, empowered by the high of a smoldering rage.

"Pony listen, hear well my speak!" The ape was jeering, one thick finger pointed directly at the space between the orange earth pony's eyes. "Papers clear, this my stall! I work here and you go! Go!" A pronounced sweep of the ape's arm very nearly caught Applejack, but she jumped back, wary.

"Oh yeah?" Now she was smirking. "Prove it! Show me them papers an' I'll be right out of your hair! Or can you even read 'em?"

"Here, rude pony, here!" The ape clicked his fingers, and a thick sheaf of documents materialised in his hand. Ape magic was certainly impressive. "You look, you see, you know! Then you apologise courteously and proper for my time! Sun is risen, work to do!"

"Yeah, yeah, don't we all," Applejack muttered, shuffling through the sheets of paper. The moments that followed were filled by a pregnant pause as the entire courtyard unknowingly held its breath; after a few seconds had passed, the orange earth pony sighed dramatically, passing the papers back with a begrudging hoof. "Well, darn it all, looks like you were right and all. I guess I'm sorry. But my papers say the same thing!"

Pulling a stack of paper from her own saddlebags, Applejack handed them over to the ape, who read over the entire thing in the blink of an eye.

"Clerical error," he mumbled, snapping his fingers again. Twilight caught the sudden drop

in Applejack's posture. Had he used his magic to put them back? Ingenious. She'd have to grill someone about ape mysticism later on.

Gradually, the rage released its grip on her, and she returned to normal as she casually strode over to rejoin the two merchants. Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie followed behind, the former slightly disgruntled even as the latter two beamed.

"Aw, jeez," the rainbow-maned pegasus sighed, "I wanted to see a fight! I thought you were going to go all 'bucking bronco' on him, AJ, show him what a real Iron Pony can do!"

"Iron Pony?" the ape looked quizzical at that. "Ponies not made of marshmallow?"

"Nope!" Pinkie Pie laughed. The rest of the group simply groaned. Apes. "We're just like you guys! We're all meat and bones and other icky disgusting goop!"

"I'm sorry about all that stuff I said," Applejack said. The contrite expression on her face said enough for Twilight, but the poor ape had taken quite the mockery. Apes were supposed to be used to that sort of thing, from her research. Hated the world over for some mysterious, incomprehensible reasoning, but she'd always believed it was simply superstition. To have one of her friends so strongly react to what most ponies considered a scary bedtime story...that was pretty scary stuff itself, to her. "I had no business goin' off like that. I'll move, as soon as possible."

For a moment, the ape looked thoughtful.

"Very old, I am," he began, eyes glimmering with the beginnings of tears. "My people, much sufferings. Many sorrows in my travels. To come here, expecting acceptance immediately..." Twilight looked up into the ape's eyes, the rest of her friends doing the same. He seemed sad, wise beyond his visible years. Someone to respect, not to attack. "Silly. Apes feared by creatures. Even dragons. But never...never apologised to before."

To see such a tall creature, from a race so proud and majestic, reduce itself to a pony's height as it crouched, almost kneeling in prostration, was a sight Twilight vowed never to forget. A pony's obstinacy, ignorance, even its mulish nature, could be the key to ruining a potential friendship, but more than that, their ability to ask for forgiveness, to be forgiven, and to forgive...that could save one. Applejack was evidence enough of that.

"Well, golly," the earth pony in question stammered, "I, uh, you don't have to kneel, I can-"

"Pony, I apologise," the ape said, a low, guttural growl that felt almost like a roar. "Augustus."

“Uh, what now?”

Silently, Twilight voiced her agreement, fairly certain her other friends were doing the same.

“Augustus,” he rumbled, standing again. At his full height, the ape merchant looked almost menacing, almost twice the height of the ponies. “My name.”

“Oh!” With that realisation, Applejack quickly recovered, grabbing one of the ape’s gigantic hands in both her hooves and shaking it vigorously. The ape looked almost amused. “Well, howdy, Augustus! I’m Applejack, and these’re my friends!”

“Twilight Sparkle,” the lavender unicorn said, smiling as she took his hand in her hooves. She felt small as he grasped her, but his touch was surprisingly gentle for such a massive beast, and when he released her, it was with a pleasant smile of his own.

“I’m Rainbow Dash, fastest flier in Equestria!” Striking the air with a powerful hoof pump, Rainbow Dash soared above them for a moment before diving back down, swooping into an aggressive position above the ape’s head before she grabbed his hand with her hoof. “I was totally going to step in and break you two up! I’m not afraid of a fight!”

“Ah, young one, such empty courage,” the ape mused. “There is much strength in you, more than I have ever seen in any creature before. Why hide it behind false bravado?”

Twilight understood the meaning, though some of the words had been lost in translation. The rest of the group simply looked puzzled, save Pinkie Pie, who, for just a moment, had held a serene expression so wise Twilight could have mistaken her for Princess Celestia. Then it disappeared, replaced by a goofy grin as she pulled Fluttershy forward.

“Hi there!” the pink earth pony sang, dragging the yellow pegasus behind her. Fluttershy was entranced by the ape, unable to take her eyes off him, the same way she had been with Spike, but this time, her fear of the oversized creature was radiating off her in waves. Anyone taking a passing glance could tell. “I’m Pinkie Pie! *Peace!* It’s awful nice to meet you, I didn’t think I’d make any new friends today because of all the hard work Twilight and the Princesses said we’d have to do! But then I thought, maybe a party might be a great way to make new friends, and then I realised that a party is always a great way to make new friends, so let’s throw a party! But after that I realised that there was too much to do, and I had to wake Twilight up, and Fluttershy needed to go and tend to the animals but she didn’t want to talk to the gardener because she thinks she offended him last time she was here, and Rainbow Dash wanted to practice her awesome flight tricks...”

She hadn’t taken a breath throughout her spiel, Twilight noted, but what was even more horrifying was that the ape hadn’t missed a beat either, nodding along and drinking the entire

thing in. And Pinkie spoke Apesque? That was a shocker.

"Yes, madam, I am also a veterinarian! I adore animals!" Twilight had lost track of the conversation a short ways back, but it seemed that even without her help, Fluttershy had quickly acclimatised to the experience, happily, if quietly, chatting away to Augustus. Pinkie was somehow acting as their translator. Twilight couldn't contain her incredulity at that.

"Excuse me, sir Caesar," she interrupted, *"I was wondering what exactly it is you sell?"*

"Twilight, that's kind of rude, you know!" Pinkie, surprisingly, looked a little miffed. "Fluttershy was talking to Augustus! Couldn't you have just waited a little while?" Next to the pink pony, Fluttershy shrank back, looking slightly abashed. Augustus laughed again, a low, resounding chuckle that permeated the air and made her innards vibrate ever so slightly.

"Sorry, Pinkie," Twilight said sheepishly, "I didn't realise. And since when do you speak Apesque?"

"Oh, it's a long story," Pinkie replied, casually brushing the question off. "It's how I got my Cutie Mark!"

"...what?" Fluttershy piped up, confusedly staring at Pinkie. "Pinkie, umm, I don't mean to say that you're lying or anything, but, well," the yellow pegasus trailed off for a second before resuming with new courage, "didn't you say you got your Cutie Mark when you fought that dragon in a swordfight on top of the mountains in Caninada?"

"...what?" Now Rainbow Dash looked perplexed herself. "Pinkie, you told me you got your Cutie Mark when you saw my Sonic Rainboom, climbing the Aurora in the Wastes! I thought that was so cool, why would you make something like that up?"

"Kinda answers itself, sugarcube," Applejack chimed in, sighing. "Anyway, don't you all know Pinkie Pie found her Cutie Mark diggin' for oil in the Western Deserts? A real plumb haul too, set 'er up for life! Everyone in Ponyville knows that story!"

"Pinkie," Twilight grumbled, pulling the pink earth pony aside, "you told me you grew up on a rock farm and got your Cutie Mark when the Sonic Rainboom taught you how to party. Don't tell me you've been lying."

"No, silly!" With a laugh and a hug, Pinkie danced around Twilight, returning to Augustus' side. "They're all true! I got my Cutie Mark when I learned to enjoy life and take things as they come!"

Twilight couldn't argue with that. Considering she'd known of parasprites even when Princess Celestia had been ignorant (whether truthfully or not), and her incredible Pinkie Sense,

the pink earth pony could have done anything in her crazy lifetime and none of them would ever have a clue as to the real, honest-to-goodness truth.

"Dilemma," Augustus said, raising a hand to scratch his scalp. "Knowledge keyed, and yet hidden. No answers to questions."

"Looks like the rest of the Apple family are about ready to set up shop," muttered Applejack, raising a hoof to wave at Big MacIntosh, Apple Fritter and Apple Strudel. "'bout time we get this show on the road! See you gals later, and you, Augustus, ya big lug." With a nod and a smile, Applejack turned away.

"Wait!" The sound of Augustus' voice, at a volume high enough to shake the earth around them, made Applejack jump, but she turned, one hoof holding onto her heart as she hyperventilated.

"Don't be a baby, AJ," Rainbow Dash grinned, slowly taking her hooves away from her ears. Fluttershy giggled slightly at that.

"Earth pony Applejack," Augustus began, "you, your friends, shown me much kindness. Please, stall is yours."

"Oh, no, you don't!" The group found themselves caught off guard by Applejack's sudden yelling. "I treated you like dirt! No pony, and I mean no pony, gets away with bein' like that to a fellow creature! I certainly don't deserve a reward for my behaviour!"

Augustus leaned down and whispered something into Pinkie Pie's ear. The pink earth pony shot up upon hearing it.

"You've done really nice things already for Auggie, Applejack!"

"Now that ain't true!" Applejack was beginning to turn red-faced, which made Twilight uncomfortable. She understood exactly how the poor earth pony was feeling. "I made a right fool outta both o' us and I said some horrible things that I'm gonna regret for the rest of my days. That don't mean I should get a nice pat on the head. I gotta pay for my mistakes, and I'm doin' this even if it means I have to turn down a favour! So sorry, Augustus, but I got a stall to run and I'm gonna run it in the darkest, dankest, loneliest corner of this courtyard if it so kills me!"

Applejack turned, intending to stroll away, but a hoof on her back made her stop. Pinkie had somehow crossed the distance between the orange pony and the ape faster than she could blink, and was now giving her a hard stare. Not a Stare, not enough to make Applejack fear for her very soul, but easily enough to make her draw back in fright.

“AJ, you silly pony,” the pink earth pony giggled, grinning like a maniac, “Auggie wants to share the stall so you can both get your money’s worth! It’s easily big enough for both of you!”

At that, Applejack froze. Behind her, Rainbow Dash sidled up next to Twilight, Fluttershy falling into line after her; the three of them watched in awe as Applejack slowly crumbled under the pressure.

After a few more seconds, the dam broke, and she rushed to the ape, falling prostrate at his feet in tears.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” The sobbing was a little distracting. “I thought I’d never get a chance to sell my apples at the castle ever again! This is everythin’ I’ve been dreamin’ about! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

The ape simply leaned over and patted Applejack on the head, before turning away and strolling towards the stall. Pinkie Pie bounced along after him, followed by Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy, the latter casting a cursory glance around her before waving back at Twilight.

“Well, that ended a lot better than it started,” Twilight sighed, helping Applejack to her hooves. Wrapping a foreleg around her friend’s neck, she gave up on standing, resting all her weight on the other, stronger pony.

“As my brother’d say, eeyup,” Applejack said, tone slightly dazed. “Now I best get to movin’ all my stocks on up here. I’m runnin’ mighty late. Sorry, Twi, I gotta scoot.”

“Alright, Applejack, I’ll see you when I see you,” the unicorn replied, but by then Applejack was already off in her own little world, prancing down the paved pathways of the courtyard towards the gates. Already the lanes and alleys around the hedgerows and foliage were being filled up by numerous different stalls, each manned by exotic creatures from across the world; Twilight could barely contain her excitement at having opportunity to meet them all. Maybe she’d even encounter a few more apes while she was at it!

She had a good few hours until the arrival of the first delegation, surely she had time. And Rarity wouldn’t be set up until later in the evening, when she’d put on her fashion show with Canterlot’s top models, surely she’d be fine on her own until then?

Reluctantly Twilight started making her way towards the gates herself. Not going to visit Rarity would invariably end up being something she’d never get to live down, and despite her desire to learn of all these new creatures and places, she knew her obligations to her friends came first.

At least, that was what she told herself, though she couldn’t keep her eyes off the fetishes on one zebra stall, or the unusual staves concealed behind a thin tarp in a stall manned

by a lone vulture-

Wait. A vulture?

Twilight backed up for a moment, eying the vulture warily. How could a non-sapient creature manage a stall? That couldn't be right.

As she headed towards it, unable to fight the siren call of knowledge, a stocky white pegasus in a suit of glittering golden armor ploughed into her side like a ton of bricks falling from a tall tower.

What a terrible simile, Twilight thought, as consciousness escaped her.
