

"Ready?" Luna asked. She was firmly planted in the center of the library with a series of objects floating next to her: a few books, a candle, and a glass of tea. On the floor in front of her were several more books taken from the library's shelves and just beyond those, both of her fillies.

Every time they were with Luna, their mother took the time to teach them something about magic. While this was something Dusk readily looked forward to, Dawn dreaded it. She felt as though the whole ordeal was another chance for her sister to outdo her. Today was no exception.

"Ready," Dusk chimed.

Dawn simply swallowed and stayed silent.

"Go!" Luna called.

The two twins focused in concentration. Almost immediately their horns were aglow with magic. Several books lifted from the floor, floating around Dusk albeit a little wobbly. One of the remaining books floated uncertainly upwards, shaking and shuddering the whole way.

Dusk looked triumphantly at Luna, beaming at her own accomplishment. Meanwhile, Dawn was struggling to keep her single wobbly book up in the air in front of her. The steady glow of magic around her horn showed signs of strain as another book lifted a few inches off of the floor. The light blue glow rippled before simply winking out with an audible pop. Both of the books fell back to the floor.

"Good job, Dawn! That was much longer than last time," Luna said, nuzzling her daughter. Dawn faked a smile, holding back her sense of failure. Her breaths still came ragged as sweat seeped through her coat.

"Did you see me?" Dusk asked, hopping up and down. The books she had held now firmly on the floor.

Rainbow smiled, watching them from the window. The smell of grilled alfalfa filled the air, wafted from the grill set up behind the library.

"They're learning so quickly," She muttered to herself, turning back to the food.

"Aren't they?" An image of Twilight Sparkle walked over to stand in front of the grill. *"But don't sell yourself short, Dash. You could have had a chef's hat for your cutie mark. This looks delicious."*

"Thanks Twi', but, it's just a hobby."

Twilight looked into the window, her hooves placed on the windowsill. She stared longingly at the magic lesson. Rainbow knew Twilight wanted to be in Luna's place more than anything in the world. But... it was impossible.

She looked up. Big Mac had set up a stake for horseshoes and he and his sister were going arguing over who was better. A rouge toss flew straight over Rarity's head, which prompted a swift retort about Applejack's poor aim and 'brutish' methods.

Rarity didn't follow her words with any kind of action, simply turning in the lawn chair she had brought for herself. Beside her, Fluttershy was trying to continue the conversation, occasionally glancing at the game to ensure there weren't any loose horseshoes coming back in her direction.

Rainbow laughed as Early Blaze tried to toss one of the horseshoes, coming up quite short. She looked back down at the grill and flipped over a few of the alfalfa burgers.

"Do you think I would have been a good mom?" Twilight turned away from the window, sitting down next to the grill.

Dash let the spatula rest loosely in her grip. Her chest tightened and she looked straight down at the

ground. She often wondered what it would have been like if things had gone differently. It brought up several painful memories, which she fought into the back of her mind. She turned to look at Twilight. “I certainly think so.”

Tears welled in Twilight’s eyes, a soft smile the only response to Dash’s answer. She nodded her head, wiping away her tears.

“It’s alright. Go get some tea. It’ll help,” Dash offered. Twilight simply nodded and walked around the library, disappearing from sight. She stopped for a moment, reconsidering what she had said – more importantly **who** she had said it to.

“Rainbow Dash, those burgers smell simply fantastic.” Rainbow glanced up at Rarity, who was hovering a plate in front of her. She had neatly separated several condiments onto her plate and had sliced the bun with a knife to make small bite-sized pieces. Noticing the odd glance Rainbow was giving her, she explained, “They’re much better once you cut them into smaller pieces. It releases the flavor of the seasonings.”

Rainbow placed one of the ready burgers onto the plate, while moving the others onto a serving tray.

“Food’s ready!” She called out, trotting over to the others with the tray of food.

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Starfall grunted in pain as Celestia secured the bindings on his hooves. “Easy,” he whispered under his breath. The bounds were yanked tighter, bringing another whine from the stallion.

Celestia looked down at her prisoner. Each of his hooves was firmly secured in the center of the archive room. Around them were magically reinforced straps holding them in place. On his horn was the same magic-inhibiting lock he had placed on Twilight. Over his back were several of the same chains recovered from that day, painstakingly placed together for this very moment.

Celestia felt satisfied with her work thus far. She had hoof-picked everything in order to have this happen on **her** terms.

It was well-crafted revenge.

Celestia went about her work sifting through the materials she had laid out the night before. Several containers hovered out of the pile to settle down beside her. She went around in a circle leaving a sickly green trail of powder behind her.

Starfall began to shift in his restraints. He didn’t like what she was doing.

“So tell me,” Starfall began. “How did you manage to keep Nightmare from taking over your mind?” He needed to distract her from whatever she was doing. A mistake would give him time to figure it out.

Celestia looked up at him, answering with a stern glare... or so he thought. “Training? Sheer force of will? It doesn’t matter, Starfall.”

Starfall tried to form another question but it faltered on his tongue. Not but a few hours ago, she had completely lost it. Yet here she was being **civil** – relatively so. He tried again, “But for a thousand years? There must have been some moments when you couldn’t control the taint?”

“It was a plague, Starfall. Recurrences of that plague mean nothing to me.”

Blocked. He tried to think of something else to ask, tossing one idea after another at his brain. “Might I remind you that you still have symptoms?”

Celestia simply stared at him, facial features flat. She was not amused. He averted his eyes, letting her win once more. Once she started moving again, his body tensed up and he swallowed hard. It was time to

gamble.

“Luna probably thinks you’re losing it,” he began. “Is it really a good idea to prove her right?”

Celestia simply blinked once and laughed. “Oh please,” she said, levitating something over the table. “She’s merely concerned that I’m... overworking myself. Let me tell you a little something about Nightmare.”
Please do, he thought.

“Nightmare made sure **everypony** was infected with that plague. But she didn’t really make it. My foolish half-sister used Discord’s magic to make it ‘original’, but it ended with Discord controlling her, even while trapped in that stone prison of his. He had complete control of her mind before she even considered the possibility. You see, unlike me, she had no experience with that manic. I’ve known him far longer than Nightmare ever had and **I** know how to fight his madness.”

Starfall raised an eyebrow, “Discord? ...**That** Discord?”

Celestia simply smiled and turned back to her work. He wasn’t getting anything else out of her.

The tome she was reading hovered over to the circle, now peppered with odd symbols Starfall didn’t recognize. Celestia turned a page with her magic and turned slowly to face Starfall.

His heart started to pound in his chest. Sweat began to bead in his dirty mane as she went around the circle, sprinkling salt on his coat. The symbols flared to life with each dose glowing a blood red. Suddenly, he could now guess what was going on, with horrifying clarity.

Celestia’s smile widened as Starfall began to visibly panic. He tried to escape his bindings but did nothing except tighten them further, eliciting more pained whines. Before long, he was swinging his head back and forth trying desperately to scrape the symbols away.

She had planned for that to happen. Starfall came up decidedly short, shaking as hard as he could to wriggle out of his predicament. He looked right up at her as she completed the circle, wide-eyed and baffled.

“HAVE YOU GONE MAD?” he screamed. He noticed that one of her eyes had resumed that sickening red glow. “HAS SHE DRIVEN YOU TO INSANITY?”

“No. This is simply the best solution to two of my most pressing problems,” she replied calmly. The symbols began to rise into the air, taking shape before spinning slowly around his body. A sickly green hue replaced the previous color of the symbols.

“Besides,” Celestia continued, flipping to the right page in her book, “if I can’t embrace chaos, I can’t bring back the proper order of things. More specifically, I need the **proper** student roaming Equestria. Not you.”

She began to read from the text, focusing on the intricacies in each word and phrase. It had to be recited properly, or she’d have to start over.

Starfall watched as an inky black film began to seep through the stone floor, painting over the walls and furniture in the room. It blotted Celestia from his view, leaving only her dismembered voice chanting in the darkness, while black hooves reached down from the ceiling above him.

He screamed, attempting to free himself from the assault on his mind. If he failed... he knew full well what the consequences would be. The screams became shriller as the hooves stretched closer to him. As a last resort, he lowered himself as close to the ground as possible to avoid their grasp. That’s when the green glow he had taken for granted started to go out.

“Nononononono...” he muttered to himself, refocusing his efforts on keeping the eerie symbols from going out. But it was no use.

The viscous black hooves grazed his mane. He trembled at the ice-cold touch, frantically staring at the symbols around him. All at once they went out.

Outside the stone doors the eerie silence choked out his screams.

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The sleepover devolved into a ruckus of party games, relatively quickly. It was one of the few ways to keep the fillies entertained. At the moment, Applejack and Pinkie Pie were facing off in a heated game of charades.

“Uh... Work horse! Mac’s Plow! Aw, horse feathers.” Applejack was completely lost by Dawn’s circular and erratic motions. Dawn was getting frustrated as well, glancing over at her sister to see how she was doing.

Dusk was having an easier time, spinning a pencil around her head with magic. She tried to help it along with wide round gestures, visibly losing her patience with her partner.

“A balloon! Cotton Candy! A spinning top!” Pinkie Pie bounced along throwing out whatever came to mind first, “Oh, I know! A ball!”

Rainbow sat with Luna, Fluttershy, and Rarity in the upper part of the library, watching the game over the banister.

Rarity levitated her teacup over to her, “Anyways. Business has been fairly good lately with the new fall fashions. I’ve been working on my winter line since then. It’s going to be fabulous.”

“That sounds wonderful, Rarity,” Fluttershy said.

“It will be. I even took the liberty of designing one for you, Rainbow.”

Dash looked at her, confused. “What could you possibly have designed after me? The gala dress was the only thing you ever designed with me in mind.” Rainbow sighed, “Besides, you have more important clientele than a member of the weather patrol.”

Rarity ignored Dash’s attitude, “I designed it with you in mind because you’re my **friend**. You know I don’t need another reason. Everyone else had one designed after them too.”

Dash was a little lost now. The only reason she had ever worn a dress was for the Grand Galloping Gala and the fashion show for Hoity Toity.

“Rarity... I haven’t mentioned it to her yet,” Luna spoke quietly.

“No? Well now’s a perfect time to give it to her.”

Luna nodded, “I suppose so.”

“Give me what?” Dash asked.

A set of silver tickets popped into existence, settling down in front of her. “The new head of the School for Gifted Unicorns was poking around the archives and found a mention of the Lunar Ball that I held on the longest night of the year. He convinced me to start doing it again. I’m inviting all of you to the ball, I just hadn’t gotten a chance to give you your tickets yet.”

“This isn’t going to be like the gala, is it?” Dash said, mildly concerned.

“No. I’ve already asked Pinkie Pie if she wanted to re-invent my celebration event. I have the utmost confidence that this won’t be like the last time.” Luna smiled.

“Cool.”

Rarity continued with her discussion on the Lunar Ball, while Rainbow tuned her out. She looked to her right where Twilight was seated, taking in the conversation but adding nothing to it. By this point, Rainbow had all but forgotten that Twilight was a figment of her imagination. She rubbed her eye with a hoof. One day she’d have to start remembering that.

“Speaking of the ball, isn’t it time?” Rarity questioned.

Luna looked out the window at the setting sun, still hovering over the horizon, “It certainly is.” She rose from where she sat to lean over the railing. She called down to the others; “It’s time for sunset!”

The next few minutes of chaos jarred Rainbow from her spot, trying to get everyone over to the balcony. Somehow, in the confusion, Pinkie Pie and Applejack ended up on the treetop, bringing along all three of the fillies and “much protest from Fluttershy”. Big Mac and Rarity stayed on the balcony, neither of them wanting to climb up the Library’s branches. Luna took off into the sky to lower the sun as part of her planned display.

Rainbow went back inside to grab a few of the snacks. She floated down to the library floor, trotting into the kitchen. On the table she found the various bowls of hay chips and candied flowers still relatively full. She balanced them both on her back clearing the empty plates and a small blue teacup.

Rainbow looked at the teacup on the table, mildly bewildered. She couldn’t recall anyone using that one during the party. She didn’t have much time to question it, as the sunlight began to fade from the kitchen window. Leaving the teacup on the table, she flew back through the library and out onto the balcony.

The sky was bathed in colors of all kinds, starting with a dramatic orange-red color and melting into an inky blue. Slowly, the dark blue crept over the sky, heralding the moon as it rose from its bed in the eastern horizon.

Dawn and Dusk watched as the sky began to light up with bright stars. The sense of pride they felt in their mother’s work left them speechless. When Rainbow offered them food, her words didn’t even register with them. Applejack shrugged, and took the hay chips from Rainbow, popping a few in her mouth. Rainbow took a seat next to the twins, keeping her eyes focused on the night sky.

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Rainbow closed the bedroom door softly behind her. She was always surprised how long the girls managed to evade her efforts to go to bed at a reasonable time. With Early Blaze helping them it was darn near impossible. She glided down to the bottom floor of the library, where everyone else was seated, talking to one another in a hushed tones.

Dash settled down next to Applejack, “Coast is clear. They’re asleep.”

Almost everyone else gave a sigh of relief.

“Excellent. Thank you for being so kind as to putting them to sleep,” Rarity said.

“No problem. Any more of those chips left for me?” Rainbow eyed the bowl as Big Mac passed it over, “Thanks. I’m starving.”

A small lapse of silence passed between them, filled with the soft sounds of chewing and the occasion crackle from the fireplace. Every year they had avoided the topic until later in the evening. It looked like it would be the same thing this year.

“Five years,” Applejack started. “Can you believe it’s been that long?”

“Not really,” Rarity replied. There was a pause. “Do you ever wonder what really happened on the front?”

“Nope,” Big Mac said, “glad I was tending apples. Family that came back still ain’t the same.”

Applejack shifted in place uncomfortably. Rainbow had stopped eating and put the bowl to the side. She looked across the room at the kitchen. Twilight stood in the doorway, frowning in anticipation.

“It hasn’t really ended.” Everyone looked at Luna in bewilderment.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself Luna,” Rarity tried to comfort the princess of the night, “most of those foals don’t really know anything about what happened.”

“No, really, you don’t understand,” Luna continued nervously. “There’s a reason I send the girls to school here instead of in Canterlot. Remember the riots that happened a few days before they came here?”

Everypony else nodded.

“It started with a fight between Dusk and a student whose parents disagreed with my co-rule. The headmaster at the School for Gifted Unicorns then was known for being very hands-off. When he didn’t interfere, the student’s parents stormed in with a few of the local radicals.

“Luckily one of the teachers, Bright Light, shielded the classrooms and students from the attack until Celestia and I arrived. He spent weeks in the hospital recovering.

“After that, I simply couldn’t let them go back. Bright Light was disappointed, but he has helped with remedial classes over the summers. Even so, there are still... incidents.”

Applejack looked dumbfounded. Fluttershy had her head buried in Big Mac’s shoulder, who comforted her with a light nuzzle. Rarity’s eye twitched uncontrollably.

“Incidents?” Rarity asked. Her voice started to grow in volume, “Somepony would **da**re continue?”

“Calm down Rarity. The little ‘uns are sleeping,” Applejack soothed.

“Please. Nothing major has happened in years,” Luna added.

Rainbow had lost her nerve to continue listening. She knew that was mostly true, except for the ‘major incidents’ part. It was part of the reason Rainbow never picked up the twins. She could recall bringing them back from winter break in Canterlot, and the hours they spent under the castle.

Some crazy pony – a follower of Starfall, when he was alive – was able to sneak in a group of unicorns that tore the palace apart. They went on a rampage looking for the twins, while one of the guards tried to hide them in the lower levels. They caught up to them in the tunnels, just as Celestia came to help. They were apprehended but it was all very hush-hush. Only a few other ponies knew about the incident because of how high profile it was.

Rainbow felt helpless about the whole thing. Luna visited her to apologize personally. The twins had nightmares for a week. Even so, Dash couldn’t imagine how Twilight felt without the details, despite the horrified look on her face from hearing that something happened at all. The only thing Rainbow could pick up was her talking to herself over and over.

“It’s all my fault... I couldn’t do anything...”

Rainbow tuned back in as the room fell silent, with everypony looking down at the ground.

“If only I was there. I could protect them.” Twilight said, hanging her head low while she walked into the kitchen.

“Did you say something, Fluttershy?” Rarity said.

Rainbow looked at her quizzically. “I didn’t hear her say anything.”

Something fell in the kitchen, breaking the sudden silence in the room. Rainbow flew up to the bedroom door and peeked inside. The three fillies were still fast asleep. She settled down on the ground in front of the kitchen door. On the floor, several apples lay next to a nearly full barrel. Otherwise the room was empty.

This time, she was hallucinating something fierce.

“What fell?” Pinkie Pie asked, glad for a chance to shift the mood.

“Just a few apples,” Dash replied. “They must have been loose the whole time.”

“Aunt Rainbow? Mom?”

Everypony looked at the top step. Dawn's head peeked out groggily, "I can't sleep. It sounds like there's a thunderstorm coming."

Luna floated up to console her, "Its ok. Aunt Rainbow cleared the skies for the whole weekend. A few apples fell in the kitchen."

Rainbow floated up to the balcony, opened the doors and stepped outside. A low rumble echoed softly in the room. "What the hay?"

Everyone else rose to their hooves and went outside to see what all the commotion was about. A storm was brewing above Canterlot, pouring out from behind the mountain like smoke. Lightning danced across the clouds like fireworks. As the moon passed into the center of the sky, a blood-red hue trickled over its surface. Luna went pale, and fell to her knees on the staircase.

"Mom?" Dawn asked, visibly upset.

"Its ok, stay with me. Mommy's alright," Luna said, scooping her up with her hooves.

Rainbow flew back into the house, darting around looking frantically for her goggles. She tossed books onto the floor, pushing aside party favors and sleeping bags.

"What in tarnation is going on?" Applejack said as she ran inside.

"I dunno AJ. Put another log on the fire in case we need it later." Dash sped into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding falling on the spilled apples.

"Rainbow... I feel funny..."

She looked to her right. Twilight was walking dizzily around the room, trying in vain to find something to hold on to. Something was wrapping itself around Twilight. *No*, she thought, *it's a hallucination*. Twilight's colors seemed to be flickering brighter and dimmer with each step, until she fell to her stomach. Rainbow was fighting herself in confusion. Something wasn't adding up, even while her rational mind was telling her it wasn't real.

A sudden yank sent Twilight hurtling across the room screaming, "HEELP! RAINBOW, HELP ME!"

Her body passed through the wall.

Rainbow lost any train of thought she had. Goggle-less, she flew around the kitchen door and came to a dead stop in the living room.

"Applejack! Quick, you have to come with me, NOW!"

Applejack began to protest.

"NOW!" Rainbow stomped her hoof.

Applejack pulled her hat tight around her head and nodded. Rainbow launched herself through the door towards the middle of town, with Applejack hot on her hooves.