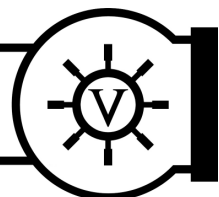


Tonight I Shall Be Laughter

Cloud Wander

PONY FICTION VAULT



Princess Luna gazed out over Canterlot from the eastern balcony of her tower. Because of the sheer verticality of the castle, it was difficult to see much of the city, even from the heights. She knew, in her head, that early evening crowds bustled through the lanes and plazas, but she could see none of this from her vantage point. Odd that one could be in the midst of so great a herd, yet still seem to be alone.

Ugh, stop that, she thought impatiently. The Elements of Harmony had shattered her old armor, but the scars of Nightmare were still inside her. It was possible she would have to struggle with them for the remainder of her life. *But she would not let the armor enslave her again!*

She turned her gaze from the city to the heavens. *That is a good sky*, she thought with some pride. Her Moon, a delicate crescent, rode high in the purple night.

All of the Elements are inside of me, although badly out of balance. I will choose who I will be.

A Generous Princess, the leader who promotes the prosperity of her people.

An Honest Princess, the judge that rules fairly and openly.

A Kindly Princess, the healer that cares for the sick and the forgotten.

Princess Luna looked back up at her Moon. Such a fine crescent, like the print of slender hoof.

Or, perhaps, like a smile.

The corners of Luna's mouth crooked upwards. The expression was so unfamiliar to her face, that it almost felt painful. Yet she continued until she broke into a full grin.

Of all the Elements, the one Nightmare lacked most was *humor*.

Princess Luna laughed. *That's it, then.*

Tonight, I shall be Laughter.

• • •

Captain Bucephalus, Commander of the Lunar Guard, approached the writing stand that bore *The Ancient Chronicle of Night*. With grave care, he opened the massive tome, delicately turning the pages wherein was recorded the rich tale of the Lunar Guardians.

This was, of course, only the *current* volume of the *Chronicle*. Hundreds of similar books rested, in safety and in honor, against a wall in the basement of the tower, where they formed not only a monument to the grand history of the Guard, but also provided significant structural support for the building.

Bucephalus found it humbling to contemplate the many hooves of his predecessors that had contributed to this work, carefully recording dates and times and personal observations.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon observed. Condition unchanged. Moon set.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon observed. Condition unchanged. Moon set.

Moon rose. Some fog. Mare in the Moon observed. Condition unchanged. Moon set.

Turning to the most recent entries in the *Chronicle*, Bucephalus felt a bit self-conscious about his own modest contributions.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon observed. Condition unchanged. Moon set.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon observed. Condition unchanged. Moon set.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon-- OMG! WTF!!!

That entry was punctuated by an ungainly blob of ink where Bucephalus had lost control of the writing instrument. Later, after the situation had calmed down, he had returned to the *Chronicle* and attempted to re-work the ink blot into a portrait of the former Mare in the Moon, noting this in a caption to the illustration. Unfortunately, the portrait did little credit to the subject or the artist.

The most recent entries demonstrated that a neat orderliness had returned to the *Chronicle*.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon absent. Moon set.

Moon rose. Mare in the Moon absent. Moon set.

Bucephalus sighed. It just wasn't the same, somehow. Still, he completed this evening's "Moon rose" entry. He decided against noting the Mare in the Moon's status ("*absent*") at this point. The night was young, things could change, one never knew.

Archivist duty completed, Captain Bucephalus turned to his next task. General inspection.

Right then. Bucephalus marched to the main hall of the guardhouse. "General inspection!" he announced. "Fall in!"

Captain Bucephalus snapped to attention. He was, of course, the only one in the main hall of the guardhouse, as he was at present the only member of the Lunar Guard.

Discipline is just as important in a small force as a large one, he reminded himself. Bucephalus presented himself to a wall-mounted mirror and reviewed his appearance with a critical eye.

Not bad, he finally decided. A stormcloud-gray pegasus pony, still in prime condition, sound in wind and limb, still fit for the shining silver armor of a Lunar Guard. Self-discipline, that was the key. A sense of mission, of purpose, and an unstinting devotion to duty. *Come what may, there will be no shirking on my watch.*

He puffed himself up a bit. *Captain Bucephalus: the best knight ever!*

"General inspection completed," he announced to the empty hall. "Dis--missed!"

Bucephalus consulted the duty roster and found that he was scheduled to police the approaches to the Princess's chambers. Ordinarily, Bucephalus would not have approved of a senior officer performing cleaning duties, but he prided himself that he would never order one of his soldiers to perform a task that he himself would not do. Which was a good thing, considering the circumstances.

The preceding ten centuries had been a bit of a lean time for the Lunar Guard. With their Principal in exile, as it were, there had been little for the Guard to do but monitor the Princess from afar and maintain a state of readiness for Her return.

A full brigade, such as the Celestial Guard, was reasonably deemed unnecessary for such a task. Indeed, it seemed more sensible to assign such duties to a smaller company of dedicated specialists. And, as over the centuries the protocols for the Lunar Guard fully matured, the size of the force tasked for this purpose became smaller and smaller. In the end, an army of one was judged sufficient.

When a young Private Bucephalus had been offered (or rather, directed) to the Lunar Guard, the ambitious pony had leapt at the opportunity. Here, in a smaller command, a hard-working soldier had the chance to prove his quality and move up through the ranks. After several years of dedicated effort, Bucephalus was promoted to the rank of Captain and named Commander of the Lunar Guard.

True, true, it had at times been lonely, maintaining the proud tradition of the Lunars all by himself. He sometimes watched the Celestials on parade and missed the sense of camaraderie with his fellow serviceponies. But Captain Bucephalus liked to believe that his vigil gave him a special kinship-in-spirit with the Princess Herself, he faithfully standing the watch alone while She remained entombed in solitude.

Of course, circumstances had changed dramatically in recent days. The Celestial Guard was still wrestling with the problem of reorganizing the corps in response to Princess Luna's return. There was, of course, no question but that Captain Bucephalus should remain in command of the Lunars; he had both the seniority and the necessary experience. By rights, the Celestials should have already transferred a company of their finest guards to Captain Bucephalus's unit, but for some reason the general staff seemed reluctant to put soldiers under his command.

Mired in petty politics, no doubt, sniffed the Commander of the Lunar Guard, as he collected his mop and bucket.

As he approached the Grand Passage to the Inner Chambers, he suddenly became aware of a strange noise ahead.

badadup badadup badadup... wheeeeeeeeeee... thump!

badadup badadup badadup... wheeeeeeeeeee... thump!

badadup badadup badadup... wheeeeeeeeeee... crash! Heeheehee!

Instantly alert for danger, the Commander of the Lunar Guard discarded his cleaning equipment and sprang forward. *Invaders! Fear! Fire! Foes!* his mind shouted. *Not on my watch, you villains! Bucephalus to the fore!*

Charging furiously into the Grand Passage, he unexpectedly found himself face-to-face, so to speak, with Princess Luna's rump.

"Oh, sorry!" cried the Princess gleefully.

badadup badadup badadup... wheeeeeeeeeee... thump!

Princess Luna galloped down the length of the Grand Passage, somewhat awkwardly struggling to obtain traction with Her sock-clad hooves on the polished marble floors. After collecting sufficient speed, She then braced Her legs and slid, spinning, down the hallway until She smacked into the wall at the far end.

"Heeheehee!"

For the first time in many years, Captain Bucephalus found himself perplexed. The protocols of the Lunar Guard described, in exacting detail, his duties and responsibilities in every diplomatic, strategic and tactical situation. However, even after a thousand years of refinement, the protocols had failed to address the circumstance of encountering the Princess sliding across the floor in Her socks.

"May I be of some assistance, Your Highness?" he offered. That seemed like a safe opening move.

"Ha ha ha! You can catch me!" shouted Princess Luna, galumphing towards him. She braced and slid.

Obediently, Captain Bucephalus moved to intercept, interposing himself between the wall and the Princess.

The collision was not at all unpleasant, Bucephalus found. *Wow. Soft.*

Shape up there, soldier! he ordered himself sharply. *You're a fighter in Her Majesty's Lunar Guards, not some salt-soaked libertine! Duty! Duty! Close your eyes and think of Equestria!*

"Hay! This is so much fun!" said the Princess, a bit out of breath. "You know, usually, I hate socks. But these floors are so great!"

Captain Bucephalus felt a swell of pride. He took particular care of the tower's floors. The trick was to use several thin coats of polish, buffing after each coat, rather than slathering the floor with one thick coat. It was deeply gratifying to know that the Lady Herself approved of his work.

"Your Highness's appreciation is most welcome," said Bucephalus, bowing.

There was, however, a small part of his mind that clucked unhappily at the way She demonstrated Her approval. The floor runner had been casually shoved to one side. The framed paintings that lined the hall were now all askew. And one displayed suit of barding had been knocked over and scattered.

"You know, Captain... Bucephalus, is it?" said Princess Luna. "I've been here in the tower for more than a week now, and we've hardly talked. What exactly is it that you do here?"

Captain Bucephalus drew himself up. "Well, your Highness, as Commander of Your Majesty's Lunar Guard, it is my honor and privilege to maintain the readiness of the unit for Your Highness's... um, return. And to maintain a faithful record of Your Highness's... well, of the Moon."

Now that he was actually describing his duties out loud, it occurred to Bucephalus that the mission statement of the Lunar Guard, as detailed in the command manual, might require some revision and extension, in light of changed circumstances.

Improvise, adapt and overcome! he told himself.

"And," Captain Bucephalus continued, "and, of course, to protect and serve Your Highness in every way."

"Protect me?" asked Princess Luna, quizzically. "From whom?"

Bucephalus waved a hoof vaguely. "From, well, visitors. Curiosity-seekers. Rabble. That sort of thing."

The protocols had been quite explicit on this point. To secure and maintain the readiness of the unit, the Lunar Tower was strictly off limits to unauthorized personnel. Up until the last week, this duty had chiefly required Captain Bucephalus to shoo tourists away and provide direction to ponies lost in the winding paths of Canterlot. But in the last few days, he had been at times hard-pressed to turn aside the flood of well-wishers and admirers that had washed up on the Princess's doorstep.

"Wait," said Princess Luna, slowly and carefully. "Are you telling me that it is your *job* to make sure that I am *alone*?"

"I shall ensure that no pony is allowed to disturb the serenity of Your Highness's repose," declared Captain Bucephalus proudly.

Princess Luna's sea-green eyes grew wide. *Doubtless, She admires my steadfast devotion to Her well-being*, thought Bucephalus.

After a moment, Princess Luna's face broke into a wide and faintly disturbing grin.

"You know, Captain Bucephalus, you should really try sliding on these floors. It's quite fun." Princess Luna started pulling off Her socks.

"I'm sure it is quite enjoyable, Your Highness, but..." began Captain Bucephalus.

"I've noticed a certain deficiency in the state of the Lunar Tower, Captain," stated Princess Luna, Her manner suddenly business-like.

"A deficiency, Your Highness? I am alarmed to hear this."

"There is a distinct lack of *fun* here. Has this not come to your attention before?"

Fun was not something that Captain Bucephalus associated with his duties, this was true. Oh, certainly, when he hung the tower rugs on the clothesline and beat the dust from them, he sometimes liked to fancy himself in combat. *Here! Have at you, fellow! Whack! Take that! Whack! Whack!*

But, otherwise, no, *fun* was not included in the index of the Lunar Guard command manual.

"I intend to remedy this situation," declared Princess Luna, grandly. "Here. Put these on." She slid Her socks across the floor to Bucephalus.

"But, Your Highness..."

She cocked one eyebrow. "Who's the Princess here?"

"Very good, Your Highness." Awkwardly, Bucephalus struggled to remove his armored shoes and struggled further to maintain his dignity as he pulled on Her Majesty's delicately-embroidered garments. Bucephalus could not help observing that, although She appeared little older than a filly, Her Highness was remarkably long-legged. In time, She would unquestionably have Her Sister's height.

When Bucephalus had completed putting on Princess Luna's socks, the Princess continued. "Now, then. I plan to approach this *fun* shortage in a scientific and methodical manner."

"Very good, Your Highness."

"I intend to consult a leading expert in the field of *fun* and obtain her guidance in this area."

"A marvelous plan, Your Highness."

"This will, of course, necessitate my immediate departure from the Lunar Tower, unaccompanied by my Lunar Guard."

"Of course, Your Highness. Wait... what?"

"Catch me if you can, Captain. Heehee!"

And, with that, Princess Luna spun about and galloped away down the Grand Passage.

Captain Bucephalus stared after Her. The *Princess* leaving the *Tower* without Her *Guard*? What should he *do*? Try as he might, Bucephalus could think of nothing in the Lunar Guard protocols that addressed this situation.

Frankly, Captain Bucephalus was beginning to suspect that the command manual was not entirely adequate in matters dealing with an actual living, present Princess.

Would his fellow Celestials leave *their* Princess without an honor guard? No, of course not! Bucephalus's duty was clear: where Princess Luna went, he must follow!

Captain Bucephalus sprang into action, galloping headlong down the Grand Passage. But, strangely, like a memory of a bad dream, though he ran desperately with all his strength, he seemed to move only with the most agonizing slowness.

He glanced down at his galloping hooves. *Ah, socks*, he thought. *Polished floor*.

He looked up at the Princess's rapidly dwindling hindquarters. *You would almost think that She planned this*.

Furiously, Bucephalus tore the socks from his legs with his teeth and plunged down the hallway.

He negotiated the turn at the end and reached the Princess's balcony just in time to witness Her terrifying leap over the railing.

"PRINCESS LUNA! NO!" he cried in horror.

Peals of laughter rang through the sky as Princess Luna suddenly swooped into view.

Oh. Right. Wings. That changes matters somewhat, realized Bucephalus.

Well, what do I do now? Bucephalus thought, tapping his helmet. *How do I follow?*

He abruptly paused, turned his head and examined his own back. *Wings! Right! I'm a pegasus pony!* Flying inside the Lunar Tower was a breach of protocol, of course, so Bucephalus often went weeks without lifting his hooves from the ground. He sometimes forgot that he had ever flown at all.

Never let it be said that the Commander of the Lunar Guard was caught unprepared! he thought triumphantly. *Onward! Bucephalus to the fore!*

Captain Bucephalus charged the balcony railing and leapt skyward. Unfortunately, as he did so, his left rear hoof caught the railing and he was pitched downwards, bouncing off a bit of projecting crenellation into the steeply-angled roof of a lower tower, sliding from there to become entangled in a hanging pennant.

Captain Bucephalus tugged futilely at the web of ropes and canvas that held him. *Well, at least it can't get any worse,* he thought.

Then the pole supporting the pennant cracked.

Uh oh.

Still entangled, Captain Bucephalus plummeted three stories into a soft, warm, strongly redolent compost heap.

A storm of laughter rained down on him from the sky.

Captain Bucephalus spat rotten vegetables and earthworms from his mouth. He surged out of the compost and staggered upright. An emotion that he would never consciously identify as anger arose within him.

("Catch me if you can, Captain. Heehee!")

That sounds very much like a direct order, Princess, Bucephalus thought, gritting his teeth.

Very well then, Your Highness. It. Is. On!

• • •

The sky above Canterlot:

It's more difficult than you might think to follow a midnight blue alicorn through a midnight blue sky.

By the time Captain Bucephalus had finally become airborne, Princess Luna had flown far beyond the lights of Canterlot. However, Bucephalus's keen ears soon discerned a faint "haw haw haw" drifting down the wind from the direction of Cloudsdale. *Target acquired!* he thought.

Bucephalus threw himself furiously in the direction of the sound. He was out of practice as a flyer and laden with armor besides, but his strength and determination lent him speed.

In a short while, Bucephalus thought he had caught a break when a winged silhouette ghosted into view against the soft mists of the Cloudsdale gyre. *Let's see who haw-haws now, Your Highness.* He altered course to intercept and drove in.

It was only upon overtaking the target that Bucephalus discovered that he had been chasing a wild goose.

"Haw?" honked the goose, alarmed.

"My apologies, ma'am," said Bucephalus, awkwardly. "I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers."

"Haw!" replied the goose in indignation, flying off in a huff.

Flapping to a hover, Captain Bucephalus paused to reflect. *A clever stratagem, Your Highness. Well played.*

Right then. What now? Bucephalus tapped his helmet thoughtfully.

Princess Luna had said She was going to consult with an expert in *fun*. Where does one find a *fun* expert?

• • •

A little later that evening, in a small room in Ponyville:

"Hsst!"

Snuggled in her bed in her room on the third floor above Sugarcube Corner, Pinkie Pie was not entirely asleep nor entirely awake. One might argue, in Pinkie's case, if the two states were distinguishable.

"Hsst!"

One of Pinkie's ears flapped up.

"Hsst!"

And the other.

"Hsst... hsst!"

Pinkie's blue eyes opened, automatically scanning the objects in her room: octopus plush toy, model helicopter, Gummy's basket, Gummy, balloons (un-inflated), balloons (inflated), picture of her Uncle Josh, maid costume, umbrella hat, Princess Luna hovering at the window, hay bale, beach ball...

Gasps! What was that?! Pinkie sat up, startled. Where did that beach ball come from?

"Hsst!"

And the beach ball has a leak!

"Hsst! Pinkamena Diane Pie!"

The Three Names! No, not THE THREE NAMES! The Three Names were terrible things, always followed by an awful order:

Pinkamena Diane Pie: eat your turnips!

Pinkamena Diane Pie: clean your room!

Pinkamena Diane Pie: put down the detonator!

The Three Names were definitely not good news!

"Hsst! Pinkie Pie! May I please come in?" asked Luna.

Pinkie sprang from her bed and opened the window. "Hay, Princess Luna!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Do you have a leak?"

"What? No. Please, may I come in?"

"Sure!"

"Shhhh!" hushed Luna, holding a hoof to her lips as she stepped through the window. "I don't want to attract attention."

"WHY DON'T YOU WANT TO ATTRACT ATTENTION?"

"Shhhh!" hushed Luna, again, this time holding a hoof over Pinkie's mouth.

"hwcnihlpu, prncsslina?" burred Pinkie.

"Pinkamena Diane Pie," Luna intoned, dropping into her Voice of Command. *No! Stop that!* she interrupted herself. She took a deep breath, smiled, then began again.

"Pinkie Pie, I would like to ask you to help me."

"thtswhtijtsid."

"Quietly."

"O. k."

Luna released Pinkie Pie and stepped back.

"Pinkie Pie, I would like to throw a party," said Luna.

"A party! I love parties! You want me to throw you a party?" Pinkie exclaimed, quietly, as she ricocheted gently around her room.

"No," said Luna. "I would like *you* to help *me* throw a party."

Luna flashed her horn and a clipboard materialized in the air before her. "I've done some research. It says here that *parties* are *fun*. Since I wish to maximize my *fun* level, it logically follows that I should convene a *party*. And, as you are a noted authority in this area..."

"Woot! Woot! Woot!" hooted Pinkie, softly. From somewhere, she produced a *We're Number 1!* foam finger. Waved.

"Yes, well, be that as it may... I have come to seek your guidance in this matter."

Luna consulted her clipboard. "Now, I see that there are a number of preparations to be made in advance of the party. Refreshments..."

"Punch! Cupcakes!"

"Ah, yes. Decorations..."

"Balloons! Streamers!"

Luna smiled. "Obviously, I've come to the right expert. Now, here we come to a complication."

"Oh, I *love* complications!" Pinkie vibrated with excitement.

"While these preparations are being made, it is vital that my presence here in Ponyville go undetected. There are certain *outside agencies*," Luna imagined that dumb lunk, Captain Bucephalus, "that would seek to interrupt the proceedings. Do you understand?"

"No, not at all!" said Pinkie happily, shaking her head.

Luna sighed.

"I think I will require a disguise of some sort," she explained, "so that I can go about making these preparations without being recognized."

"Ah, ha! I get it," said Pinkie, suddenly all slyness and cunning. "Camouflage! In-cog-neat-o!" She rubbed her chin and examined the Princess closely, squinting in concentration.

"I know! I have just the thing!" she exclaimed, gleefully. "Hee!"

• • •

Shortly thereafter, in the kitchens at Sugarcube Corner:

Carrot Cake stretched sleepily. It had been a long day and he knew that morning, for a baker, would come all too early. He walked into the kitchens thinking only to take a last look around before turning off the lights.

Instead he discovered Pinkie Pie, busily at work with bowls and pans, accompanied by... who now?

Carrot Cake started violently. He, like everyone in Ponyville, had attended Princess Luna's welcome celebration following the Summer Sun Festival. He had seen the restored Princess Luna with his own eyes.

And here she was, a Princess of Equestria, the Queen of the Moon, once the dreaded Nightmare Moon, in his kitchen, an oven mitt in her mouth and holding a pan of cupcakes.

And wearing a big, black handlebar moustache.

Now, Carrot Cake was a simple pony. Flour, salt, water and sugar were the four fundamental elements of his universe. Confronted with a thousand-year-old alicorn moon-goddess baking cupcakes and sporting a handlebar moustache, he naturally attempted to interpret what he was seeing in terms of his own experience:

Well, *of course* the moustache is a fake.

So, the horn is likely fake as well. Yes. Yes, he could see now the telltale traces of wax holding it in place.

The wings... well, sure, they appeared pretty convincing. But looking more closely with a skeptical eye, he was certain he could make out the line of the strap holding the fake wings in place.

Ha ha. One of Pinkie's friends then, in costume. Whoa. That was a relief.

"Hay, Mr. Cake!" muttered Pinkie around the big mixing spoon she held in her teeth.

Setting down the cupcake pan, Luna said, hesitantly, "Good evening, sir." *Oh, no. This can't possibly work*, she thought.

"Hello, Pinkie. And hello to you as well, Miss--?" *Or Mister. Really, who knew, these days?*

Luna thought quickly. "Crescent... Cookie. Yes, that's right. My name is Crescent Cookie, sir."

Crescent Cookie. A perfectly ordinary name, thought Carrot Cake, a bit relieved.

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Cookie," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Luna said. Luna glanced over at Pinkie Pie, who simply winked and continued her mixing.

"We're making preparations for a party we hope to hold later tonight, sir," explained Luna. "I hope we will not disturb you or your lovely wife."

"Ah, well now, the missus is a bit particular about who she lets in her kitchen, y'know. Still, if you're one of Pinkie's friends, I'm sure it will be okay."

"Thank you, sir."

"You just clean up afterwards, all right? Lots t'do tomorrow."

"We'll do our best, sir," Luna assured him. "Good night, sir."

"G'night!" said Pinkie around the mixing spoon.

"Take care, girls. Good night," said Mr. Cake.

A stream of delighted giggling followed him up the stairs.

• • •

Slydesdale, Cloudsdale's premier water slide park:

Slydesdale was operating on summer hours and the park was crowded with happy pegasus ponies. Captain Bucephalus had spent most of the last hour standing in line at the park's most popular attraction, the *Sonic Rainflume!* ride, waiting for an opportunity to speak to the ride operator, who Bucephalus naturally assumed would be the most *fun* person in the park.

It was challenging for him to maintain his proper guard demeanor among the raucous throng of ponies, but Captain Bucephalus took advantage of the opportunity to reassure the gathered citizens that *yes*, there really is a Lunar Guard, that *no*, his silver armor was

in no sense "gnarly, dude," and that *yes, indeed*, Princess Luna was most assuredly replete with "awesome sauce."

His interview with the ride operator, an elderly and sour-looking pegasus, proved disappointing.

"Please remain seated while the ride is in motion," the operator recited in a weary monotone. "Please secure all loose items in a pocket or bag. Please keep all legs and wings inside the ride at all times."

The ride operator threw a large lever that launched the next log into the flume. The moment the log started moving, all of the passengers immediately stood and held their forelegs and wings outside the car.

"Darn foal kids," muttered the operator.

It appeared to Bucephalus that, not only was the ride operator not having *fun*, but through long exposure to lines of countless fun-seekers, he had developed a complete immunity to the *idea* of fun.

The ride operator had little time or help to offer Captain Bucephalus. Captain Bucephalus thanked him for his assistance anyway, and inquired as to the location of the exit.

"Only two ways down from here, sonny," said the ride operator. "Down the flume," he waved towards the log ride, "or down the Walk of Shame."

Off to one side was a doorway boldly labeled THE WALK OF SHAME. "Abandon all pride, ye who exit here! Don't worry! It's safe! *Looooooser!*" proclaimed a banner over the door.

"Can't I just fly down?" asked Bucephalus.

"Nope. Safety regulations, sonny," said the operator. "The log or the slog, that's it."

Captain Bucephalus drew himself up. Of course, no member of the Lunar Guard could be seen taking such an undignified and disgraceful exit as THE WALK OF SHAME. Bucephalus would just have to take the next log ride down. It would be the quickest way, after all. He marched over and took a seat in front of the next log.

Really, how bad could it be?

Ten minutes later Captain Bucephalus was struggling to stop his eyes from spinning in opposite directions. He was soaking wet. His helmet had been lost somewhere between "The Tornado of Terror" and a freefall drop into darkness ominously called "The Throat." The screaming of his fellow log passengers had unnerved him; his own screams, even more so. Climbing out of the log ride, he found his legs wandering in unexpected directions.

And yet, he couldn't stop *grinning*.

That was fun! he thought. Bucephalus looked up at the top of the *Sonic Rainflume!* and wondered if he had time enough to go again.

Duty! Duty! he chided himself. *The Princess's welfare is my primary responsibility. The Princess before all!*

Bucephalus hadn't found a clue to the Princess's *expert*, but he thought had a clue of a different sort. Perhaps *fun* involves a degree of *risk*, even if the risk was nothing more than trying something new, something out of one's usual experience.

Bucephalus shook himself out and flew towards Slydesdale's exit, deep in thought.

Where would Princess Luna go to experience *risk*?

• • •

In the kitchens at Sugarcube Corner:

"Crescent, Crescent bo-bescent
Banana-fanna fo-fescent
Mi my mo-mescent
Crescent!" sang Pinkie.

"Pinkie, Pinkie bo-binkie
Banana-fanna fo-finkie
Mi my mo-minkie
Pinkie!" sang Luna.

"Applejack, Applejack bo-buh-blapple-ack! *Ow!* I think I thprained my tongue!"

"Heeheehee!"

Pinkie Pie was putting the finishing touches on a tray of cupcakes while Luna worked on the invitations.

"All right," announced Luna. "The next one's ready to go!"

"Do it!" cried Pinkie.

Luna focused on the scroll in front of her, concentrating. Her horn flashed. The scroll burst and vanished.

"It's on it's way!" she said.

• • •

In the family room of Sweet Apple Acres:

Applejack burped.

"Better out than in, dearie," said Granny Smith sweetly, looking up from her knitting.

"Ay-yup," agreed Big Macintosh.

"Whut in tarnation?" exclaimed Applejack. A scroll had appeared in the air in front of her. The scroll floated softly to the floor of the family room and unrolled.

Miss Crescent Cookie
(in association with Pinkie Pie Perfect Party Productions)
invites APPLEJACK to
A GRAND MIDNIGHT REVEL!!!
Cupcakes! Balloons! Games of Skill!
And a SPECIAL SURPRISE GUEST!
Celebrate the *Mystery of the Night*
with the most FABULOUS PONIES IN PONYVILLE!
T*O*N*I*G*H*T
at the Ponyville Library at 11:30 PM EST (Equestria Standard Time)!
Join the Herd! Join us! JOIN US!
(RSVP by eating this scroll!)

Huh, thought Applejack. Don't reckon I know this Crescent Cookie, but if she's a friend of Pinkie Pie, she must be okay.

I guess Twilight must be behind this stunt with the invitations. That girl, I swear. She's a caution.

Wull... it's summer. Days are long and nights short. Why not?

Grabbing a pencil in her mouth, she wrote, *I'm in* on the scroll.

Now eat the scroll? All right. Huh, tastes like watermelon. Not too bad.

Better get my hat.

• • •

In the kitchens at Sugarcube Corner:

Applejack's RSVP popped into the air in front of Luna.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Luna hopped around wildly, clutching Applejack's reply to her chest. "Applejack said *yes!* She's coming. *Everyone* is coming!"

"Woot! Woot! Woot! Wave the finger, Crescent! Wave it!" cried Pinkie.

Luna accepted the *We're Number 1!* finger and waved it, feeling completely ridiculous. Still, she felt very happy and very relieved as well.

"So, that's it, then," Luna said. "We have everyone. Twilight Sparkle..."

"And Spike!" added Pinkie.

"And Spike," agreed Luna. "Applejack. Rarity. Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy."

"And Gummy!" added Pinkie, hugging the tiny reptile to her bosom.

"And Gummy," concluded Luna. "That's quite a guest list."

"Don't forget our Special Surprise Guest: Princess Luna!" said Pinkie.

Luna grinned. She consulted her clipboard once more. "I'm glad that Twilight Sparkle agreed to let us hold the party at the Library. I wouldn't want to disturb Mr. and Mrs. Cake any more than I have already."

As she checked the names off of her list she thought, with some smug satisfaction, *So much for you, Captain Bucephalus! I'm going to throw a party and make friends and there's nothing you can do to stop me!*

"BWA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" chortled Luna, giving her black moustache a twirl.

"Oooh, that sounded spoo-oo-ooky, Crescent!" squeaked Pinkie.

"Ah. Did I do that out loud? So sorry."

Ever since her last meeting with Captain Bucephalus, Luna had been nursing a small spark of resentment against her self-proclaimed guardian. Luna had enjoyed baking cupcakes, writing invitations and planning games, but her pleasure had been spiced, just a little, with sweet *revenge*. With each cupcake iced and balloon inflated, there had been a gleeful and growing ember of spite: *Ha! Take that! And that! How do you like that, Captain Bucephalus?*

Luna completed her review of the guest list. "I can't thank you enough for your help, Pinkie," she said. "I couldn't have thrown this party by myself. You have so many good friends. I have no friends of my own to invite," she finished, sadly.

"Don't you know *anyone*?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"Only my sister, and she's far too busy to attend a small function like this," said Luna. "Oh, I've been introduced to a round of ministers and government officials, courtiers and distant relatives. I can't remember half their names. But for the last week, it's just been them, my sister... and that idiot Captain Bucephalus, 'Commander of the Lunar Guard.'" Air-quotes.

"Well," suggested Pinkie, brightly. "Why don't you invite *him*?"

"Invite *Captain Bucephalus*? My supposed 'protector?'" Air-quotes. "Are you crazy? *He's* the one that kept me trapped in the Lunar Tower! *He's* the one who has been driving everypony away! *He's why I'm still alone!*"

Luna seemed to swell with rage. In the corners of the kitchen, the shadows grew.

"In a thousand years nothing has changed! No one visits! No one cares! *And it's all his fault!*"

"Golly," said Pinkie, saucer-eyed. "He must be a real Meanie McMeaniepants! How did you finally manage to escape from the tower?"

"I-- well, I just left," said Luna, confused.

"Didn't he try to stop you?" asked Pinkie. "I bet you had to fight him off. Hi-yahh!" Pinkie drew herself up into a fighting crane stance. She fell over.

"Well, no," admitted Luna. "But he tried to follow me! To protect me, he said," Luna sneered. "So that he could stop anyone from getting near me, he should have said." Pinkie's questions were starting vex her. *Why are you arguing with me? Why can't you just be angry, too?*

"Huh," said Pinkie, getting up. "Did you ever ask him *not* to do that?"

"Ask him not to--? What?"

("I've been here in the tower for more than a week now, and we've hardly talked.")

"I, I never said so, not in so many words, but, but it was his *responsibility*..."

("Who's the Princess here?")

Luna stopped.

No. Oh, no.

It was my responsibility, wasn't it? It was always my responsibility. To leave the tower. To go out. To make friends.

In a thousand years, I'm the one who hasn't changed. I held myself, high and aloof in my beautiful sky, and waited for my admirers to approach me, to worship me. When did I ever reach down to them?

When did I even try throwing them a party?

The carefully nurtured flame of resentment that she had held in her heart finally snuffed out, leaving behind only the soot of remorse.

"Oh, Pinkie," Luna began, green eyes brimming.

"I've been a terrible, terrible Princess. In truth, it wasn't Captain Bucephalus's fault. It was all mine."

(Honesty...)

"All along he was only doing what he thought was best to help me, to care for me, but I repaid him with anger and ridicule. Poor Captain Bucephalus!"

(...kindness...)

"He has given me his unselfish devotion for years, even when I was no more than the Mare in the Moon. How can I show him any less in return?"

(...loyalty...)

"I must do something for him. Something special. For his sake and not for mine!"

(...generosity...)

Through her tears, Luna suddenly discovered a smile. "Oh, I know! I know what to do! It's so obvious! Ha ha ha! Pinkie Pie! Will you help me, please?"

(...laughter...)

"Of course I'll help you!" exclaimed Pinkie.

Luna brushed her tears away. "Thank you. Thank you so much. You are a good friend.

"Now, we have a lot of work to do. Can you show me how to make party decorations?"

(...magic!)

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The Ancient Palace of the Royal Pony Sisters, Everfree Forest:

Silently pacing the ruined halls of the Palace, Captain Bucephalus now doubted that Princess Luna had returned here.

It had seemed like a good idea, before. This was the last place She had been Nightmare Moon, the site of her most wrenching transformation. There was still some power here,

Bucephalus felt. If there was *risk* for a Princess of Equestria, it might well be concealed here.

But there was little opportunity for *fun*, unless one's tastes ran towards ghost stories. The ancient ruin was haunted by memory. This had once been the fortress of the Lunar Guard. This had once been Her home. But now the corridors only echoed with regret.

Bucephalus left the Palace, somberly walking across a suspension bridge over a misty chasm, into the depths of the Everfree Forest.

So where else, then? Bucephalus wondered. It occurred to him that the Princess was a total stranger to modern Equestria. Canterlot, the ruined Palace... what other place could hold meaning for Her now?

And, as in uffish thought he stood, a manticore ambushed Captain Bucephalus.

Bucephalus's armor saved him. The manticore's claws raked the pegasus's neckguard, shredding the armor but leaving Bucephalus relatively unhurt. Now regretting the loss of his helmet, Bucephalus headbutted the brute's sensitive nose. The manticore roared with pain, backed up a step, then charged again.

An adult manticore is much larger and more massive than a pony, but also slower and less agile. Bucephalus evaded the beast's powerful swipes, all the while working back towards the edge of the trees. If the pegasus could get some clear sky, he could take to the air where he would have the advantage over the slower, clumsier flyer.

As he dodged and beat back the manticore's attacks, Bucephalus suddenly became aware that against all reason he was *grinning* again. For all that he was in deadly danger, the thrust and counter-thrust with the manticore reminded Bucephalus of nothing so much as the mock battles that he had often had with the Lunar Tower's furnishings. Fighting the manticore was *fun*.

"Aha! Parry! Riposte! Have at you!" Bucephalus shouted, planting a well-placed kick in the manticore's ribs. "Ho, villain! You think to subdue the Commander of the Lunar Guard? I say thee *neigh!*"

The pegasus's taunts and kicks drove the manticore mad with frustration and rage. The brute, wild-eyed, lunged furiously at Bucephalus, but the pegasus always remained just beyond its reach.

The battle had reached the edge of the trees, along a wide riverbank. Clear sky was just behind Bucephalus. All he required now was a little space to make a leap into the air and to safety.

The manticore seemed to realize this too, for all of a sudden as it sprang towards Bucephalus it unfurled its own broad, leathery wings, blocking the pegasus's path to the sky.

Bucephalus was forced back into the river. Water rushed up around his haunches; thick mud clutched at his legs. No good; in the water and the mud, the advantage would turn quickly to the more powerful manticore. The manticore, sensing this, threw itself with all its fury at Bucephalus.

Unnoticed by the two combatants as they fought, the river had begun to boil. Something enormous and unseen moved beneath the black waters until the surface churned foam-white in the thin moonlight.

Watersmooth claws as sharp as swords sliced the river. Fingers like great tree trunks bound with cables reached out with oiled grace. In a flash, both the pegasus and the manticore were seized by mighty, gargantuan hands sheathed in amethyst scales.

Bucephalus struggled helplessly in the monster's grasp as he was raised up. The creature, impossibly long, rose majestically, dragging coil after heavy coil out of the dark river. Bucephalus gazed in horror at the broad draconic head that blotted out the stars and the vast eyes that blazed with anger. The manticore shrieked with terror and rage.

Then the great serpent spoke.

"Really, now, if you boys want to roughhouse, you should do it someplace else. A fellow needs his beauty sleep, you know."

Say what now? thought Bucephalus.

The manticore, screaming, stabbed savagely with its barbed tail at the monstrous serpent, striking its luminescent scales without effect.

"*Rude,*" said the serpent, cocking an eye at the manticore. It wrinkled its huge nostrils. "*Tch!* And you smell bad, too! *That* I think I can fix!"

Utterly indifferent to the manticore's howling, the serpent reached down and swished the manticore about in the water, like a cook rinsing a turnip. Then the serpent waded to the river's edge and rubbed the struggling manticore vigorously against a mass of shrubbery.

The serpent raised the manticore to its nostrils and sniffed. "Ah! Lilac! Much nicer, as I think you'll agree. Well, now that you've had your little bath, be a nice kitty and fly away home. Shoo, shoo, shoo!"

With that, the great serpent wound up an underhand pitch and tossed the manticore far over the trees and out of sight. The manticore yowled and complained, but the brute still had enough sense to continue flying away.

"Now," said the serpent, turning his vast, deep gaze upon Bucephalus. "What about you then, my little pony?"

That's quite a moustache, Bucephalus thought. *And is that a hair net he's wearing?* Studying the great serpent a bit more carefully, the fellow didn't seem quite as fierce as Bucephalus had first thought. He just seemed a bit put out.

Bucephalus cleared his throat. "Perhaps if I may introduce myself? I am Captain Bucephalus, Commander of Her Majesty's Lunar Guard. I apologize for disturbing you earlier. I was fighting for my life just now so I may have become a little boisterous."

"Well, I suppose it couldn't be helped." *Sigh.* "Still, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, *mon capitain,*" said the serpent. "As for myself, there are many who know me as... Steve."

"Hay, Steve," said Bucephalus, genially. His mad urge to grin was starting to return.

"Hay, Captain. I *do* hope you'll forgive my saying so, but you appear a bit *dishabille* for a member of the Royal Guard."

Bucephalus examined himself. He was bruised, scratched, his silver armor in tatters, caked with mud and covered in tree sap.

"I've had a pretty busy evening," he admitted.

"Ah, perhaps I can fix you up," said Steve brightly.

"It's kind of you to offer, Steve, but really, ah-- glub!"

Much like the manticore before him, though possibly a little more gently, Bucephalus was plunged into the river then rubbed briskly against a flower bed. When the ordeal was over, Bucephalus thought, *well, at least now I'm clean and minty fresh.*

"La-da-da-di-*dah* la-da-da-di-daaah!" hummed Steve gaily, as he carefully groomed Bucephalus's mane with one massive claw. "There! Handsome again!"

"Thanks, Steve," said Bucephalus.

"Oh, no trouble at all, *mon capitain*," said Steve. The serpent yawned hugely. Bucephalus was abruptly reminded of staring down "The Throat" of the *Sonic Rainflume!* ride. "Now, if you don't mind, I really *must* snuggle up in my cozy riverbed. This night air is simply *terrible* for my complexion. May I offer you a boost to wherever you're going?"

"No, no, that's fine," said Bucephalus quickly, not wanting to be pitched like a softball. "If you could just point me towards the nearest town--?"

"Of course," said Steve, releasing Bucephalus, who hovered near the serpent's head. "That would be Ponyville. Just follow the river downstream; the river will lead you right to it."

"Thank you, Steve. Thanks again for everything. I mean it."

"My pleasure," said Steve sleepily as he coiled back down into the river. "*Do* visit me again some time, *mon capitain*."

Steve raised one warning claw. "*In daylight.*"

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Ponyville. Midnight:

Captain Bucephalus flapped tiredly into the Ponyville marketplace. He had flown more in this one night than in many a month before.

He touched down and looked about. Ponyville was more than a one-horse town, but at this time of night the streets were empty and silent, save for the soft batting of the lantern bugs in the streetlamps.

Ponyville had some small association with Princess Luna. There had been a welcome celebration here, after Her return. The Celestial Guard had taken the lead with security,

of course, as their Principal was involved. Captain Bucephalus doubted that anyone remembered the lone pegasus in silver, hovering at a respectful distance.

It didn't seem likely that Ponyville would offer many clues to the Princess's location. But the night was young. One never knew.

During his flyover of Ponyville, Bucephalus had found that most of the buildings were dark. But there was one structure that was alight and so it caught his attention.

It's a hollow tree, he realized as he approached. It reminded him of Canterlot, in a way. It sprawled more vertically than horizontally. It had balconies and terraces. And, yes, there! At the top: an observatory platform.

Its windows were all alight. And it stood out from the buildings around it in another way: from the branches and windows hung chains of paper lanterns, each glowing with a warm yellow crescent.

Someone must be home, Bucephalus thought. *Perhaps I can gather information about the Princess's whereabouts here. I could use more intelligence*, he admitted to himself.

Bucephalus stepped around a *papier mâché* crescent, ducked under some crescent-shaped lights and lifted a pennant adorned with a crescent to examine the sign underneath. A book. *This is a library*, he realized.

Research! That's the key! Perhaps here, in some obscure tome, Bucephalus could pick up the subtle thread that would lead him to Princess Luna!

Never say die! he reminded himself. *Bucephalus to the fore!*

Bucephalus released the crescent pennant, ducked under a string of crescent balloons and approached the door festooned with a crescent banner.

As he touched the door handle, the ground floor lights went out.

Ominous, Bucephalus thought. *Still, who dares, wins*. Boldly, he opened the door.

Darkness and silence greeted him. He stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind him.

"Hello?" he called. "I've come to use the library."

No response.

Bucephalus moved into the center of the room. *Perhaps I can find a lamp*, he thought, groping in the shadows.

Then, behind him: a rustle of movement. Ahead: a cough.

It's a trap, Bucephalus thought, grimly. *Well, whoever these foals are, they will find they have met their match with me!*

Captain Bucephalus lowered his head, bracing himself to charge. "All right," he hissed under his breath. "Come get some, you mudders."

The room lights came on.

"SURPRISE!" shouted Princess Luna and her friends.

Here's an obvious fact: the distance from a pony's brain to his hind legs is greater than the distance from his brain to his forelegs. Consequence: when startled, a pony's rear is slower to react than his front.

When the lights came up and Bucephalus realized he was facing a roomful of harmless ponies, his forelegs slammed down into an immediate stop. His rear, however, prepped for a charge, carried on regardless.

His wings, caught between the two extremes, shrugged helplessly. *Whatever*, they thought.

The result was that Captain Bucephalus described a lazy forward loop-the-loop into the refreshment table, terminating with a faceplant into a tray of cupcakes.

Struggling blindly, Bucephalus brought one hoof down heavily onto the punchbowl, which flipped over and discharged its contents onto his head.

Ouch, he thought.

There was much excited shouting in his ears, little of which he could make out. Raising his fore hooves to his face, he scraped smooshed cupcakes out of his eyes.

Looking down his muzzle, Bucephalus discovered that a small alligator, wearing a tiny party hat, was clamped painlessly but firmly to the end of his nose.

Bucephalus found he could no longer help himself. His desire to grin became a desire to laugh wildly, and from that it became an urge to bray.

"HAW-HAW-HAW-HAW," he bellowed, holding his sides. The little voice that clucked in his head, *Dignity! Dignity!* was simply overwhelmed and forgotten.

"HAW-HAW-HAW-HAW!" Bucephalus struggled but failed to raise himself from a floor slick with icing and fruit punch.

"Oh, Captain! Captain Bucephalus!" came one sweet voice from the center of the commotion.

Bucephalus looked up to find a handsome young unicorn with a thick black moustache standing over him.

That's the second largest moustache I've seen tonight, Bucephalus thought. Somehow, the notion caused his laughter to re-double.

The young unicorn flashed his horn. The punchbowl lifted off of Bucephalus's head. A pink pony rushed forward to claim the tiny alligator. Another sturdy orange pony moved to help Bucephalus upright.

"Hehhehhehheh, well, I guess he was surprised!" declared a blue pegasus wheeling above him.

"Oh, Captain Bucephalus, are you all right?" implored the midnight blue unicorn.

"Hahahaha! Sure, thank you, young fellow, hehe, I'm just fine," said Bucephalus, finally back on all four hooves.

"Fellow?" said the midnight blue unicorn. "Oh, this ridiculous moustache!" The unicorn reached up and, to Bucephalus's amazement, pulled away his moustache.

"Princess Luna!" Captain Bucephalus drew himself to attention.

("Whoa! No way!" called the blue pegasus.)

("Whut the hay?!" exclaimed the orange pony.)

(The purple unicorn rolled her eyes. *Jocks*, she thought.)

"Your Majesty, are you all right? Are you safe?" asked Captain Bucephalus, eagerly.

"Yes. Yes, thank you, Captain," said Princess Luna.

"All is well, then," said Captain Bucephalus, relieved. He bowed.

"Oh, Captain," said the Princess. "Just look at you. So bruised and hurt..."

"Please forgive my lack of uniform, your Highness," said Bucephalus. "I appear to have mislaid my armor."

"That's all right, Captain," said Luna, her eyes shining. "I think I've finally mislaid my own."

Luna turned to her friends. "Here is our Special Surprise Guest! Everypony! Please welcome Captain Bucephalus, Commander of the Lunar Guard!"

"Woot! Woot! Woot!" "So distinguished!" "Yay!" "Best knight ever!"

The assembled ponies (and dragon, and even alligator) stamped their approval.

Bucephalus waved, uncertain how to respond to the unexpected recognition.

Duty! Duty! called a tiny part of Bucephalus's mind, quietly now.

Ah, yes. Orders, he thought.

Bucephalus paused. What he contemplated now violated all of the protocols of the Lunar Guard. Still, orders were orders. And what was life without a little *risk*?

"Luna?" he said.

"Yes, Captain?" she said, turning to him.

Very deliberately, Bucephalus placed a hoof gently across her shoulder.

"Caught you," he said, grinning.

And Luna laughed.

• • •

The party lasted until Luna's night began to give way to Celestia's day.

They flew home to Canterlot, Bucephalus in the fore. Luna soared behind, confident in the protection of Her Captain.

Bucephalus saw Luna safely to Her chambers.

"Good day, Captain," She said.

"Good day, Your Highness," he said, bowing.

As he paced back along the Grand Passage, Bucephalus paused to straighten the hall runner. The pictures and the rest of the mess he decided to leave until tomorrow; well, later that day, actually.

He picked up his armored shoes. He made a mental note to ask Slydesdale about his missing helmet. He decided that Steve was welcome to whatever remained of his silver armor.

He entered the guardroom on the way to his bunk. Looking around, he noticed *The Ancient Chronicle of Night*, still open to the last, incomplete entry.

Bucephalus walked over to it. The status of the Mare in the Moon was still blank.

Bucephalus thought for a bit, then picked up the writing instrument.

He drew a heavy black line beneath the last entry in the journal.

Princess Luna is returned to us, he wrote.

She is home.

She is happy.

And with that, Captain Bucephalus closed the book on the past and never looked there again.