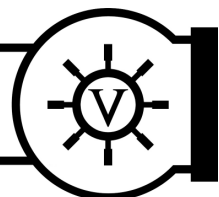


Dancing on Silver Strings

Mystic

PONY FICTION VAULT



Helpless. She knew that she was helpless to stop them.

She could do little more than watch as Twilight began to solve Discord's riddle, setting the unicorn and her friends down a path she knew should have been hers. The labyrinth, her student had concluded. The Elements of Harmony had to be in the labyrinth. Celestia's mind raced, alive with tumultuous streams of ideas and thoughts, all colliding with one another in an attempt to make themselves heard. Plots. Schemes. Plans. They all came and went.

But ultimately, she had nothing. She couldn't help them. Not this time.

She had to have faith.

"Good luck, my little ponies," Celestia said, a miasma of emotion lurking just beneath the surface of her stoic expression. She leaned forward, gently placing her horn on either side of Twilight's head. It was an old expression, an expression of love, of fealty, of trust. "The fate of Equestria is in your hooves."

She was not lying.

Twilight's face hardened, determination shining in her eyes. "Thanks, Princess. We won't let you down!" Without another word, she and her friends turned and ran out of the hall, united in their common cause. They were the elements of harmony, and together, they could never fall. Celestia could do little more than hope – no – *believe* that it was true.

The air grew cold as Celestia watched them leave. Discord's laugh echoed loudly in the empty room.

The sound of rapid hoofsteps faded in time, and with it went the laughter. It almost appeared as if the alicorn was alone... almost.

Celestia waited. She inhaled, closing her eyes, feeling her mane move peacefully around her body. She exhaled, sliding her eyes open. She was already losing and they had barely begun playing.

"Come out, you wretched snake."

The laugh returned, colder and crueler than before. This was the laugh she knew. This was the laugh from her memory, a sound she hadn't heard in almost two thousand years. "What's this, Celestia? The second your little subjects leave, your language becomes so foul! Tsk tsk."

The princess' lips pursed, the muscles in her neck tensing. "You give her a riddle? What game are you playing at? Why send Twilight and her friends on that fruitless hunt? You and I both know they will not find the elements unless you want them to."

A shadow moved in the corner of the room. "You make it sound like I cheat! I don't cheat when I play games. I always *love* a challenge, after all."

"No. You just make it impossible for the other team to win before they start playing."

There was another chuckle. "Well, losing isn't any fun, either."

"What do you want, Discord? I pose no threat to you now that the elements are out of my control. Why are you here?"

A pair of eyes opened in front of the princess, a sickly yellow colour with red irises. They peered at Celestia, shaking as the invisible creature continued to laugh. "Your precious ponies pose no threat to me, Celestia. I can keep them occupied and have my little chat with you without any trouble at all. That whole time and space thing is very overrated."

Celestia's eyes narrowed, her stance widening. "But why? You still haven't answered why. Do you want to try and kill me? Revenge? Is that why you're here?"

The monstrosity finally materialised around the glowing pair of eyes. A misaligned patchwork of animal limbs moved in the air as it stretched its snake-like body, leaning down close to the princess. His face curved into a wicked smile. "Kill you? Oh no. Death is far too easy. It is far too finite. No. What I want is something much, much better than that, Celestia. What I want is for you to know the truth."

The princess frowned. Riddles. One of his favourite games. "The truth? What do you mean 'the truth?' What truth is there to know?"

Discord almost seemed to ignore her, lost in his own little world. "I have always wondered what it's like to be you, Celestia. What must it be like up in that pretty head of yours? So wise! So benevolent! So... perfect." His smile grew wider, eyes glinting madly.

Discord gestured with a talon, and a wall of silver rose up from the floor like water flowing down a waterfall, rippling as it settled into a sheet of glass. Celestia could see herself clear as day, her expression tight and guarded.

"Mirrors never lie..." Discord murmured, running a finger along Celestia's jaw.

Celestia's eyes flashed, and she pulled away. "Quit your games, Discord. I have little time for them!"

"Patience!" Discord reprimanded, wagging his paw at the princess. "I had always wondered, even when we played our games so very long ago. You were always so much fun to compete with. There was so much material to use."

"I wouldn't call them games," Celestia said darkly, her throat constricting as she remembered the ice-cold fire, the storms of magical energy, and the armies of monsters freed from the depths of Tartarus. All just pieces in his cruel 'game'.

"Yes, but your sense of humour is somewhat lacking, isn't it?" Discord leaned back, lounging on thin air with a contented stretch. "But I'm getting off-topic. No. I tried to show you it all those years ago, but you were blinded by your righteous fury. You wouldn't even begin to consider reason."

"Show me what?!" Celestia snapped.

Discord grinned, revealing rows of small pointed teeth that glistened with saliva. He rolled over onto his side to look at the princess properly. "Ah. Now I don't want to spoil it, do I?"

Celestia ground her teeth together, an uncharacteristic display of frustration. She tried to regain control of her breathing; she wouldn't let him get to her. Not again.

"That's it, Celly. Breathe. I don't want you getting too angry just yet."

Celestia exhaled, struggling to control the rising anger biting at her. "You are still not making any sense. What truth? What do you want to show me?"

Discord disappeared, his voice suddenly coming from just behind the princess' head. "Yourself, Celestia. I want to show you yourself. Come on, we have wasted enough time; we are going to go on a little adventure."

Celestia opened her mouth, but she was too slow, for the world suddenly ceased to exist. The hall melted away from around her like ice in summer. The colours bled from the world, mixing together in the darkness beneath her, vanishing in a whirlpool of nothing. She was floating in empty space, but at the same time, she was standing without help. Discord hovered near her, watching intently.

She briefly attempted to fight the spirit's magic, but in a moment of panic she realised that she could not even feel her own power. It had been stripped from her completely, its absence akin to drowning.

"What are you doing?" Celestia demanded, her wings flaring out defensively. "Where are we?"

"Now, now, you have asked more than enough questions. It's my turn now. Look around, Celestia. Look around and tell me what you can see..."

Gritting her teeth, Celestia did as she was told. There was no use fighting just yet. Her magic was failing her; she could barely feel the trace of energy in the air. The princess had no idea where she was, or even what power the draconequus was using to keep her there. *And besides*, a rational part of her brain suggested, *she was buying Twilight time by playing along with his games.*

Looking around, she could see nothing. The light and colour had completely faded, leaving nothing but a smoky darkness. There was no sound, no warmth or real cold. There was only a deep sense of nothing, a feeling that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

"There isn't anything," Celestia said at last. "Nothing but the darkness."

Discord clapped his mismatched hands together, the sound consuming the dark until there was nothing else. "Bingo! She gets it in one! The darkness. Good job, Celestia. You have passed round one. Alright, next question, and this one might be a little harder. What does the darkness mean to you?"

Celestia paused, taken aback by the question. Her mind raced, trying to pierce the question's hidden meaning.

"Come on," Discord chided. "We don't have all day. Twilight and her friends are already in the maze."

She could find nothing which was more likely to be correct than any other theory. At least, not until she had more information. "The darkness represents evil in the world, Discord. Of all the abominations this world has had the ill-fortune to see exist, you should know that."

Discord chuckled, tapping his digits together as he drifted in lazy circles around the princess. "Evil? Really? Darkness means evil to you?"

"Evil has always commanded the shadows," Celestia replied shortly.

"Ahh yes. The shadows. You have such a special relationship with the darkness, did you know that, Celestia? You are the lightbringer to the world. Without you, shadows would never exist. One could follow that line of logic and conclude that evil exists *because* of you!"

Celestia glared at Discord. "Don't be a fool. You are just as much a product of the shadow as any other evil, and you are certainly not created by me."

"Aren't I?" Discord appeared to think for a moment. "No. You misunderstand me. I am not evil. I am no more evil than you, at least. I have what you have. Potential. There is a clear difference. What I actually am is something much less obvious." Discord smiled, almost to himself. "I am chaos."

"Discord, I have seen you destroy more ponies than most mortals will ever know. You are the very definition of evil," Celestia replied, her voice thick with disbelief.

The draconequeus laughed. He threw his head back as he cackled, holding his stomach as if he was about to explode with mirth. Around them, the darkness began to rumble, a growl growing deep in the nothing and becoming louder with each passing second.

"There is definitely good and evil in this world, Celestia, but as much as it must pain you to admit it, I am neither. I am chaos, pure and simple, and I am everything you are not."

The darkness exploded. Shards of images speared upwards through the nothing, puncturing the shadowed ceiling above them. Colour came with them, light seeping back into the world. The ground shifted beneath Celestia's hooves as stone began to form, rising up as it solidified.

The princess found herself rising quickly into the rapidly forming sky, a dark and bruised heaven, thick with bloated storm clouds. The tower she was on grew and grew, leaving the ground far below. She could see tiny buildings around the base of her tower. They looked so small and fragile, almost like the toys small fillies played with. Lightning began to flash and thunder roared, bellowing its dissatisfaction that the sky was being invaded by this pillar of stone.

Celestia's eyes grew wide as the world finished growing, leaving her atop the tower alone with Discord. Her vision blurred on either side with the veils on the horizon, hills and rivers and forests all mixing into one. She did not have a clue how he was doing this... How was he commanding such power? This world had been built from nothing before

her very eyes! It was an illusion, but it was masterful in the sense that Celestia was struggling to tell it apart from reality.

"Look down, Celestia! They are your ponies, after all."

Celestia peered over the edge, scared to draw too near. The fact that she could fly did not ease her anxiousness. Amongst the buildings, she could faintly see crowds of shapes milling in the streets, all of them trying to look up into the sky to see their princess. Shouts and cries reached her ears, hectic and scared.

"Your loyal subjects," Discord murmured. "So dependable. So very loyal. It's a pity they can't see you..."

Celestia finally found the strength to speak. "Impressive, but you are still not making sense. You still have not told me your purpose here."

"Not making sense? Why would you think that I care about making sense?" Discord waved a paw in the air with a flourish, bats materialising around him only to fly away, screeching loudly.

Celestia frowned. "Why bats?"

"It's simple, really, as you shall see. Come on, our next stop is waiting. This is one is something easy. A memory? A fear? Well, I'll let you decide which." The draconequus stopped, twisting his head around completely to look to the western horizon. "Besides, the timing is just right. It's twilight. Night is falling..."

Before Celestia could protest, the world vanished again. It unravelled at the horizon, blown away like smoke in the wind, leaving the alicorn standing alone in the darkness once more. This time, however, she was not made to wait long. The earth grew up around her, rumbling as the darkness was replaced by a lighter, colder shadow.

When the rumbling finally stopped, Celestia looked around. She was standing in the middle of a small village, a cluster of mud brick houses with dank thatched roofs. In front of her was a massive castle, an imposing bastion of stone and glass surrounded by a chasm-like moat. Bright moonlight smothered the stars with a sickly glow.

She could hear screams. They rose and fell in the night air, coming closer with each passing second. Ghostly lights danced in the castle windows, flashes of blue, white and gold illuminating the night sky.

Celestia felt her heart speed up. She knew this place. *But how... how did he know? He wasn't around for this; he had already been imprisoned!*

"Nighttime... it's so peaceful in Equestria, isn't it?" Discord swam backwards and forwards in front of Celestia, looking altogether relaxed. "Except, of course, when it has been nighttime for over two months."

The first ponies swam into Celestia's vision. They stumbled past, their faces gaunt and sunken, wild eyes set in their shadowed sockets. Thin rags clung to their bodies, hanging off their wasted frames. If they noticed the majestic princess then they showed no sign. A mother and her foal were curled up in a door-frame nearby, the mare holding her tiny filly tightly. Her ribcage peeked through her battered skin as she numbly stroked the small foal's mane.

"Your sister was quite cruel here," Discord tittered. "So much suffering for what? Power?"

"It was a cry for help..." Celestia murmured.

"Yes, because making your subjects starve to death is definitely an effective way to get their love and attention."

Celestia flashed a glare over at the draconequus. "Is there a point to this?"

Discord smiled wolfishly. "Of course."

Celestia blinked and suddenly found herself standing on a low-lying cloud. The castle was beneath her, the village ringing the stone palace on all sides. The world was quiet for a moment while Celestia regained her composure before all the light in the world seemed to congeal on a single point, a glowing sphere hanging above the castle.

With an eruption of magic that shattered the air with shockwaves, Luna appeared where the magic had been, her body radiating light, her wings spread wide. She was clad in the garb of Nightmare Moon, the self-inflicted changes to her body almost complete. "**The night is ours!**" she boomed, her voice reaching out over the buildings to smother every other sound. "**Look upon us, oh loyal subjects, for the day is no more, and the world our own! Look upon us and cast yourselves at our hooves! We shall reward your loyalty most kindly!**"

The ponies in the village screamed at the sight of their princess, now a cold shadow of the idol she had once been. Panic swept over the population like a tsunami, despair following

quickly in its wake. It all settled in the streets, eating at the hope these ponies had been clinging to for so long. The sun was gone. Never again would they see the dawn.

Celestia bit down on her lip. Every part of her wanted to race forward, to combat the monster taking hold in her sister's heart. But she couldn't move; her hooves felt like they were stuck in quicksand. She wanted to scream in frustration.

"No!" Luna shouted, tendrils of dark magic curling around her body. **"Do not flee! You shall not flee from us! We command it! You owe us your allegiance!"** Her cries fell upon deaf ears, the ponies on the ground scrambling in an attempt to escape.

Celestia could do little but watch as Luna slammed her hooves on the stone of the castle, cracks as wide as a pony's hoof splitting down the walls. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She couldn't move...

"No! No!" The light began to grow along the length of Luna's horn, her eyes wide and terrified.

Celestia looked away. There was an explosion, and a wall of blue light washed over her, the shockwave blowing her mane about her face. The screams grew louder, and the ear-shattering screech of splitting stone filled the air.

"Why?" she asked quietly. She knew he could hear her just fine. "This happened a millennium ago, so why show it to me now? You think I haven't relived those weeks myself? You think I haven't spent every minute of the last thousand years wondering what I could have done to stop it, where I went wrong?"

"Oh, I'm sure you have," Discord replied easily, ticking something off on a check-list. He peered at Celestia over a pair of thick wire-framed glasses. "I just want you to take a proper look at it, that's all."

"A proper look?"

"Yes indeed. This here is what you fear, Celestia. You know this, don't you?"

Celestia regarded the draconequus in front of her coolly. She refused to give him the satisfaction of confirming his assumption.

Discord snorted, amused by her stubbornness. "See? You do know. But a fear of what, exactly? That's what I want you to see."

The princess raised an eyebrow. "My sister tried to destroy the world, forcing my subjects into death by starvation, and you ask a fear of what?"

Discord began circling Celestia again, scratching his chin idly with a claw. She refused to follow him with her eyes, choosing instead to stare back down at the now burning village. It was a poor choice.

"A fear for your sister? Fear for your subjects' safety? No... I don't think so." Discord's eyes glistened with the light from the fires. "Tell me, Celestia, for this is your memory; where are you in all this?"

"My memory? This isn't my memory," Celestia replied on impulse. How could it be her memory? She had been present for this whole ordeal. She could still remember the burns, the heat and the power coursing through her veins, but there was none of that now. So where was she?

"Exactly," Discord said, disappearing in a puff of smoke only to reappear on Celestia's other side. "You are not there. You can only watch now. That was your mind's choice, by the way, not mine. I just pointed it in the right direction. After all, I was never here, remember?"

Celestia turned away from Discord, her brow knitted together. "But you teleported me up here. I watched you build this world from nothing!"

Discord waved his hand dismissively. "You give me too much credit. I don't have that much power. Well, at least I have more than you right now. Look at you! Helpless this time while your ponies suffer! Completely useless! That, yes *that*, is what you fear."

"Being helpless?"

"Being powerless," Discord corrected. "The fear of losing your power, being unable to affect the outcomes to suit you. You fear losing your power; you fear losing control of the strings. It's not terribly complicated, really."

Celestia held back a scoff, indignation rising inside her against her will. "Losing my power? What are you talking about? Why would I fear that?"

"And losing it to your sister, of all ponies! After three thousand years of her living in your shadow, she finally throws you to the side... That must sting a little, mustn't it?"

Celestia gave the draconequus a cool, hard stare. "No. My power, my position, is irrelevant. It is my subjects who come first. They always have, and they always will."

Discord smiled back at Celestia, looking as if she had just told him a wonderful joke. The punchline, however, was lost on its teller. "Always? Oh dear. Such strong language... Such a definite time period. Always is a *very* long time, Celestia, you should know that."

And just like that, the everlasting night faded away. The void rushed to replace it while the world reassembled itself around her. Celestia tried to keep her stomach steady as the world exploded back into life in a whirlpool of colour and light. She was standing in the centre of a large amphitheatre upon a raised dais. A tall, lonely throne stood watch over the space, encrusted with gems and gold filigree. On all sides she was surrounded by rows upon rows of ponies. There were hundreds of them in seats that stretched all the way up to the sky, and they were all looking at Celestia, all of them whispering.

The spotlight was on her. That it in itself was not unusual; Celestia was a princess, after all. But why was her body filled with a cold and clammy fear that made her feel sick? The whispers set her teeth on edge, little buzzsaws in her ears.

"Your ponies come first? So noble. Really, you should be commended." Discord twirled in the air, waving his arms around at all those assembled. He held a small red megaphone that made his voice reverberate so everypony could hear. "But what about when the feeling is no longer mutual? What will you do then, Celestia?"

"What are you talking about?" Everypony was staring at her, traitorous remarks hiding behind their cold, hard gazes.

"I'm talking about when your ponies grow up, when they decide to stand up for themselves." Discord leaned over, putting his face right into Celestia's. "I'm talking about when they no longer need you."

As if on cue, every single pony in the theatre raised their forward right hoof. Celestia realised with a cold stab of shock that they were voting. They all glared down at Celestia, their movements creating a natural wave up the rows of seats. Celestia flinched, the wave threatening to bear down upon her and swallow her whole.

"The ponies have spoken," Discord said, his eyes glinting. "They want their freedom."

Celestia turned, staring back up at the crowd. They glared back, their gazes icy and piercing.

Why? she wanted to scream. *Why?* But she couldn't speak. She could only look up, a small speck surrounded on all sides. Her tiara slipped from her head, sailing through the air almost in slow motion. Celestia watched in horror as it shattered like glass on the stone floor.

Celestia gritted her teeth together tightly, forcing her emotions back under control. She knew that on the outside her expression would have barely shifted, but she also knew that Discord would only need the slightest flickers of emotion to count it as a victory.

"So be it," she said at last, exhaling slowly through her nose. "If that's what they wish, then who am I to keep their freedom from them?"

"Exactly!" Discord cried. "But I know you, Celestia. You would never let this happen. You are a chessmaster. You would see the move coming from years in the future."

"What are you implying? That I would keep my ponies from traveling down this path should they choose it?"

The draconequus pondered for a moment over a chessboard. One team was made entirely of ponies bowing low, the other yelling defiantly to the air. "Who says they would ever know such a path exists? You have them grovelling at your hoof. They *adore* you." At once the expressions on the ponies in the stands changed. Smiles lit up their faces, their eyes sparkling like couples newly in love. "Thanks to your clever little moves, they wouldn't even consider setting themselves free, just as you want it."

"They respect me because I treat them with respect, Discord. How is that so hard for you to see? Are you just blind to the effects love can have?"

Discord looked at her, his smile smug. "I know love very well." His eyes moved past Celestia's shoulder. "Do you?"

The princess turned, only to see a copy of herself walking down the steps of the dais to where a throng of ponies were waiting for her. They were all reaching out, desperate to touch her, eager to kiss her golden shoes.

Celestia's jaw tensed when she looked at the strange new armour covering her clone's body and the way her mane seemed to burn, tinged with orange and red. The eyes were narrowed into cat-like slits, set in a head that wasn't held high with confidence, but with arrogance.

The mock-Celestia's presence alone parted the crowd like water. Her horn was glowing brightly, two wooden crosses floating on either side of her head. The real Celestia frowned when she saw thin silver strings coming down from the crosses, a nearly invisible line connected to the head of everypony present. Whenever the fake Celestia moved the marionette, the ponies followed, their limbs jerking to-and-fro as she tugged and pulled.

Discord chuckled at the sight. "You move them just so until you and you alone are happy with the outcome. How high and mighty of you. Tell me, what's it like from the moral high ground you love so much? I bet the view is... spectacular."

The world began to melt, the ponies and the amphitheatre disappearing as shadow took its place, still as cold and lonely as before. Celestia took the transition as an opportunity to breathe deeply, regaining her composure. The Nightmare Celestia lingered in her mind's eye, pulling on the strings that floated around her like a spider's web.

The second the darkness stopped moving, Celestia went back on the offensive. "You are a hypocrite, Discord. How can you show me that and expect to pass judgement on me? There was a time when you were called the Puppet Master by most of the world. You lied and schemed your way into control of half the earth before anybody even saw your face."

Discord resumed his seemingly aimless floating, putting himself above Celestia as he circled her. He moved his hands as if he were playing piano. "That's because I can. I am chaos. It's my nature. I live that. I breathe it, and I embrace it. You see yourself as so mighty and pure, and that's what insults the honest schemers like me."

Celestia barked a laugh. "Excuses. You are always so full of excuses. For someone who claims that I think that I can do no wrong, you certainly are quick to justify your own behaviour."

"Truth as an excuse? Now that's a new one." Discord raised an eyebrow, smirking. "Come now, we are both immortals. We are both products of the ether. It is our right, wouldn't you say? We don't play using the same rules. We are both above them. Your actions are proof enough of that fact. Ponies are nothing more than chess pieces!"

"I don't think you care whether we are immortal or not."

Discord moved closer, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Oh, but I think that *you* do."

Celestia ignored the jab, moving back into safer, stabler territory. "I ensure that the world stays safe, Discord. It is my duty and responsibility. It always has been."

"Protecting harmony! Celestia, always sacrificing life and limb for the greater good! Oh yes, that's definitely the alicorn I know."

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "And what would you know about sacrifice?"

"After watching you and what you do to ponies, more than I would like to."

"What do you mean – " Celestia asked, realising far, far too late that she had walked straight into his trap. She snapped her jaw shut, biting her lip in the process.

Discord smiled in victory, his eyes glowing with a malicious fire. "Oh Celestia, I never thought you'd ask. Come with me, I have been wanting to show you this timeline for a very, very long time..."

Colour raced into the darkness. It swiftly took shape, forming buildings, trees, roads. It was a normal city street – Canterlot, judging from the architecture. Ponies milled about, going about their day-to-day business. No pony even looked up when Celestia and Discord materialised in their midst, the former blinking against the sudden light from the sun.

"Canterlot!" Discord exclaimed, throwing his hands up dramatically into the air. "What a lovely city. No, seriously, I love what you've done with the place."

"No strange and mystic messages now?" Celestia said, indulging in some sarcasm.

Discord chuckled, snapping his fingers. A small and diseased-looking sapling sprang to life over his claw, its branches reaching out in all directions, twisting and mingling, but all wasted and sickly. "Oh no..." he said. "None at all."

Celestia opened her mouth to reply when a familiar voice caused her heart to stop.

"No, Morning, I can't do that! You should know better than that!"

"C'mon, Twi! It's not like it's too close to exams, anyway. A week. Big deal."

"Yes! It's only a week!"

There was a collective giggle. Celestia looked over to a dainty little cafe across the street. The busy road made it hard to see, but the princess saw a pony that was unmistakably Twilight sitting over a table with her friends. Only, they weren't her friends from

Ponyville. They were all unicorns, and there were three of them instead of five. All of them giggled at the librarian's plain look of outrage.

"Yes, Twi. A week. You'll be fine. Come and have some fun with us! It's not like it's the first time anyway."

Twilight groaned, lowering her head to the table. "You sure this... party... is going to be fun?"

All of the girls quickly nodded their heads. "Definitely!"

Twilight groaned again. "Alright." She sighed heavily. "Just for you, girls."

The one called Morning, a white unicorn with dusty orange hair, clapped her hooves together. "Yay! See that's the attitude you need to have!"

Twilight smiled sheepishly, daring to look a little excited.

"Twilight?" Celestia said, reaching forward subconsciously with a hoof.

"Isn't she happy?" Discord sighed, floating down next to the alicorn. "Look at her! She has friends!"

A gap appeared in the crowds. Celestia froze. Twilight's cutie mark... it was different! No longer was it the collection of stars. Instead, an image of an opened book and a filled quill adorned her side. Twilight's smile was bright and radiant, and she was throwing herself into the conversation with a little more vigour than before.

"What is this?" Celestia said, willing her voice to be louder. That wasn't Twilight... That wasn't *her* Twilight. Not her student. She knew it wasn't real – couldn't be real – but it didn't stop the cold feeling settling in her stomach.

"This is something I have wanted to show you for a very, very long time," Discord said, paying close attention to the fingers on his left hand, looking nonchalantly back at Celestia every now and then. "This is Twilight's life if you had never intruded upon it, if you had never changed it forever."

"What – what are you talking about? I never intruded."

Discord flashed upright, pushing his face in front of Celestia's. His eyes held an animalistic gleam that made Celestia flinch, tucking her head down subconsciously to

limit the exposure to her throat. "Why else would you have been near the school at that time? You knew exactly what was going to happen, and you knew exactly what you needed to do to make sure your little agenda stayed intact and on plan."

"My agenda?" It was all Celestia could summon in response.

"Your agenda!" Discord spat back. "This is the life Twilight lost when you decided she was the pony you needed in your plot to stop your sister from overthrowing you for the second time! You knew that without the elements, you would, at this present moment, be banished without physical form in the sun. You couldn't live with that, and so you used her and set her life along a path that *you* chose!"

Celestia took a subconscious step back. Her mind raced, desperately trying to find a way to stop her hasty retreat. "No I didn't; I didn't know at that point. The curse wasn't due for almost ten years!"

"Yes you did!" Discord snarled. "You did know, and you keep lying to yourself by thinking otherwise. You took her choice away, and at the time, you knew why you took it all from her. You could feel it inside of you. It wasn't fate. It was your scheming."

"My scheming? I cannot be held responsible for what harmony does, Discord."

He snorted. "Oh please. Now are you going to tell me that it was fate, or that it was Twilight's *destiny* that saw everything happen?" He sneered at her. "Don't be ridiculous."

"There are forces at work in this world far greater than you or I. I know you hate to think of yourself as small, but there are some things that even you cannot understand."

This time, Discord threw his head back with a hoot of laughter. "Listen to yourself! You sound like you think we live in some sort of fairytale. I guess that makes me the terrible villain, and it is your fate, your destiny, to stop me so that everypony can live happily ever after. Please. Do you even hear the rubbish that comes out of your mouth sometimes?"

A stab of frustration cut through Celestia, making her jaw tense. She struggled to bite it back. "I am not arrogant enough to believe that I am in complete control, Discord."

Discord looked at her, completely incredulous. "Oh yes, of course you are not. And while we are on the subject of things that you love to lie about, destiny is definitely something you believe in."

Shapes moved in the darkness. Celestia peered through the misty shadow, trying to make out what they were. A flash of purple confirmed her fears; it was Twilight and her friends, all being dragged along by a copy of Celestia, their heads and legs shackled by thin silver strings.

"Oh no..." Discord muttered while moving away, his body surrounded with dark tendrils. "You are not controlling them at all."

The shadow underneath Celestia's hooves began to run, moving like little streams. It pooled in lines along the floor, glistening despite the lack of any real light. After a time the lines began to grow upwards, seeping along invisible walls to form sheets of silvery darkness. Celestia knew what was coming even before they turned into glass.

The mirrors were arranged in haphazard rows, forming odd corridors stretching as far as she could see. Discord laughed, disappearing somewhere into the darkness. "Come on, Celestia!" he called out, his voice echoing and distorting in the dark. "I believe the game is called hide and seek!"

Celestia took a few hesitant steps forward, half expecting something else to form or make itself known. Yet she saw nothing but her own reflection, warped and disjointed, as she moved past the mirrors. Her eyes darted nervously, watching and waiting for anything out of the ordinary.

Celestia's reflection began to change depending on the mirror. In some mirrors she saw herself with the same benevolent and controlled expression that felt like a second skin to her now, the face she wore when around her subjects. In some mirrors she thought she saw a nightmare version of herself, cold and cruel, sneering back at her. In the rest there was nothing but herself wearing every single emotion she could think of. The faces laughed, cried, glared and shook back at her.

Yet in all of them, Celestia could see webs of silver strings, surrounding her, controlled by her. Celestia the puppet master.

It was not long before Celestia could make out the light flickering down the end of one of the rows. It was a warm glow, and it filled her with a feeling she associated with the inside of a pony's home.

She approached it carefully. What Celestia didn't understand, though, was the fact that here in the mirrors, she could feel her magic better. It wasn't strong enough for anything

more complex than a light spell, but it was there, waiting for her to use it. It made her anxious, apprehensive to find out just what Discord was playing at.

The glow revealed itself to be a fire burning merrily in a fireplace. Discord was curled up next to it like a cat, a monocle on his eye as he peered at a scroll floating in front of him. His other hand held a small fine-china cup of steaming tea. He sipped at it daintily, carefully blowing the steam off the top before he did. Apart from the fireplace, the darkness was empty, a surreal and incomplete mimicry of a pony study or living room.

"Ah, Celestia! You found me! Look at that. Round two goes to you as well."

"Mirrors? Discord, you are many things, but you are certainly not subtle."

"Subtlety is for clever ponies, Celestia."

"Ah. That would explain why you don't use it."

Discord laughed, throwing the cup of tea over his shoulder where it vanished in a puff of smoke. "You're suddenly in a good mood. I must not be trying hard enough. Also, I'm not a pony. Don't insult me."

"That is very, very clear to me," the princess replied, letting sarcasm bleed into her voice. It was petty, but it felt good. And sarcasm certainly wasn't moving backwards or giving up ground.

Discord regarded her for a moment. "Why do you do it, Celestia? Do the ends justify the means for you? Is necessity your excuse? Because if so, shame on you; that's a terrible justification."

"Necessity? Necessity doesn't always breed duty. I want to do better, Discord, for myself, and for Equestria. As hard as that must be for you to imagine, it's quite simple."

"Do better?' Oh yes... I remember that's what you used to say to little Luna when she started getting a little fiery."

"It's what we live by."

"And it's ridiculous. You do realise that you sound like a pony reading lines from one of those terrible plays, don't you? But still, why don't you, Celestia? Why *don't* you do better? I am sure there are lots of ponies who are waiting very patiently for that day."

Celestia ignored the comment, choosing instead to shift the focus of the conversation. "What do you have there?" she asked, looking at the unravelled scroll still floating in front of the draconequus.

"Oh this?" Discord replied. "I was wondering when you'd get around to asking me about these. Allow me to show you." He made a deal of clearing his throat. "Dear Princess Celestia, I've learned that one of the joys of friendship is sharing your blessings...' Oh look at that! How quaint!"

Celestia's throat constricted and her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing with those? They are mine, Discord. Not yours, and I don't see how they have any use for you in the slightest."

"They're interesting. Truly, they are totally fascinating. Look at how eager she was to please you. She just about turned herself inside out in her attempt to sprint down the path you set for her."

"I didn't set any path. That was one she chose for herself." Celestia felt the lie on her tongue. It was a bitter taste, and it made her want to spit.

Discord only chuckled, shaking his head. "I'm just looking forward to the day when she finally opens her eyes and sees you for who you truly are."

An image flashed on Celestia's left. Her head ducked to the side, finding herself looking at Twilight in a mirror. The young unicorn's face was smeared with ash and blood, small paths cut through the filth where her tears had travelled. A nightmarish copy of Celestia moved in front her, blocking Twilight from view.

Celestia exhaled loudly. "Again, Discord, more mirrors?"

He smirked tapping his fingers together like some evil mastermind. "Do you want to know something funny about mirrors, Celestia? They never lie."

"Except for when you control them."

"Oh no. Especially then. Even when the world has burnt itself to ashes, a mirror will still be able to show you exactly who you are. No matter what you do, or what you say, or even if you wear a mask, the mirror will always tell you the truth. The truth can always be seen in your eyes. And it is only a matter of time before *everypony* sees it."

"Mirrors can be broken."

A strange look came across the draconequus. It was a smile, but it was disconnected, almost as if he were thinking of something other than what was making him smile. "But Celestia, your mirrors are just fine. Isn't that right, Twilight Sparkle?"

Celestia's head snapped to the right. The voice of her faithful student drifted through the darkness, ghostly and ethereal. "Princess Celestia? Are you there? Princess? Please!"

Celestia forced herself to stay quiet. It was just another of Discord's mind games. She wasn't real. That wasn't Twilight. That wasn't *her* Twilight.

"Please! Princess where are you? I can't see! Princess? Where are you?"

Celestia could see the unicorn wandering around in the darkness, her eyes wide with fear darting around as she tried to make sense of her surroundings. She looked so small in the dark, no bigger than a foal framed by the nothing around her.

Discord drew close to the princess, leaving the pile of friendship reports on the floor. He put his face close to Celestia's, whispering in her ear, "Aren't you going to say anything? Look at her, so alone, so afraid. Show some compassion, Celestia. She needs your help."

It began as an orange glow taking root deep in the dark. The light grew and grew, and soon great licks of fire were crawling into visibility, sheets of flame that ate away at the darkness, replacing it with a searing heat. It surrounded Celestia and Twilight, ringing them in, creating a wall of hot air that made Celestia's skin prickle uncomfortably.

"Princess! Princess! Fire! Princess, please, where am I? What's going on? Please! Please help me!"

"The fire *is* pretty hot over there," Discord added, nudging Celestia with an elbow.

Celestia looked over at Twilight, the unicorn dashing from one side of the ring to the other, still unable to see the alicorn standing barely thirty feet away from her.

She just couldn't take it any more. "Twilight!" she cried out. "Twilight, I'm over here!"

"Princess? Princess! You're here! Oh thank you! I'm scared, Princess. Where am I?"

"Everything is going to be okay, Twilight. Trust me."

"What do I *do*?" Twilight said, staring at Celestia with desperate eyes.

"Come over here, Twilight. Just follow the sound of my voice. Just come over here. Everything will be fine."

Almost immediately, Twilight began walking over to the princess. She started off slow, placing each hoof tentatively in front of her like she was scared the floor would break.

"That's it, Twilight! Keep walking towards me!"

She should have known. She shouldn't have played his game. She should have known.

The fire tore across the ring, drawing a blazing line straight through the middle, separating Twilight and Celestia with a roaring inferno. Celestia flinched as the heat struck her face like a wall, drying her eyes out and make her skin feel like paper.

Twilight, however, did not stop. She kept stumbling forward like a blind pony, oblivious, every step bringing her closer towards the wall of fire.

"Twilight!" Desperation crept into Celestia's voice. "Twilight stop! Stop moving!"

"But why, Princess?" Twilight replied. "You said to follow your voice!"

"No! Stop! Don't move, Twilight! Discord is trying to hurt you!" She tried to move, she tried to lift her hooves or move her wings but nothing happened. They were dead weight glued to the shadowy floor.

"But you won't let that happen. I trust you, Princess. You said to follow your voice."

"No! Twilight, my faithful student, please! Just stop moving!"

"But you said... You said to – "

Celestia looked away just as Twilight stepped forward. She tried to block out all sounds, but she failed miserably. It echoed in her mind, a high pitched wail that screamed betrayal. But then even the scream fell silent, leaving nothing but the sound of flames crackling merrily.

The princess rounded on Discord, anger bubbling deep inside her chest like a volcano ready to unleash its fury upon the world. "Have you had your fun now?! Have you proved your point with your illusions and games?"

"There, there," Discord said, chuckling as he patted Celestia's head. The alicorn took a swipe at his arm with a hoof, only for her leg to pass through his body like smoke. "It's just an illusion like you said. Why are you so upset? It's not like it's real."

Celestia forced herself to take a deep breath. He wanted a reaction, and she was giving one to him. Even after all these years, even despite the millennia separating the last time they had seen each other, he was still beating her at a game she had claimed to have mastered.

"And it's not as if you did anything to help! You just stood there and watched her burn alive because you told her to. That is truly cruel, Celestia. Even I'm not *that* dark." He slithered behind her, moving like a snake in the air. "So cold," he whispered. "So very cold. Where is your compassion, Celestia?"

The friendship reports were on fire now. Celestia watched them burn, her heart pounding and her mind racing. Her horn glowed faintly as her body began to tremble with the effort. One by one the scrolls were consumed, vanishing into nothing.

Discord began to laugh, resting on his side next to Celestia, studying her face. "So it's time to take the test again. Do you know the thing about mirrors, Celestia?"

Celestia fought hard to keep her voice calm and in control. "They never lie?"

"They never lie," Discord repeated. A mirror drew itself out of the floor, rising up in front of the pair. Celestia could see herself, looking gaunt and haggard, ash clinging to her face. Discord was floating behind her, holding a marionette in his mismatched paws, all of the strings connected to her, all of them pulled tight.

The princess jerked away, putting as much distance between herself and the mirror as she could. The fires were going out now, leaving the world cold and dark again.

"You are a fool if you think that you can control me, Discord! You have tried before and you failed, and you will do so again."

"Never control you? You played my game for years, Celestia, and you lost time and time again!"

"I won, though," Celestia replied, letting her voice snap. "In the end I won and you were the one imprisoned in stone."

Discord's jaw tensed. "Yes, but you cheated."

"No one likes a sore loser," Celestia replied, fighting to keep her temper in check. Too late she realised that Discord was beating her; her facade had cracked.

Discord pushed away, smiling to himself. "You still have so much to learn, Celestia. You are still so bad at this game."

"You are young compared to me, snake!"

"And why are you still so naive?" Discord snapped. His claw glowed and the mirrors shattered into pieces, blowing away on some unseen wind.

One mirror remained. It grew and grew, fed by the pieces of those broken before it. Celestia watched as it formed a single glass sheet in front of her, towering high into the sky.

"Let's take a trip down memory lane, shall we?" Discord said, playing with a ball of light between his hands. "We should always start at the beginning when telling a story."

"Except you never started at the beginning," Celestia said tightly.

"Ah well." Discord shrugged. "Better late than never."

Images began to swirl into life in the mirror. Celestia stared at them, watching shapes form like water pooling in a bowl. At first it was indiscriminate, and she was unable to make anything out. But then two ponies, alicorns to be exact, shifted into frame. They were two lone foals, sitting in a field of silver grass moving gently with the wind. Celestia knew this picture. She remembered that night well.

Luna and Celestia looked up at a dark sky, almost as if the heavens were blanketed in cloud. But she remembered that it was a cloudless night. Luna pointed up to the sky, her eyes narrowed in frustration. Celestia smiled and pointed as well, her mouth moving. She couldn't hear, but she remembered the words like she had spoken them yesterday.

The night sky is your canvas. You can paint on it anything you want. Then the ponies will see.

They will?

They will. You can make it beautiful. You can make it yours.

Stars began to form in the darkness, little pinpricks of fairy light that shone brightly, happy and confident.

Celestia smiled at the memory. She watched as Luna jumped up, pointing and laughing. She had been so proud.

And then, in the darkness around Celestia, little lights burst into existence. The princess glanced over, trying to work out what it was. They were quickly joined by more, and then more, all glowing merrily, their twinkles like little smiles.

The stars, Celestia realised. They were the stars.

Before long, the darkness was covered in a blanket of lights radiating a quiet and gentle peace. The night sky always had a serene kind of beauty. It was a fact too few acknowledged. Maybe it all would have been different all those years ago if ponies had, but Celestia would never know.

Then, on opposite sides of the horizon, two glowing circles filled the sky. One was golden yellow, burning brightly for all to see; the other was soft and mysterious, filling its side of the heavens with a sense of peace. They were both roughly equal in size, the sun being slightly larger, just as it was in Equestria.

They began their journey across the sky, arcing up towards each other, shedding light over Celestia and Discord, the pair casting long shadows that danced behind them.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it?" Discord said, putting on a pair of sunglasses.

Celestia didn't reply.

"The beginning. The song that breathed life into all creation. A very long time ago indeed, really."

Celestia looked away from the two celestial orbs. They were becoming dangerously close to each other now. "More than a long time ago. Before you, at least."

"So you think," Discord countered. He threw a glance up at the stars over the top of his shades, a little smile growing on his lips. "Mhmm. So much has changed. So much yet to come..."

Back in the mirror, the image changed. The stars were still there, but they were duller now, like a mist was covering the sky. Luna was staring up at the stars, her face shadowed, her eyes veiled with a darkness of their own.

Celestia approached slowly, tentatively, almost as if Luna were a wild animal of some sort. The princess said something, and Luna snapped, whirling around on her sister, pointing to the night sky. Alone, she had said. She was so alone.

The real Celestia looked back up. She frowned. The sun and moon were not stopping, each one hurtling towards the other on a collision course of epic proportions. The sun was bearing down on the moon, the flames on its surface glowing hungrily. If they didn't stop they were going to hit. But no, they couldn't...

Celestia reached upwards, a cry half formed on her lips. Yet all the warning in the world would do her no good.

She could not stop it.

The two celestial bodies hurtled forwards, now seconds from impact.

No!

On the mirror, the moon soared into the sky. Celestia cried out. It was the sun's turn. It was the day, not the night.

Luna turned away, choosing her own fate. There could only be one.

"But you know what they say about beginnings," Discord murmured, looking up past the mirror at the two celestial bodies as well. "Everything that has a beginning has an ending."

The sky exploded. The sun and the moon collided with a shattering roar that shook the heavens to their foundations. The moon cracked and buckled under the sun's immense size and heat. Celestia looked on, her mouth hanging open limply as the moon began to shatter completely, huge burning chunks plummeting down from the heavens. The sun distorted as coronas of light stretched away, forced outwards by the force of the moon's impact.

The moon began to lose all sense of structure, falling to pieces as the sun sputtered and choked, threatening to go out. The darkness trembled as shards of the moon speared into the shadow around them, the flame casting angry shadows around the world.

"Oh dear," Discord said.

A shard began falling toward them. It raced through the darkness, leaving a fiery trail of light. Celestia tried to move her hooves, but they would not budge. Her wings felt leaden, almost like they were glued to her sides.

Celestia looked up at the shard, and then she closed her eyes...

"But you know what? I've grown tired of this."

...And then she opened them.

The world flickered around her like a spluttering candle. Celestia saw herself standing alone on top of a tower, garbed in her armour of old, her spear by her side. Her mane blew about her face, and her eyes radiated power. Before her, the world bowed to her will; her strength was unwavering in its mission. Balance ruled supreme, the world and its spirit in a perfect equilibrium with each other. Everything was as it should be.

Ponies surrounded her. Some of them yelled in anger, others in fear. They marshaled around an alicorn as dark as the night sky, her mane shimmering like liquid starlight. Beside her levitated a curved sword, a weapon not seen since the elder days. Her eyes carried a simple message and a desperate plea all at the same time.

Please... Stop.

But all was as it should be. The world would be safe forever.

No.

Metallic screeches filled the air, sparks dancing from their burning blades like the blows from a forge. Lightning tore the sky apart, the earth cracking under the heat. But she was strong, ancient and invincible.

One by one, the sky darkened as the stars went out.

Celestia could smell the blood in the air, mixed with the metallic stench of fear and desperation. The ponies could do little more than watch in horror as the smoking body of Celestia's foe fell before them.

All was as it should be...

"You are not as different as you would like to be, Celestia. You are not as high and mighty as you think."

"Discord, why are you so frightened of the unknown? You don't understand sacrifice. You don't understand what it means to dedicate yourself to one purpose, to the good of something. You just don't understand, and you want to destroy that which you fail to comprehend."

"Oh Celestia!" Discord cried out, throwing his arms up into the air. "I understand better than you ever will! You are the one who struggles to comprehend what I would say are pretty basic concepts. You destroy and you corrupt. You corrupt everything that loves you and you turn it into evil."

Nightmare Moon flew past them, yelling in defiance. Celestia looked away only to find herself staring straight at Twilight Sparkle, the unicorn glowing with power, her eyes white like lightning. The unicorn walked unharmed through raging fires, Nightmare Moon screaming in pain as Twilight cast her down. Celestia's clone stayed behind, holding the marionette directing Twilight's actions.

"Oh yes..." Discord murmured, munching on popcorn. "Definitely for the good of everything. You are just like me, Celestia."

Celestia looked away, her skin crawling. "I am nothing like you."

"Is that it? Is that all Celestia, wordsmith and chess master, can say in response? Denial! Woo hoo hoo! I think I can see the little cracks appearing in your mask, Celestia. It's all just breaking apart..."

The darkness began to growl, and the world shook as if trapped in the middle of an earthquake. Great cracks split themselves in the open, rending the darkness apart, revealing nothing but a swirling void beyond, a tempest of shades of black.

Celestia began to run. She pushed her legs as hard as she could, sprinting through the darkness. Discord hovered behind her, cackling madly. The cracks grew wider and wider, and soon pieces of the darkness shattered and fell into the void below.

"Why are you running, Celestia? This isn't real, you know. You don't have to run."

"Fighting is a symbol," Celestia shot back, jumping over an ever-widening gap. She was stronger than Discord. She could play his game, but she would play by her rules now. "And I'll never give up fighting against you, Discord."

"Oooh! Look at that! That's new. You are right. It is a symbol. It's also fun. But you know what? I have had enough of symbols. It's time to go home."

The floor underneath Celestia vanished. She fell, her wings snapping open instinctively. They found no purchase in the darkness, though, and she plummeted like a stone.

She looked down at the void, wondering what it would be like inside.

But she never found out.

The first thing she became aware of was the sunlight. This wasn't like the sunlight before; this sun was pure, gentle and warm. Reassuring. It was *her* sun. Everything around her looked like Equestria, the same hills, trees and buildings. She was standing on the outskirts of Ponyville, the town in an absolute uproar.

Discord was having his fun, it seemed.

Entire buildings were hovering upside down, floating in the air like lopsided cloud houses. The roads were covered in a thick, bubbly liquid – soap judging by the clinical smell. Ponies floated in the air, barking like animals, their eyes vapid and distant, their movements erratic. Creatures with distended limbs crawled around, attacking clouds of cotton candy with vigour. Yells of panic and fear filled the air as ponies tried to work out what on earth was happening to them. And, more importantly, where their princess was.

Right here! She was right here...

Discord moved up next to Celestia, his expression almost dripping with smugness. "Welcome home, Celestia. I hope you don't mind what I've done with the place."

"Well, it's certainly a little more authentic," Celestia replied. "A little less fire than last time, though. It spoils the illusion somewhat, unless you have just grown soft."

Discord raised an eyebrow. "Oh no. It's time, and I have grown tired of that. Come with me; Twilight and her friends are almost back."

"Is she? Let me guess, things aren't going to plan for you here, are they?"

"What? Oh things are going splendidly. Quite according to plan, if I do say so myself." Discord looked around, his eyes darting anxiously. "Hmm. They should be here any second now..."

They were walking into the town centre now, and Celestia looked around desperately, trying to find her pupil. She wanted nothing more than to stretch her wings and take to the sky, but she knew Discord wouldn't let her get far, not when he was so focused on showing her something. What it was, however, she dreaded to find out.

While everywhere she went Celestia could still hear the yells and cries, not once did she see a normal pony for more than a second, her subjects always vanishing down a street before they even had a chance to see *her*. She passed through the town unchallenged, uncalled on.

At the town centre, Discord stopped, throwing himself on a throne he summoned from nothing. He stretched as he put his hands behind his head. The throne was a hideous affair made from black stone and red leather, the edges of its high back angled like a blade. The draconequus snapped his talons and one of the houses adjacent to them suddenly sprouted legs, dragging itself away from the town square and out toward the hills.

"Oh this is *so* much fun!" Discord cried, throwing his arms into the air and letting a storm of confetti explode forth. "How could I ever have forgotten just how much I enjoyed this?!"

Celestia refused to give him the satisfaction of answering. She held her tongue, waiting.

Discord's head snapped to side, the movement faster than a mortal pony could see. "Here she is."

Celestia turned as fast as she could, kicking up a cloud of dust. Her heart soared for just a moment when, sure enough, she saw Twilight and her five friends sprinting towards them. Determination shone in their eyes, and around their necks hung the elements of harmony, the jewels glinting in the sunlight.

Celestia smiled, letting the thrill of victory burn brightly inside her. She knew Twilight could do it; all she needed was a little push in the right direction. "Oh dear," she said. "Looks like you are in trouble."

Discord simply smiled and snapped his fingers.

Twilight's eyes locked onto Celestia's, a smile lighting up her face, joy glowing in her eyes.

It wasn't real. She knew it wasn't.

It all happened so slowly, as if time itself was trying to prolong the moment, forcing her to understand just what was happening. The look of relief on Twilight's face suddenly turned into one of pain, her eyes rolling back into their sockets, her twisted expression matched by her friends'. They all cried out, tripping over their own hooves as their bodies lost the ability to function. They collapsed into the dirt, coming to a sliding stop not ten feet from where Celestia stood.

Not one of them got up. Not one of them even stirred.

Discord grinned, his eyes burning, his whole body glowing as he snarled in victory. "Oops," he said. "I slipped. How clumsy of me."

Celestia took a deep breath. "You truly are a monster."

Discord froze. His body jerked in the air like a fish caught on a line. He turned to face the princess.

"What did you say?"

"You are a monster," Celestia replied, keeping her voice as flat as possible. A smile began to grow on her face as a rainbow spread across in the sky.

"I..." Discord twitched again. "You... You really are cold, Celestia. I'm surprised."

"Oh? How so? Is something the matter?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I had expected at least a scream. Perhaps tears in anger or denial. You were the one who said you loved her."

Celestia began to laugh. Rainbow light was crawling in from all around now, tearing the world apart at the seams. "Discord, you just never learn. Look around you! Your world, your lies, are crumbling around you! I can see that. Why would you think that I would actually believe this is real? You are losing, and you know it. You must have gotten desperate indeed if you had to resort to trying to convince me this was the real world."

Discord raised an eyebrow, the move somewhat ruined by the grimace that shot across his face soon after. "Oh? Do explain."

"You just never learn. In the shadow world, back with the mirrors, you forgot something. You left the magical ley lines open. Those friendship reports were real; you must have taken them straight from my study. I still had control over them. You gave me my

weapons, the ammunition I had been giving Twilight to strengthen her bond to the elements. By the looks of things, my plan is succeeding. But you would know better than me, wouldn't you? I think you have just lost."

Discord didn't move. He stared at Celestia, as still as a statue for what felt like a full minute. The princess held his gaze, the smile never leaving her face.

The draconequus' mouth twitched. A muscle in his jaw tensed, and for just one second, Celestia could have sworn there was violence glittering in his eyes. But then it was gone, and Discord began to laugh.

Celestia frowned. The rainbow light was growing stronger, the world itself blurring and fading away. Discord jerked erratically like a puppet controlled by someone who didn't know what they were doing.

It didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. He clutched at his sides, crying with mirth. Celestia's patience was beginning to wear thin, and she grit her teeth. "What is so funny? Do you enjoy being defeated?"

"It's always a matter of perspective, isn't it, Celestia? Good and evil, winning and losing."

"It doesn't matter what way you look at it, Discord. You have lost again."

"Ah. But you know something else about perspective? It's always relative. Except for a mirror. Mirrors never lie." He waved his hand, a sheet of glass shimmering into existence in front of Celestia. He struggled behind her, moving as if fighting against a strong tide. The world around them was almost gone now, the rainbow light consuming all.

"What are – " She stopped, staring at the mirror. Twilight was standing next to her with vacant eyes, the unicorn's body limp and lifeless, held up by a marionette Celestia was holding within her magic. But behind her, behind the princess herself, Discord was grinning, gripping a marionette of his own, all of the silver strings connected to Celestia. In his other hand was a single scroll, a friendship report. He blew on it, and it vanished in a puff of flame.

"And you say I don't understand sacrifice. I would like to see you sacrifice this much." Discord chuckled, moving away from Celestia, the alicorn's face frozen. "This was fun, Celestia. We shall have to do it again in a couple thousand years. If you are still around, that is. Who knows, maybe next time you will join me..."

"You... You snake! You're lying!"

Discord only laughed louder. "Ta-ta now! Stay out of trouble, you hear? Because trust me when I say trouble will come to you..."

"You're wrong! You're a liar!"

Discord smiled, his eyes glinting with joy.

"No!"

The rainbow light consumed everything, and Discord and his smiling face disappeared.

• • •

Celestia opened her eyes. She was back in the great hall, alone once more, Discord nowhere to be seen. She couldn't see Twilight's body or those of her friends, either. Her breathing was fast and ragged, and her mind did not feel any better.

He couldn't be right. It didn't make sense to imprison himself again. He couldn't have sacrificed so much just... just to break her.

Could he?

The sound of hoofsteps filled the air, reverberating down the hall. Her breath caught itself in her throat, her heart skipping a beat.

"Princess? Princess Celestia? Where are you?"

"I'm... I'm here, Twilight."

Twilight moved into view, her smile radiant like the sun. "We did it, Princess! We did it! Discord is imprisoned in stone once more. Equestria has been saved!" The unicorn beamed up at her mentor, so eager to please, so proud and yet so innocent. Twilight threw herself at Celestia, drawing the princess into a warm, tight hug. "I couldn't have done it without you, Princess. Your letters saved everything."

Just for a second, Celestia froze at the touch. But then she forced a smile, wrapping her wings tightly around the small pony, sheltering her from the world.

Celestia exhaled and closed her eyes. The silver strings above Twilight's head... they were just in her mind's eye. They weren't real.

"I knew you could do it, Twilight," she whispered. "I always did."