

Arddun Lleuad

Pride

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	6
Chapter 3	13
Chapter 4	25
Chapter 5	36
Chapter 6	53
Chapter 7	64
Chapter 8	84
Epilogue	114

PONY FICTION VAULT



"Sometimes you just have to bow to the absurd."

- Captain Jean-Luc Picard

I vomited again.

Grass... it was grass. No, the ground was hard. Earthy. I was outside. Frogs and owls started calling. It was cold.

What the hell just happened? Only a few moments ago... I had been sitting at my desk with my LED lamp illuminating a 1:1400 model of the USS Enterprise, the final piece ready to glue to the rest of the ship thus completing months of work. A wave of nausea hit me like a spear tearing at my insides... spreading out like liquid ill, enveloping me with such force and speed that it caused me to double up. I tried calling for help, but produced only a low, agonized moan. A moment later, I had found myself face-down in the shag carpet of my room. I'd laid there like a fish out of water, my eyes unseeing and my mouth gaping as I snapped for air, the tearing in my guts ripping me apart. Thoughts of somehow dialing 911 were interrupted as *reality itself* seemed to melt and warp, and then the carpeting became... cold, hard dirt.

Several tense moments passed before I dared to open my eyes and take in the environs. The ground was a shade of green that was a dubious shade of brown, of what terrain it was I could not fathom; the trees were a sort of purple; and the flora was a mismatching clod of ferns, vines and flowers that were swamp-like, which matched the sounds I was hearing, yet the air was arid. The forest looked almost like it had come down with disease and never recovered.

"Jesus." I sat up, covering my face with my hand, taking a breath, trying not to let it become a sob. A sharp pain in my hand directed my attention to my clenched fist. I slowly opened it to see the final piece of my model still there, cutting its outline into my palm. I closed my hand about it again in spite of the discomfort. It was like clinging to a piece of my sanity. I glanced again at the purpled trees.

"Jesus Christ."

I forced myself to my feet.

I unfurled only to a point, too afraid to stand tall, to make it all real by interacting with a bad dream. Forcing my muscles into action, I stumbled forward towards the clearest

visible area of forest, my heartbeat riding on the sounds of my sometimes-rustling, sometimes-cracking footfalls.

As I walked I realised what a fool I'd been. I cackled with the manic realization that I had my phone in the breast pocket of my shirt. I clutched my chest in search of it; the impact of the hard chunk of plastic on my palm sent a joyous jolt of relief through my entire nervous system. Body standing down from full alert, I unbuttoned the pocket with a shaking hand, hit 999 and pressed "Call".

A moment's silence. And three sharp beeps answered my plea for help. I knew what those beeps meant. The sob I had suppressed earlier escaped me. No service. No service! I collapsed against a tree and dropped the phone into my pocket.

Somewhere in the back of my befuddled brain, reason was trying to apply itself to the situation, and getting brutalised by instinct and hard reality. Was I cut off from humanity? Was I walking the wrong way? Salvation could be behind that clump of trees I walked past, unknown to me. These thoughts threatened to push me to the borders of insanity.

Keep yourself together, Chester. Just keep your head.

There was no other option open to me, so I moved. I walked. The forest-thing remained the same. The ground remained a greenish-brown. The flora still made no attempt at order. Still the trees looked like bloodshot replicas of swamp trees. At least the feel of movement and purpose, however desperate, had made me calmer. Berries were dangling from outstretched foliage. I wondered if they were "safe".

I saw up ahead a stop in the trees - clear air from what must have been a cliff beyond. Different terrain, something to prove that the entire world around me wasn't the same forest going on forever, was most welcome.

And then, it wasn't so welcome. I stopped near the edge of the rocky cliff, and beheld a violet sky.

I simply stared at the clouds, which weren't clouds at all, but thin trails that hung in the sky. Some appeared as spirals, others stretched across the sky in snaky strips. Near the horizons the sky grew a lighter shade of violet, like a sunset without a setting sun.

My body went cold while I stood there, thunderstruck with a terrible awe. I slumped down to the ground and stared up at the sky, mind a complete blank, thoughts ceasing to occur. In spite of myself, a smile began to touch my lips. Perhaps the complete bleakness

of my situation had started to find cracks and crevices in my psyche, but I was reminded that once, a great man once said that sometimes, you just have to bow to the absurd. Not without a self-deprecating smirk, I flicked the plastic replica of the Enterprise's engine down the cliff. Goodbye, sanity. I knew ye well.

I walked along the cliff's edge feeling utterly out of place wherever I trod. The world seemed to be collapsing in on me, pushing me from all directions. I walked with equal parts senselessness and mirthless humour. Occasionally I succumbed to a bark of laughter for the sheer hell of it. From my vantage point, I could see that the cliffs seemed to spread around a valley that went on for as far as I could tell to either direction. If things weren't already bad, thirst began to make itself noticeable. I regretted passing up those berries. I kept moving.

At first I blamed my imagination, but then I was certain: the trees were beginning to grow ever-so-slightly greener. The terrain, primarily lumpy mounds of earth placed at random, began to flatten. And somehow, the air seemed clearer - easier to breathe as compared to earlier. But I was no nearer to anything hopeful.

I spotted a deep, black crevice in a rocky rise ahead of me, mired in darkness. I couldn't sleep outside on the forest floor; and I had been a vulnerable enough target for any fantastic predators that may roam nearby. Likely, there was nothing in that cave for me to fear.

Heart pounding regardless, I extracted my phone once more and switched to its MP3 player. I could use the phone as a light source - the only one I could think of - and if anything was in there, I would play the alarm tune and run, hoping to get away while the phone's music provided a sufficient distraction. Frankly, this was lunacy. Surely dark caves in forests were better explored in daylight. But that was, of course, assuming that this world had such a thing as daylight. For all I knew, this murky twilight WAS the shade of day. I couldn't wait for a sunrise that might never come.

Holding the phone before me, the cave turned out to be small and empty, barely more than ten by four feet. Although almost impossible to believe, there was nothing here. No traces of habitation, no animal bedding, just an empty cave.

I turned to the mouth of the cave and slumped against the back wall. I had started to approach something that resembled "safety".

It had been a long time coming, and now was the best time. I bent my head back, looking out at the alien world beyond the cave mouth. For a while I just stared at it, hoping the

image would go away somehow, that the environs outside would shrink away until they vanished into an infinitesimal speck. I wanted it so much that I began to hope that force of will alone would cause it to happen.

But wanting something doesn't make it reality. No, reality was very different to what I wanted it to be. Very different indeed. Even though my memory of how I came here defied all attempts to understand it, I clung to the idea that it was rational, and reversible, like a man lost at sea clings to a rock to protect against the tide.

I was scared, I was tired, and most of all, I didn't want to be here. Arm sliding along the ground, never taking my eyes from the cave mouth, I lay on the ground and waited for sleep to come and take away this nightmare.

I was chained down to the ground. People stood around me, but I couldn't see their faces; they were obscured by a thick, eternal darkness, darkness that took sight and made it stretch on and on forever. I needed to tell them something, something so important I would give my life to tell them, to make them know, to make them hear me, for just a second. But as I shouted, no sound sprang forth; I strained against my bonds, they asked what was wrong, why could I not speak, would I please stop struggling. I tried to scream, but produced only silence. I thrashed and flailed, but they showed only gentle, loving concern for my violent plight. I began to cry out, but it was always, always, in vain.

I surged awake into a frigid cold; cold from sweat, cold from the air, and my chest hurt from rapid and heavy breaths. My throat was parched. But the nightmare... it made my blood freeze, my muscles deaden. I had to sit and gather myself for entire minutes before I could function again.

The night - or day - beyond the cave hadn't changed. My phone registered midday, but I was dubious as to whether to trust the thing or not in these circumstances.

A morning ritual, something rehearsed, natural, fitting to start the day... wake at 7, turn off alarm, shower, breakfast, listen to the Gorillaz while on the train to university. How that seemed like a comforting luxury right now; how it had been a granted thing only one day ago. All I could do was rub sleep from my eyes with my fingers and feel that weakening thirst in my throat. I missed my bed, my water, my collection of Star Trek models, my desk where I brought all the pieces of a new model kit together, bought with student loan money, and made loving replicas of my favourite star ships, arranged in order of fame from top to bottom.

Bringing my palm down my face to crash back to reality, I considered my situation. Nothing had come during the night to find me lurking in their cave; I had seen nothing as I walked in the forest before I fell asleep. It was safe to assume that there was nothing out there but frogs and crickets, and I was the top of the food chain.

I set off again into the wilderness in search of hydration. I wasted no time setting out away from the forest-facsimile I had awoken in. The soft impact of grass under my shoes as I walked was most welcome. If there was clean water, it would be in this direction.

It'd been some time, walking to the ambience of birds and the wind, before I came across tracks that made me stop and stare, muscles seizing up. Whatever had made them was bloody *enormous*. They were easily twice as large as my own feet, in the shape of paws,

like a giant lion. No size of lion I could even imagine could make tracks like that. Even worse, they were inconsistent; two huge paws, two tiny paws, as if whatever had made them was misshapen and deformed, its front paws twice the size of its back paws. The same could not be said of similar tracks that ran parallel to whatever monster had made the first; tracks that appeared to belong to some kind of miniature horse. Both sets ran in the same direction, together.

Tentative walking had become a shaky attempt at stalking. As I travelled, the gradual increase of the "wellbeing" of the land eased my nervous state somewhat, but regardless my nerves were on a knife-edge, eyes in constant alert on the trees and even their branches above. As I did so, however, it was unquestionable that the sky was turning shades of blue, daylight beginning to form, moving away from the alien night I'd been so awestruck by only so many hours ago. To punctuate this fact, I saw a sun beginning to form in the sky. It would be far easier to see whatever titanic beast had created those tracks in daylight, even if the same applied to my own silhouette.

Then I saw it, to my left as I kept watch for the beast: a tree with large red orbs hanging on its branches. Unmistakably an apple tree. I would have settled for some freakish, blue, foreign substance as nourishment on this alien world! Perhaps I was in some bizarre, obscure country where the sky could be purple... stranger things have happened.

Once at its roots, I broke a branch from a nearby tree and started to beat an apple down. As one fell to the ground I picked it up like a diamond in the rough, I gave it a cursory examination, and wondered why my careful nibble had suddenly become a ferocious bite.

Mother of all things holy...

This was *gorgeous*.

It set a tidal wave of taste over my parched tongue that eroded away my mind's rationality. I felt my body go weak from the sheer impact of it; every bite was another surge of pleasure. My once-sandpaper mouth had been flooded with ambrosia, where I would have settled for a trickle of water.

I relished the taste of apple in my mouth as I collected an armful of apples from the tree and set back towards my cave. With food that could both nourish and hydrate, I would be just fine until I found some way back to normality. I had come here; there would surely be some way to go back.

I could almost see my cave when I heard it. Something big. I froze upon hearing it, and dropped to the ground, moving behind whatever could obscure me. Just controlling my breathing - and my booming heart - was all I could do. What was undoubtedly the shape of a lion emerged from the forest.

As expected, this thing was *beyond* massive. Unexpected, however, was what looked like a massive flap of raw flesh that seemed to be made of dried *meat*. Behind it seemed to float some sort of beaded rope that coiled towards its head. It was moving away from me, towards a small clearing, whereupon the true nature of the beast became apparent.

A *wing*. And a tail. A scorpion's tail. It was a manticore of legend, a gargantuan, winged lion with the tail of a scorpion. Its back legs were sickly and thin, but its front legs were thick columns of muscle. I stared at it, failing to connect the sight to reality. But there it was. At any point it could turn and look my way, and my final moments would be pitiful resistance and then a vicious cacophony of crushed bone and ripped flesh. But the manticore's slow, lumbering path bore it away from me. All I would have to do is try not to shriek in terror, and I would survive.

I watched it prowl away from me, out of sight, like a man on an electric chair watches a man who has come to free him from its binds, waving a letter of pardon. But in my tension, I had failed to realise that I was carrying a large armful of apples.

I barely had time to register the movement of the topmost few until they had landed against a tree root, bounced up, and came down through the leaves of the bushes where I hid.

I looked down at the apple in shock, and then up to the manticore.

Our eyes met.

My apples thudded to the floor. I bolted. I ran, as fast as I could away from the thing. As I ran, stumbling and terrified, I could hear it approaching, getting louder and louder as it closed the space between us, taking massive, leaping bounds, terrifying speed, thunderous approach, roars of ferocity singing of the impending carnage it would make of me in mere seconds.

I tore at my breast pocket, pulled my phone out, mashed the buttons in blind desperation and threw it behind me.

As the phone left my hand I lost my footing and crashed forward onto the forest floor. I froze, breathing into the ground, waiting for the beast to expose my innards to the air.

I heard the manticore's heavy footfalls stop, and turn. I heard a distant, irritating, digital tone grow even more distant. I was still in disbelief for a few seconds, until I heard the manticore slide to a halt, roar, and begin to run in the other direction.

I scrambled away, listening to a claw the size of a large frying pan pound on cracking plastics. I don't know how long I ran for, but I never looked back.

• • •

I had climbed into a tree, and was hugging a tree branch in what I could only identify as shock. The manticore was so big. It stood as tall as I did, at nearly two metres tall. It was so fast. And when it travelled, the ground shook with mighty earthquakes. I couldn't go for a single minute without remembering the sight of it behind me, growing larger, getting closer, the look of primal fury and open jaws...

A weapon. Something to hold, something to brandish, anything that could help me. I set two hands around a nearby branch and heaved until it broke free. As soon as I clutched it to my chest I began to breathe again.

After much gathering of courage, I scurried back to the cave I'd found earlier. I examined again my weapon of choice. As I held it, gripped it, swung it in experimentation, I was struck with the thought that this may be the first time something has ever fashioned a weapon in this world. For some reason, that thought calmed me more than actually wielding the thing.

The stick was a paltry weapon, barely a defence, but it was something. Better than my bare hands. With an idle thought, I wondered to myself: did anything else have hands in this world? Would I be a special kind of gourmet for whatever mythological beast found was to...

Mythological? I blinked. I knew what the manticore was. It wasn't some alien creature, it was something I knew. It was something that had been documented in my world. Whether it had roots in this one, or mine, I knew of the manticore legend. There was a connection.

I was of an open mind. Perhaps in dreaming someone had come by this world through their visions, and glimpsed the mighty beast, whose countenance was then engraved upon their unconscious mind to be depicted in legend. I had arrived here; perhaps I was not the first. It could be anything, and I wasn't ready to burden my mind with impossible conundrums when I had threats of the body to deal with.

It was nearly night. I had observed that the violet sky above me did, in fact, change; the "clouds" moved and the sky changed shades over time, ranging from a warm violet darkness to pitch black. I had moved alongside the brighter lands, in terrible fear of coming across the manticore - or anything else - again. If my cave was right next to - or even *in* - an area the manticore considered its territory, I would be wise never to return there again.

But for the first time I had seen stars up in that sky tonight, which confirmed that this was the first night I'd ever seen in this world. This nameless world, I wondered. It was hardly my right to name it, even if I was the only sentient being on its face capable of doing so. The thought was ridiculous - an entire planet without any trace of settlements or civilisation? - but the thought of it made something stir, deep in my spirit; a stirring of wonder, of exploration, of majesty at worlds unknown, and for that split second I was in awe at the very idea of naming a world. I would never even think of doing such a thing, but I couldn't deny I dreamed of it.

From my cave mouth I could see the stars coming out. '*Who are we, if full of care; we have no time to stand and stare.*' I pitied those who didn't see the void above us every night, I laughed at those who looked up into infinite possibility and saw nothing of interest in the black, night sky. These stars that shone above me were truly magnificent.

If God existed, and He created the stars, then surely they were His masterpiece.

The idea came to me that I could try and find Orion's Belt - the only constellation I knew - in the blanket of black above. I stepped out of the cave and looked up around the night sky.

The sight hit me like a solemn, heartfelt vow of true love.

Oh god, the *moon*. It was so *beautiful*. It was so peaceful, so graceful. It put everything to shame. **Everything** The stars were jokes beside it. Jesus Christ, it filled me with such intense wonder. This moon was of such passion that just looking at it made my body surge with what I can only describe as raw love.

It just hung there, moving so gradually over its domain, its own personal night, master of all below. The sight of it seemed to fill me entirely; the colour of it seeped behind my eyes and into my brain, filling every crevice of my body with its gorgeous hue; I felt that nameless colour that it bestowed upon all below, I felt it under my palms, which pressed against my temples. I sat down on the ground and watched it sail through the sea of stars.

Hours passed as I watched her. I made absolutely certain I could see the moon until it was no more, moving here and there, finding trees to climb. When the horizon began to claim the moon back, I gave her a bittersweet farewell, and an aching loneliness ebbed at me as soon as she had vanished. A profound loneliness that planted one irrefutable thing in my mind: I was alone in this world. Cut off. Estranged. But I will see her again the next night. To see her - it was almost a reason to live, in and of itself.

Whether it was above my station or not to give names to this world, I named her - and by extension, this world that she watched - *Arddun Lleuad*, Welsh for *Beautiful Moon*.

• • •

"Praetor hasn't brought his chess set."

Red Forest emitted a low whistle. "When was the last time he didn't bring it to the field?"

"Are you kidding?" replied Morning Down. "I don't think any of us are old enough to remember that."

The two Guardsponies walked down Ponyville's cosy street, in the cool air of dusk. All lights were out by now; the tents had gone up just before Ponyville had started to collectively drift off to sleep. As ponies were laying their heads to rest, the hustle and bustle had stopped - right on schedule.

Every tent they passed stood up to impromptu inspection; maps prepared, squads in order, rotations clear. Each tent had its search pattern displayed prominently amongst the documents and paperwork, but by now the assembled Guardsponies knew their routes like they knew their own cutie marks. Each tent was stocked with the right herbs and salves they would need.

The inspector duo enjoyed strolling back through idyllic Ponyville at night on their way back to the central command tent. Inside the command tent, as they both expected, Praetor himself was pouring over the same maps he'd been scrutinising ever since he'd drawn them up. Even while sitting, he was easily the most prominent thing in the room; larger than most ponies, as was appropriate, with his being the Praetor of the Guard.

They approached, and both Guardsponies bowed. Morning Down uttered a respectful "Sir" before Praetor looked at them. That scholarly look was well known to both Guardsponies that stood there; Praetor always looked like that when he was examining plans or strategies: intelligent, focused, intent.

"Ah, there you are, gentlecolts."

Red Forest and Morning Down stood at attention. "All squads are ready to begin in the morning, sir. No shortcomings to report."

"As expected. Marvellous. Before you retire for the night, I have made a slight error in regards to the third and fourth search party routes. Here are the revised documents - would you be so kind?"

Red Forest bowed slightly. "I'll take them, sir. Not a two-pony job, Morn. You go get some shut-eye."

Morning Down put a hoof over his mouth to cover a conveniently-timed yawn. "I think that's my body saying 'Yes please', Red. Thanks." Red Forest smiled in camaraderie, took the new routes in his mouth and left the warm glow of the command tent.

Morning Down watched him leave before he turned to Praetor, who stood facing him expectantly.

"Sir..." began Morning. Praetor nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"What will we do when we find whatever it is we're looking for?"

Praetor considered for a moment. "If it's an object, we'll simply take it back to Canterlot. If it's a beast of some description, should it cooperate, then we won't have a problem. If it doesn't, well..."

Morning waited with baited breath as Praetor thought to himself.

"We shall perform our function by any means necessary," Praetor spoke quietly, as one who understands the gravity of his words.

"I see, sir," spoke Morning.

After they had parted, and Morning Down had crept into his tent and taken place in his bed, he felt hopeful. If anypony could find what they were looking for, it was Praetor.

The very fibres of my being cried out for something. Close the distance, I felt my body singing. Try as I might, I could only feel an inexorable, intolerable, inevitable fading... it could be saved by just a few words - words which bound lips could not produce. No mouth, yet must scream. Bound lips, yet must shriek.

Wordless, yet must produce sound.

This state is not unknown to me.

I awoke, tearing from one nightmare into another. Rock walls, sick trees, violet sky.

Breathe. Just breathe. Think of her, think of Arddun. Thoughts of the moon covered me with warmth, steadied my haggard breaths, slowed my jackhammer pulse. I turned away from the cave mouth; I didn't want to see the world.

Finger and thumb pinching the bridge of my nose, as I drew long, steadying breaths, I kept that luminescent disc in my mind's eye, and suddenly nothing was as bad as I had believed...

Why? came the thought, quick and painful as a lightning bolt. *Why does the moon have such an effect on me?*

She was glorious, my Arddun. She **was** glory. But why have I suddenly become a moon-worshipper overnight? Not even overnight - in *seconds*? I saw her, and that was that, I had no qualms about suffering in her name. Was the moon magical? Did it cast a spell over everything that saw it, making them her thralls?

Ridiculous. She was benevolence and majesty and love all at once. The concept of my Lady of the Night brainwashing people was nothing short of insane. Yes, I saw how it might fit, how I had come to love her so instantly. But it just didn't make sense.

Arddun loved me too much to do that to me. Of this, I was absolutely certain.

And so my next dilemma was decided, as I breakfasted on an apple, picked up my stick and set forth into the world once more. I wouldn't find a way out of this world just yet. For now, I just wanted to see Arddun again, tonight. My family and friends could wait - after all, they wouldn't believe me if I told them the truth, so what did it matter, a few extra days to concoct stories for?

The apples were enough to both nourish and hydrate. But my clothes began to stick to my skin and a day of sweat and grime had started to make my hair thick and greasy. I needed a source of water.

I'd started my cautious trek for only a few minutes before I stopped, blinking. I didn't care if my hair was thick and greasy, or if my clothes stuck to my skin. Not when there were more prominent matters, such as legendary beasts prowling the forest. Then why was I walking?

Alarm crept into my heart as I realised the truth: the truth was that I wanted to look my best for Arddun, when she sees me tonight.

This is really wrong. I've been completely brainwashed. I can't stop thinking about her!

Palm on a tree to anchor myself to quasi-reality, doubled over, the world around me offered little solace whilst my thoughts sped through my head.

Holy hell - did I just think place the moon above my family and friends back there?

How can I fight this? And then, the most dangerous question: Do I even want to?

For all I know I was the only sentient, civilised being in the entire world. Maybe the brainwashing won't completely claim me. Maybe all she wanted was someone to love, and I was that someone. If divinity chooses to bestow its adoration upon you, do you look up and say, 'No, for although you are a celestial deity, I am wary of you, and reject your affections, O Moon'?

It felt so *right*. Nothing in my life had felt more right, than to be devoted to her, in body, mind and spirit. And what alternative did I have? Live alone in this world? Would my resistance of her freely-given, flowing love warm me at night? Would it grant me serenity? Would it grant me the strength to get back home?

It was not within me to resist her; I was not capable. I found it hard to believe that any man would be capable.

She was my Arddun Lleuad, and I, her Chester Llewelyn.

Something in my chest - or my *being* - clicked into place. I felt... at ease. I felt fine. I felt more "fine" than ten seconds ago. I felt more "fine" than I had in a long time.

I set forth towards the apple tree I'd found earlier. As the sky reclined into a cheerful blue, I had the chance to notice the clouds had changed as well, to become proper clouds. I was walking from a darkly-lit hell into something resembling habitable lands again, away from where I'd fled from the manticore; the feeling of the near-fatal chase still made my limbs feel numb.

Passing the apple tree I had found, a small thrill began to rise in my chest, slow and inevitable as the rising tide. Here I was, a true explorer, spreading his knowledge and mastery over an alien landscape. I may be the first to tread these lands in all of humanity, and that thought spread through my body with its magnificence, even with the danger that may lie all around.

I was almost upon a break in the trees. As I moved forward, I discovered just how habitable the land was.

Past the trees I looked out on some sort of a *dream*. The fields before me looked as if they'd been placed here by a fantasy movie crew - everything you could expect from a mythical land was right here: picturesque trees, a warm and gentle breeze, the greenest grass that swayed in the wind. Momentarily stunned, I walked forward in hushed awe, like a man entering a cathedral of legend... for as far as I could see, the world had suddenly become pristine, a paradise, a Garden of Eden. A perfect picture.

Before me, was nothing other than a road, smooth and yellow, set into the ground, stretching from left to right, winding lazily into the distance. I should have been overjoyed, whooping in overwhelming elation, hurtling down the road leaving only dust in my wake on my way to civilisation. I was not.

Instead I stood stock still, and just stared at it. It was set into the ground in the most perfect way; as if it was part of Nature's design that the road be there. Bending low, I ran a hand over it. Not only was the path smooth enough to have been laid there only seconds ago, but the grass beneath my other palm felt like each individual blade had been hand-crafted by an angel.

It's too perfect. Too much like one of those painted postcards that makes you stare at it with a distant smile for a few seconds before you go and buy it. The kind of smile that's always tinged with a "*If only I could go there one day*" feeling.

The hills across the road and over a field were utterly littered with apple trees. I had feared before that the solitary apple tree I'd found may have been the only one for miles. Glad as I was to see I'd never want for apples again, it was still far too perfect.

Approaching the trees, unsettling as it was to have waltzed straight into Paradise, it was hard not to be disarmed by the very feel of the air, and the colours, sweet Arddun, the colours instilled a sort of zest for life that I would be hard-placed to find anywhere else. The temptation to give in to the heavenly aura that surrounded me was nearly overwhelming; I wanted to cartwheel through the meadows, take off my shoes and socks and feel the grass on my feet, to lie down and sleep for a thousand years.

A wise man once said that events are like cowards: they wait until they can spring together, all at once. Such was the case with my frequent discoveries of the world of Arddun Lleuad, but this was the largest so far. On a small rise above me, barely twenty paces away, was a *white picket fence*.

I stared in awe, blinked for a few moments, and crept up to the fence. I reached out to it, before I could see beyond into its enclosing territory, and felt the rough wood. It was real. Then, I looked past the fence.

A farmstead. A massive farmhouse. Acres upon acres of apple trees that left no hill for all I could see. There, dragging an old plough was an alien horse. Orange mane, coat a shade of red. There was nobody around to control the beast of burden, yet it moved with purpose, driving the plough through the field alone. On its hindquarters was a large picture of a sliced, green apple. The mark must have been to help identify the beast's owner. A tattoo or a brand.

I watched it make its rounds. Nobody came to supervise it. As the beast came to a stop, I knew it would have to be set on the correct path. Its unseen attendant would make itself known, or it would display phenomenal training and intelligence by setting itself right and continuing its task unassisted.

A bright orange figure appeared out of the farmhouse with strangely-shaped brown-and-blond hair from this distance and began moving towards the field. From this distance it was difficult to tell what kind of being it was, but it was longer than it was taller, and walked on four legs. Another workhorse?

The first workhorse glanced in its direction, and then, for me, the entire world seemed to shatter in the next few seconds.

The workhorse tending to the fields shrugged off the plough's harness and walked towards a fence between it and its new company. As that company approached, I saw the differences between the two of them; the orange one's eyes were far larger, giving the thing a bizarrely sweet look of innocence, but also some sort of intelligent look about it.

In its mouth, it balanced a tray of bottles, filled with a muddy liquid, and straws mounted on it, and when it neared the first workhorse, it reached up with one of its legs, grabbed the bottle with its hoof, and began to drink. And the orange horse's lips began to move in an incredible fashion as if it had suddenly become rabid.

It was talking. There was no denying it - the thing was talking. And then it began to laugh, and then it gave a large, emphatic nod. The red one smiled an endearing, lazy smile.

By this point I was in a state that I am barely able to describe. Before me was nothing short of insanity and madness. But time wouldn't wait for me to collect myself. Instead, the entire scenario threw its coup de grâce at me.

For on that orange horse, was the most bizarre mane - lumped on its head in the most incredible fashion. And upon realising that, its true countenance was revealed. I wasn't looking at a mane. I was looking at a hat.

A cowboy hat.

That horse was *wearing a hat.*

Backing up, back down the rise, I replayed what I had just seen in my head twice and found no room for doubt. To boldly go where no man had gone before, indeed.

Somewhere in the distance to my left was a sound of a small cry. I was completely out in the open in my current position watching the mind-bending events beyond the picket fence, and, checking in all directions, I scurried down the hill and crept as quickly and quietly as possible into a large bush, laying my stick down.

I waited for some time, and the squeals began to approach, closer and closer. I remained motionless, staring out at the approaching figures from what I prayed was a safe hiding spot, keeping it steady, and the tertiary matter of not having my psyche explode into thousands of tiny pieces while whatever-the-hell-it-was was approaching me along the road.

I heard voices. And footfalls. No, I heard clops. I heard hooves. More horses were coming down the road making unintelligible noises at each other in high, sweet tones which gave me the bizarre feeling of listening to honey and sugar. It wasn't until one made a distinct laughing sound that my fraying mind connected the dots. They were talking. In a bizarre language that I could barely even describe. It was like listening to gravel, falling down a mountainous xylophone.

I hid there and listened as they passed by the bush I was hiding in and continued down the road. The opportunity presented itself to make good my escape and dash back to the obscurity of my forest domain.

If only I would take it.

Logic and reason was rallying in my brain, making smart, safe courses of action. Go back to the woods, find your cave, don't come near the crazy equine civilisation again. Lay low, don't be found. And from the wellspring of plans of safety that swirled around my mind, a single thought shone with a brilliant lustre that drowned all others.

Go where no man has gone before, Chester.

Once the road was clear and no signs of watchful eyes were around me, I dashed back to the cover of the forest trees, and began to follow the road from where the two horses had come.

• • •

I stalked the path into the evening without seeing a soul. Soon enough the trees gave out and I had to risk the open plains. I told myself this, but the truth was that there was more than adequate cover to conceal myself; I had emerged to bask in the moonlight of Arddun as she began to rise over her domain. As soon as I saw her, the full idiocy of my doubting her made me pall before her. But she forgave me. As I knew she would.

Under her benevolence, though I didn't question why, I felt different. Lighter on the ground, loftier, and most of all, her light illuminated much. I could nearly see as much as I could during the day.

One such detail was the light, glistening jewels of moonlight on running water. Skulking to the stream, running the cold, crisp feel of it through my fingers, I saw a single light dancing in the flow to my right. I looked down at it, and then up to its source.

What I had mistaken for a hill was in fact a house, that looked exactly like a hobbit-hole that had had its hill removed. A single light had come on at the topmost window, and shut off again under my gaze. I scurried away from it, down the stream, out of sight.

For the next half-hour or so, I learned a deep appreciation of the liquid necessity that just two days ago I had taken for granted, even if I had to do so alert for any noise or movement. My eyes never left the direction of the hill-house. Not a sound or sight came from its direction.

Washed, I made a low approach, and once I could see it, not ten meters away from the door, I realised I in fact had the intention of investigating this residence.

Was I really going to do this? Break into someone's house to satisfy my curiosity? Not to mention the alarming risk, this was the abode of what might very well be a person in this world.

I saw myself sat in my cave for days on end, ruminating without end over this very moment, imagination going haywire over what might lie inside those four walls, cursing myself for letting it pass. I'd never dared to dream that a chance like this might happen, to see how another race lived, how they built their homes!

And what if I found something I could use? A knife? A bucket? A cushion? A book? Oh, a book - the very idea of alien literature set a fire within my brain. But I would be stealing. Even now, in my situation, I could not surmount my own principle against the theft of someone else's potentially-beloved personal property.

Lying there on the grasses, staring at the hill-house, I came to an internal compromise. I would sneak in, and anything mundane - a cutting instrument, like a knife, I was thinking of most - I would take. Easily replaceable, and though I could imagine how I would react if someone stole my favourite breadknife back at home, I knew I would quickly get over its loss. And although I did so with much internal conflict, though I permitted myself to look at a book, I would not take one with me.

As the path to the hill-house climbed, so too did my pulse and my excitement. I was terrified, exhilarated and tense all at once. I looked over a windowsill and peered inside.

It was too dark to make anything out... so Arddun provided. Whilst I focused hard to make out details in the blackness within, a single spear of moonlight filled the room with a pale glow.

It felt so good, not to be alone, with my eternal companion above me.

Looking at the door, I had to smile - two half-doors, one on top of the other. It was like someone had designed this door as a sort of joke on the equine populace.

I gathered my courage, pushed open the top half of the door, and stepped over the lower half.

An animal paradise. Little stairs ran all over the room, which was spacious and welcoming. A fireplace, couches, colour-coordinated, comfortable. I felt invasive for walking into such a den, but already I had seen so much, I couldn't turn tail now.

Whoever lived here was not only an animal lover, but was intelligent enough to know how to care for them, how to make their pets happy and fulfilled. In fact, this horse... no, this person... must have lived for their pets; a spring of respect and affection sprung from me for the occupant and their lifestyle. He or she already displayed more intelligence than many I had met who walked on two legs.

The room was fascinating in the extreme, but before I set to examining every inch, first I needed to know if I was going to be interrupted. I crept up the stairs in the centre of the room - odd place for stairs, I thought - with all the grace and stealth of the world's most nervous burglar. Come to think of it, at this moment, I might be exactly that.

A light glowed over the walls as I moved up, but I heard only a soft, rhythmic snore in the silence; no second breaths, no pages being turned. I peered out from behind some furniture and lay eyes on the occupant.

There was a faint glow beside the bed; a night-light. Poor thing must be scared of the dark, I thought.

And if it's scared of the dark, it would be scarred by finding me in its room while it slept. I thought of turning back and leaving it well alone, until I caught sight of some odd texture on its side.

The horse was cream-coloured, adorable pink mane and tail falling all around it as it slept. What had caught my attention was on its sides... not a coat of fur, but feathers.

Sweet holy Arddun. A living pegasus, before my very eyes, sleeping in complete serenity. Walking around it, I could see on her face - for I could not imagine it to be a he - the most peaceful, faint smile, like she was dreaming blissful dreams.

She was utterly entrancing. For a while I stared at her, feeling intense revulsion at myself for staring at someone in their sleep - even a horse - but how many men had stood so close to a creature of legend? Had anyone?

I wanted so much to touch those feathers. In fact, I had the bizarre urge to brush that mane, that tail. To protect her. To respect her. I felt no bodily, carnal urges; simply... the drive to make her happy.

With a start I caught my own hand raised in the air, towards her - a hand I quickly dropped. She, too, was having an effect on me, just like Arddun Lleuad! Time to go before I lose myself completely, I thought.

Then something stabbed my ankle.

Gasping, I stared down my leg to see the meanest-looking rabbit I have ever seen in my life with its mouth firmly planted on my leg. For a moment I looked at it in dumb shock, and then I turned back to the slumbering pegasus, which was, of course, no longer slumbering.

As she screamed, I had a single instant in which to burn the image of her face into my memory for the rest of my life.

I whirled around and lunged for the stairs, crashing to the floor, having tripped from the small bundle of infinite rage, still embedded in my leg. Scrambling up, diving for the stairs, I grabbed at the white rabbit-thing, wrenched it free and tossed it aside the room.

A horrified gasp and an exclamation from the pegasus told me that I'd just made a large mistake.

I catapulted down the stairs; she was running behind me now. Halfway across the main room of the house, mid-way through bounding across the floor, something nudged me in the back. Two hooves had planted themselves on my midriff with barely enough force to make me recognise them.

Turning my head to see whatever had just poked me, I looked down at the pegasus "pounding" me with its hooves with enough force to make a mouse feel cuddled. Eyes scrunched, face turned away, making tiny grunts of anger.

It sliced my heart into tiny pieces, how this creature was trying to defend her home, her beloved pets. With that heartache, I had a brilliant flash of inspiration.

As she struck her hoof against me, I bellowed out in terrible agony, launching myself forward, stumbling as I turned to give the pegasus a look of fear. She was flying with a hoof held over her muzzle, eyes wide with surprise. I backed away from her out the door, making fearful whimpering sounds as I did so.

I tore from the house, running to the forest, making sounds of panic, casting terrified glances over my shoulder, making sure my eyes were wide enough to show their whites from this distance. She was standing just outside the door, watching me in wonder and

amazement, leaning forward just a bit, as if ready to run after me - but she stayed on her doorstep.

Perhaps my ploy had worked, and she would think that I wouldn't dare come near her again, in fear of her sky-shattering strength. Perhaps not. Either way, even now as I fled from her abode, the image of her face would not leave my mind.

On this day, I learned first-hand what it was like to strike raw, unrefined terror in a heart it should never have come near.

• • •

Safe in the boughs of a tree, hidden by leaf and night, the picture of that face never left me. I prayed that I had made her more secure with my theatrics. I would have given anything to go and hug her, tell her I was sorry, but I had done enough damage already; besides, I might walk straight into some equine police, called to investigate the break-in of the hideous, bunny-chucking monster.

Arddun caressed me with her light. It was cool and radiant; almost understanding. One by one, I unbuttoned my sweat-caked shirt and exposed my back to her, exhaling with the feel of cold night air.

I had seen how the alien horses live. In fact, I had seen enough to form a near-irrefutable conclusion of the world of Arddun Lleuad.

A magical land where ponies lived in harmony and love. The manticore of legend, prowling the forests. A pegasus. The skies that turned different colours, depending on where you were looking. The perfect, garden meadows that spread in all directions, right next to the forest facsimile I'd arrived in. The door to the horse's house. And the rich, vibrant colours of the world.

I stated it in my brain with all the finality I could muster, for by now it was beyond doubt, that I had landed...

...in a fairy-tale.

Sometimes, you just have to bow to the absurd.

Perhaps I was pulled here by some grand, cosmic design to play a part in this fairy tale. Perhaps I was here by an equally fantastic accident. Regardless of how I had arrived, I

looked on my single option for the future with an immediate conviction; I knew my course from here on in.

I must follow the Prime Directive. I must not interfere, contaminate or interact with the world in any way, shape or form. I must keep myself at as much distance as possible.

The way the pegasus had defended her home was evidence enough that the concept of having to defend their homes was alien to them; hell, the door had been unlocked at night. That would change for her, I thought, with a stab of guilt. She would lock up tight each and every night, from now on.

I had done enough damage to the world already. No more.

I watched Arddun soar through her starry sky, and as morning came, I dropped to the ground and slept.

• • •

Praetor awoke to more of a feeling than a sound. Someone was outside his tent.

Fluttershy had been standing just outside the personal sleeping tent of the Praetor of the Guard for five minutes, trying to muster the courage to wake the military pony up. Twice she'd tried to say something, but produced only a miniscule, infinitesimal squeak.

As Praetor rose, the sounds from within prompted Fluttershy to utter a "Uhm, excuse me?"

The pony that emerged from the flaps of the tent as a response made Fluttershy's heart skip a beat. He was big, yes, this she expected; but in the moonlight, he was glorious. First from the tent emerged his grey hair, and then to follow, the snow-white coat. Fluttershy knew that the Praetor was meant to be far and away from what you'd expect from a Guardpony, but not to this degree.

"What's wrong?" spoke Praetor. Fluttershy squeaked.

Praetor smiled. She seemed relaxed, if nervous. If it was a true emergency she would have woken him with more alarm and urgency.

"Wonderful squeaking voice, my lady."

Fluttershy blushed and seemed almost to shrink. Praetor laughed as he folded to the ground, to hold his head below hers.

"Take your time."

Hiding behind her mane, finally she spoke. "... 'm sorry to wake you up, sir."

"I wasn't sleeping," he lied. "I have so much to think about I couldn't get any sleep! Actually, I'm glad for the company," he added quickly, before she receive the impression she was intruding on important thinking time.

"Uhm... you told all of us to... to tell you if we saw anything."

Praetor's smile lessened. "Yes?"

Fluttershy looked at him. "Well... something happened tonight."

After her story was over, Praetor insisted that he accompany her to her cottage and stand guard in case "the beast" returned, but Fluttershy insisted that she stay at the town library with a friend instead. The Princess's favourite student received Fluttershy with open arms even before hearing her tale. Praetor excused himself from their company with a respectful bow, and a promise to Fluttershy that he would not allow the beast to come near her again; news that Fluttershy received with an immense blush and barely-audible gratitude.

Once outside, Praetor allowed himself to scowl with suppressed anger. He walked to the edge of Ponyville and looked in the direction of the Everfree Forest. Tomorrow the search plans would be changed to cover more ground, the Guardsponies would be pushed harder to fit more into a single day.

Praetor swore to himself, that no beast that dare walk into a lady's own room as she sleeps would roam free while he drew breath.

Stretching on into the endless dark, somewhere out there in that void, connected by a thread, was something. I could walk on that thread, to find that something out there. I could take wing and fly through the miasmic night, soaring over that single thread that bound me to it, following to its glorious root. I could take it in my grip, and pull myself through space, weightless and soaring, and I would see the source of this shining thread emerge from the blackness, waiting for me.

And I don't even know what it is.

I know only that we are connected.

I felt a *heaviness*, like my blood had been turned to lead. But unlike my other rude awakenings, the lack of a parched throat or aching lungs told me my breathing had been steadier... for this I was grateful; it meant the nightmares were being batted back to my brain rather than warring within my body, leaving me wrecked for the day ahead. Or, so I believed. Trying to roll onto my side felt like moving a mountain with my shoulders alone, as if I was tied to the ground. I laid there for several minutes; once or twice I wondered if I could even muster the strength to rise.

The nightmares left me with so much, but told me so *little*. An endless feeling of pining for something forever just out of reach lingered; it was all that remained that I could fathom.

The past two days had taught me that the best remedy to clear nightmares was action. And so I rose to the morning, slow and slothful, like a bear coming out of the hibernation of an entire winter condensed into one night, brushing leaves and bits of bracken from my clothes. My cave had apples there, and I wasn't going to tempt fate by picking apples from the dream-land. I started to walk.

Dream-land. I thought of that paradise, and that face came stabbing into my inner eye. Fluttershy's face as she awoke and saw me. Eyes massive, body seized with shock, so *terrified*. How could I have done that to her? To Fluttershy, of all p...

Fluttershy?

I stopped in my tracks.

And in a single second, I was all but certain that a small little crack had appeared down the side of my brain.

Now I had names for horses that came out of nowhere. It wasn't my imagination; it was just a fact, like the fact that you are currently breathing, Arddun is the most benevolent entity in the known universe, pigs don't fly, Han shot first and that horse's name was Fluttershy.

I didn't even want to think about this. I wanted things to make *sense* again. I wanted my starship models, my reasonable university grades, a *shower*. Where I am right now, I have always wanted in some way, shape, or form. But not like this. *Not like this*.

But I was here, and wanting reality to change does not make it change. With thoughts of my crime came thoughts of my penance. Today would mark the first day under my greater cause, the Prime Directive, to stay as far away from the civilisation(s?) around me as possible. I had done enough damage to Fluttershy - despite my confusion to the name, the thought that prevailed was how I wish I could make amends, how it pained me to think of the state she must be in - but my involvement with the equine race was to stop here. I would not bear the consequence of technologically advancing a fairytale civilisation beyond its natural rate. The way my clothes were made, or the sight of my opposable thumbs, or...

Or...

My phone.

It took all of my willpower not to break into a loud, thundering sprint through the forest. The cautious rush was a torturous balance of subtlety and haste as I sped towards my cave. If anyone was nearby, I was almost sure my heartbeat alone would be loud enough to alert them.

From my cave I could backtrack to where I had fled from the manticore, and from there I could search all day if needs be, for the wreckage. How fortunate I was that I didn't have to, for before I was upon the early grave of my £400 iPhone 4, I could see three brightly-coloured, infantile ponies around what I could only presume was nothing other than my phone. A smorgasbord of colours, neon orange, white, light cream with a big, red bow tie.

From a distance I could only watch in horror as they poked at it, spoke in awed voices. They quickly became excited, and the horn of one began to glow with a sound of light itself popping into existence in the most fantastic way. The technological wreckage floated in an aura of white-purple sparks and light, and hovered beside the three as they began to gallop away.

I had just witnessed magic. It stunned me for a moment, seeing something so utterly beyond my comprehension, but my sensibilities returned at the sight of their forms beginning to shrink into the distance.

Now, Chester! Sprint after them, scare them into dropping the phone, before they take it somewhere! came the thought, immediate and urgent. I had to do it. I couldn't let them wreak unknowing havoc on their world without their knowledge!

Sprinting to close the distance, I clenched my fists and prepared to make a bellowing roar, ready to leap out and come to my full height to scare them away -

I choked. Before they could hear me, or see me, I fell into the forest undergrowth and stared.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't see another face like Fluttershy's, on three, tiny fillies.

Likely, I could not even imagine the consequences that phone would have on their race; but I was incapable. I just couldn't do it. Arddun help me, Arddun *curse* me for my weakness, but... it was beyond me.

Now a desperate man, I hurried after them, keeping as quiet as possible as they moved away. Soon they broke away from the forest, and I had to move in the open, dashing between what little cover I could find; never did any man fear open, rolling plains as much as I did now. I don't know what I intended. But I couldn't just let them go, turn around and walk away.

Option: dash in and snatch it out of the air, running away before they knew what had hit them. Downside: I might not grab all of the phone. Once alerted they might get away with a critical component, like a circuit board or the battery. I followed them for some time, watching my ruined phone float in the air not twenty paces away.

Arddun damn it, Chester, get a bloody grip! Three children against an entire bloody civilisation's worth of damage, run in there and grab the stupid thing!

After minutes of this thought hammering me, I steeled myself. Praying to Arddun for the forgiveness of these three, and holding my breath, ready to charge for the hovering phone -

How could I be so blind? I'd been so focused on those three fillies that I hadn't seen *where* exactly they were going. Now they were headed towards a small gathering of

horses. I recognised one as the Stetson-wearer, the second member of this alien, fairytale race I had ever seen.

The trio drew near, giving excited shouts. Initially, there was a collective gasp of shock and the orange one spoke in strong, reprimanding tones, the voice of harsh, but affectionate, concern for a loved one. But the conversation was interrupted, and turned into high tones of wonder as the phone was brought before them.

Judging from their examination of the thing, they'd not seen anything like it before. One such horse was various shades of brown, which stood out against the greens and blues of the world around her; from where I was, I could make out some sort of brown mark in various hues on it's flank, and a tiny silver spoon. The sight gave me a distinct craving for coffee.

But more to my attention was a snow-white pegasus clad in majestic, golden armour. Armour that wouldn't look out of place in ancient Rome, complete with brush-style helmet. I was looking at some sort of equine *centurion*. The perfect addition to this scene to really hammer home how screwed I was.

All of them together could probably overwhelm me with ease, especially the soldier. I had been rendered helpless, my physical advantage now offset. The soldier was small, but there were a few of them and only one of me. And I had no idea how powerful those legs could be. A kick from a horse in my world might break a rib - I wasn't stupid enough to see if the same rule applied here.

They began to collectively gallop off down a path, mercifully enough, away from me. They were taking my phone somewhere, and that meant I had to follow. Watching them take the culture-bomb iPhone away, I could only prowl behind them once they were out of sight, lingering amongst trees, bushes, rolling hills to stay out of sight.

I encountered nothing else on the beautiful road they had travelled down, but the slow decline of the day into night. As the hills came into view - as wondrously as you might expect, in this dream-land I now stalked in - the odd house stood proud and strong atop them. I knew what I would see just over that rise ahead of me. The time had come to see my first town of fairytale.

I crept over the small rise, and stifled a gasp.

I want to live here, said my body. *I want to live here*, said everything I was, *I want to live here*, screamed my whole being. The sight of it was the most blissful agony - it was a

perfect picture of how a world should be; but even looking at it for the first time, the message was clear. It would always remain a picture, forever distant from me, despite my being closer to paradise than possibly any man had ever been in his life. I could run my hands through that river, or climb those hills, or dance in those streets... I could *talk* with its inhabitants, learn their ways, learn who they are, what do they dream of, what they love about their lives.

I wiped tears I didn't realise I had shed from my cheeks with my shirt sleeve and crawled into nearby foliage, awaiting the night. I couldn't let my phone ruin what I had seen. I will use subterfuge where force will not suffice; in the midst of the night, under Arddun's gaze, I will find and take the phone back, and when I have it in my grasp again, I will leave these lands forever and find my way home.

No man should taint this Garden of Eden.

• • •

In the dead of night, I thought to myself: this *had* to be a fairytale town.

Not only was it as beautiful as just about everything else here, but it didn't make any *sense*. The approach had been how I had envisioned going to heaven when I was young, having lovely houses spread out in the most picturesque of ways where I would enter the town and find my new place of residence already waiting for me, with pretty girls and boisterous friends as my neighbours. What was around me fit my childhood dream perfectly - except for the hearts, of course. Now, as a man, instead of my childhood heaven, I saw a nonsensical settlement that could not possibly withstand scrutiny by professional architects. Walls that bend for no reason, top-heavy structures that couldn't stand under great weight, random houses in areas where nobody could *possibly* reach...

I kept close to the walls of the houses, ducking out of sight of the windows, even though none of them had any lights within. With Arddun above me, I felt lighter, footfalls softer; no need to creep. The village in the dead of night was peaceful and serene; if only I felt the same way.

The phone had to have been taken to a large structure that housed the one most appropriate to examine it, I thought, prowling through the silent town. The town hall, or a library; I wagered it wouldn't be taken into a private abode, unless all of the horses who'd taken it away were friends or roommates, and would be inclined to keep secrets from the rest of the town - and this being a fairytale wonderland, that didn't fit the bill.

Off in the distance I could see, on the side of a great mountain, an extraordinary set of towers and parapets, a wondrous castle that stood tall and proud into the sky, with great waterfalls thundering down. It was incredible to see, and I thanked Arddun for the moonlight with which to see it, for it was truly a monument. Perhaps that was the capital?

Dotted around the town's streets were multiple tents; they were pure white with a sun insignia blazing in pride set on each corner. But the strangest thing was that nobody occupied them. No soft snores, no muted whinnying whilst dreaming. Each one was completely empty. After listening from all angles of the largest tent for some time to confirm this, I pulled back a flap and entered.

Were I not blessed with Arddun's boon of sight in even small levels of moonlight I would have been utterly blind. As it was, however, I could make out a small table with several maps, an unlit candlestick, and a picture on the table... I picked it up and, holding it close to my face, I examined it minutely.

The wooden frame was made by one who loves his craft. Motifs of sun rays with a simple, elegant wooden sun were carved into the frame, and the frame itself surrounded a charcoal impression of some sort of equine queen or goddess. The creature was immensely graceful, even in this form; but there was something that irked me about her, something implacable. As I looked at the royal art, I could only think: *Arddun has far more grace than she.*

I set about trying to find this town on one of the maps, but first found a marker that identified clearly the mountain-castle I'd seen. I'd read enough maps in my life to know that size and importance made it the capital city of this fairytale land. From there I could find Horsetown, or whatever this town was called - and then, my forest.

I looked at the other maps. Strategy maps. Someone had gone to great lengths to plan something on this map, for the old, dry lines of terrain and place names were set under elegant scrawls of paths and notes that had been written there recently. These lines covered what appeared to be a forest, spreading out, back and around, iterating the same paths until it seemed no ground was left in the forest that would have been unchecked...

Oh, Arddun, *no.*

I brought the route map together with the first map of the surrounding lands. I didn't want to see it, but I couldn't deny it. These were search routes for the very forest that I had come to call my home.

They're looking for me.

Time to get my phone and run like hell. It was a long time before I found a bizarre house set inside a tree. I couldn't have asked for better directions, for just outside the door was a signposted picture of a book. A place of learning. Wide and open rooms, lots of reference material. Possible location of phone.

This time, the door was divided into three parts, with the top half above two smaller swing doors set side-by-side on the bottom. As expected, the front door was unlocked. I pushed one of the doors on the bottom aside and squeezed through the small opening; as I left the moonlight, I felt my body grow heavier, as if Arddun's hands could no longer gently lift me from the vantage point of her celestial throne.

A single spear of moonlight fell directly onto the wreckage of my phone. Looking at my quarry at last, I breathed an audible sigh of relief. Before I did anything, I crept over to the curtain and cast an eye up at my patron saint. "Thank you," I whispered, as soft as I could manage.

I approached the phone. Whatever - or whoever - had been examining the phone had done so with seemingly reckless glee; parts of it were spread all over the makeshift workbench, with special attention directed at the circuitry and wires, sitting in the centre of the workbench surrounded by tools that I knew: screwdrivers, wrenches, even a hammer; and some that I did not: a gear-infested, riveted metal box with no discernable use, a long tube with a large piston inside, which spread to other, smaller tubes... nothing looked like it had any integrated circuits or anything more complex than a set of wires connected to a motor.

If this was the technology they had brought to analyse my own, then I had been correct in my fears. But this danger would not come to pass. I had been successful. With the weight of a world lifted from my shoulders, I turned to leave.

A sudden cry from the darkness of the library - a bellowing shout, crashing hooves, floor rumbling, voice of authority audible over the equine calamity of sound. And all at once, while I stood blind and wavering, it came to a cease. I opened my eyes.

One, two, five, ten soldier-horses, golden armour on battle-ready postures, prepared in case I make a single move, all around the room, eyes fixed on me with military discipline. Emerging from bookshelves, Fluttershy, an orange Stetson-wearing horse, a purple unicorn with a vivid streak of white through unkempt hair and a wrench tucked behind her ear, and a deeper, violet unicorn with a streak of purple.

And lastly, *him*. The one sight in the room, even counting the squad of soldiers, that told me I was well and truly smegged. As tall as myself, at six feet and two inches, his was a snow white coat, mane a graceful, elegant grey, and a countenance that spoke of discipline and valour. I had come face to face with a captain... no, a *commander* of the team.

He spoke. I couldn't call his voice noise. It was sound, it was speech, the rough, harsh, gravelly speech of - what else? - a talking horse. Even across the language barrier, I knew full well that tone, the intelligent tone of one accustomed to command.

It stated something at length. The pitch of its impossible vocalisations rose at the end; I'd just been asked a question.

"I don't understand you, sir," I offered.

All eyes widened, a hushed awe filled the room. From the corner of my eye, I could see Fluttershy and her companions had begun speaking in earnest. I'd spoken; I've revealed a different language to them. Or maybe I revealed that I *could* speak.

I caught Fluttershy's eye, and she squeaked. That face again, in my mind. My face felt hot and flushed under the piercing memory.

The ground began to tremble and the form of the white-mane commander came between Fluttershy and I in a rumbling instant - as he did so, I caught a glance of the most curious mark on his flank - a *chess piece*, that of a knight. Then his face was the focus of my attention. Protective, righteous.

Backing up, I inclined my head forward and raised my hands in a gesture of submission. I would be a complete idiot to try anything; they'd surely bolted the doors, had all escape routes covered. My first act as the upholder of the Prime Directive, my first act - and what was to be my last act - for these "people", and it had ended like this.

Fluttershy's friends and her were engaged in a conversation that carried quick, fascinated tones. Even the soldiers had begun to murmur between themselves. As they spoke to each other, even under the intensive gaze of the commander, I looked slowly around the room.

There. The commander had been guarding it before he had moved. A ladder. A ladder up to a higher level, then another ladder, and a window, not high up from the ground at all... was I really going to do this? They could climb the ladders, clearly, or they wouldn't be

there. But they were horses, and I was of primate origin. When it came to climbing, I was the superior being.

The commander gave an order. Two soldiers broke their stance and fetched some rope from a pile of supplies on the floor. I gazed at the commander. He never broke his gaze once.

That horse does not like me. And judging by how he had come between Fluttershy and me, I could guess why. Frankly, at this I had nothing but respect for him.

Rope in mouth, the two soldiers approached me and dropped the rope onto the ground, taking one end in their mouths. The commander *stood on his back legs*, somehow, and gestured for me to lower my arms. It was now or never.

Arddun, see me through this time of trial so that these people may live as you intended them to.

I lowered my hands to the rope, brought my wrists together, and readied my legs for movement. The commander studied me intensely; I saw his eyelids narrow in suspicion, and before my body language could totally betray my plans, I bolted for the ladder.

The sudden shouts and gasps behind me rose up as I put a foot on the second rung of the ladder and leapt up, clasping the railing and pulling myself up, the rising momentum seeing me safe on the upper level. I whirled to see all eyes on me, pegasi preparing to take off, and a soldier leaping towards the ladder I had just used.

I pulled the ladder up, weight supporting the entire motion as the ladder flew into the air and into my hands. Two rungs grasped in two palms, I backed towards the second ladder and brandished my unwieldy weapon at three snow-white, armour-plated pegasi. Waving my ladder-weapon at them, my foot found the second ladder I had to climb. One of the pegasi lurched forward and grabbed the ladder in his hooves, pulling me away; I threw the other end towards the other two, twisted, and clambered up the second ladder, pulling it up with me; as I did so, I could glance for a single instant at the chaos I had caused below. The two unicorns had started to cast something; the orange one was fishing for something in the supply pile; Fluttershy looked on in fright.

But the commander was nowhere to be seen.

I rammed the window with a ladder. After all, who the hell would be stupid enough to jump through one? Much as I enjoyed the idea of having my clothes and skin sliced to bits by thousands of jagged edges, I cleared away the remaining shards and tossed the

ladder with my entire body at the pegasi. Without a backwards glance, I climbed onto the window and dropped.

Within Arddun's rays, I could not fail. As the tree's steep curve brought me to the ground, I leapt away from the glass shards below, landed on my feet, and started to run for my life - free to move at last! - before something with a momentum closely resembling that of a bus slammed into my side and sent me flying.

Rolling with the sheer *force* of the blow, somehow scrambling to my feet, a quick glance revealed the equine commander, face of fury, charging again, moments away from tossing me aside like a freight train; I lurched backwards and felt the wind flow with him as he passed me by mere inches. He skidded, turned, and looked me square in the eyes.

And so I ran. I ran down the streets of the cosy little village I had brought total disorder to. I ran in Arddun's rays, I ran with the thundering captain close at my heels. I ran, world-changing device in my shirt pocket.

The commander swiftly met me neck-and-neck, grey mane flowing in his pursuit of me, a living icon of strength and speed. He veered and hit me side-on; though I floundered in the air, I remained vertical, even if barely running.

"No! Just let me go!"

His reply to this was a valiant bellow, the speech of an honourable combatant to another.

Our eyes met whilst we sped side-by-side. Once again he lurched towards me; I was ready. He pulled away from me, put his entire weight towards me, and as he was only inches away from slamming into me once more, I -

The world became a shade darker, and in a split second, my body gave out completely, tumbling to the ground like a rag doll in a hurricane. When I came to a stop, I could only lie there and suck in breath. I tried to get up; my limbs were utterly spent.

I cast my gaze from whence I came to see what had just happened. I was on the outskirts of the town... when I had passed under the lunar shadow of a house. Arddun's light was on me the entire time; as soon as it had left me, the vigour, the drive it had given me had vanished like the memory of a dream on a Saturday morning.

The commander looked down at me, confused, but resolute. The world was starting to swim now; the immeasurable pull of exhaustion hooked at my brain, dragging me into

unconsciousness. With the last vestige of strength I had to spend, I met his eyes and spoke.

"You're a good man," I managed, before I succumbed to exhaustion.

I was floating...

Floating on warm light... a light, so gentle.

Who was that? Beside me. A unicorn. Unicorns. Horns aglow in that blaze of gorgeous, ethereal light...

They were levitating me along on a bed of magic. I could see only two on my right. Gliding along like a living breeze... I recognised that violet coat, that large, red-and-white star-spark mark... as a matter of fact, I think I knew her name...

"Twi..."

I lurched in the air, but didn't notice.

"Twilight..."

The air beneath me was pulled out from below me and my body thudded to the ground. In the state I was in, I could barely feel it. All their heads above me, looking down at me; their wondering tones growing distant...

• • •

I was flying...

The wind was rushing past me. I was curled up in a golden, metal nest. There was the sound of great wings beating all around as we raced through the sky. A cloud flew past my vision, and I smiled the smile of a sky-watcher...

Exhaustion overwhelmed me again.

• • •

The sound of running water... the feel of bedclothes. I've either died and gone to heaven, or this was real, and I was in heaven anyway. This time, the world was too harmonious to allow myself to sink back into unconsciousness.

I must have emitted one of those slight, barely audible sleep-grunts, for the room became animated beyond my closed eyelids. A presence stood over me to my left, and there was

magic on my right: warm, concentrated light like one would expect to radiate from an angel in the flesh.

I opened my eyes to bright, white walls, tapestry of royal red falling behind the bed on which I lay, all made radiant with sunshine. As I tried to sit up, I felt two bonds holding me down: the first, of rope. I was bound to the bed. The second, far greater, was that of my muscles screaming in protest against the slightest movement. I turned my neck to my right...

There she was, Twilight, sitting near my low, nearly floor-height bed, emitting a fierce, living magic from her horn, her face one of immense concentration. I was looking into magic. Within, I swore I could see the very essence of the cosmos in flitting instants. My face slackened with awe; I stared stupidly at what I can only describe as creation itself.

The light that blinds began to intensity and concentrate, forming sparks, filling the room with the sound of electric light existing for a single, magnificent instant before fading away. There was a formless explosion like all of creation had just happened in this very room, and...

My throat and ears felt warm. For a short while I could savour the feeling - after all, it wasn't as if I could do anything else - before I heard the most utterly incredible sound I had ever heard.

"Good afternoon. I am Praetor. Do you understand me?"

I whipped my head to the left. The presence I had felt belonged to none other than the commander I had gone head-to-head with.

I stared at him, his regal countenance, his blue eyes. I blinked, sputtered.

"H... hello?"

The commander - Praetor - bowed his head. "Might I have your name, sir?"

A heartbeat passed as my ears, still warm with the sound of some rushing, liquid light flowing in them, passed the information to my brain that a talking horse had just asked for my name, to which my brain processed, and came to the conclusion, after drawing from years of common knowledge, that horses don't talk.

And yet, "Your name, sir," said the talking horse, patiently.

"Chester," I managed.

Praetor drew to his full height and spoke as one speaks to a respected prisoner of war. "You have been brought to Canterlot Castle. You will be cared for and seen to properly as a guest within the Castle, and after your stay here is complete, you will be allowed to leave freely."

His obligatory duty performed, he lowered his head and looked me in the eyes.

"But we are aware of your work, Chester."

"I'm sorry?" I blurted, stupidly. "Wh- work?"

Praetor continued. "We will release you from your bindings. Then, you are required to come with me."

What work? I wanted to ask. *What the bloody hell are you going on about?* Instead, I lay there as a set of hooves, armour clanking and clinking, worked at the rope that bound me.

As the last rope fell away, I hauled myself up. From my previous viewpoint, I had not seen the guards standing ready and alert, watching my every move, not two meters from the foot of the bed. Their gaze burned into me, making my every move nervous and tense.

I must be in some sort of nurse's office or hospital room, for I had been lying on one of four beds in a room bathed in red-and-white effects; the tapestries that fell behind each bed were emblazoned with a glorious, stylised sun, and golden-yellow embroideries near the edges. Between each tapestry was a wall-waterfall that came from the ceiling and fell into the floor, with neither root nor channel visible from within the room. The sunlight dancing in the water-wall was truly a sight to behold.

With all the gradual motion of an awakening sloth, I rose from the bed to a chorus of screaming muscles. I was reminded sharply of my phone; slowly, with no sudden movement, I raised my hand and put my palm on my chest pocket; the movement met the resistance of hard chunks of broken plastic. I could sigh with relief, were it not for the situation at hand.

Praetor and his guards awaited my painful awakening as I climbed to my feet. "Do you need assistance?" he inquired, formal and valiant, without a note of concern.

"No, I'm-" I attempted, whilst trying to take a step. My leg muscles buckled immediately and I lurched forward, hitting the ground. The last time I had used my body, in my fight and flight from Praetor, I had been surging with vigour from Arddun. But my body was not built for what I had forced it to do. I was reduced to a walking pile of torn and overstrained musculature.

"Yes," I said, resigned, as Praetor walked over and took my arm in his leg, helping me to my feet.

With an arm on his back, we began walking to the door. It was wooden, carved masterfully, intrinsic details etched into the material, not unlike the frame of the picture I had seen last night... presuming I had been out for a day. Keeping track of time was not a priority.

As one of the guards opened the door, a multi-coloured throng shrank back and I was subject to the gaze of dozens of large, curious eyes, of small, innocent, sweet little ponies. To say I didn't want to be the centre of attention at this point was the current prize winner of the Understatement of the Century award.

Praetor supported me as we walked out of the hospital into a grand corridor, teeming with horses that were awed at the sight of me. The air bustled with hushed whispers as we walked into the open.

To some, I met their gaze, and their reactions were varied. Some backed up a bit, others simply stared. But there were some who looked aggressive, even angry. Indeed, the air was that of a crowd observing a convict, rather than an alien being brought into public for the first time.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, I am pleased to inform you all that the Beast is currently unable to be a threat to any of us. He has told me his name is Chester."

Gasps of wonder and amazement. "But how is he not a threat?" came a distressed, maternal voice from a light orange mane towards the back of the crowd. "After what he's done?"

"He is currently in no form to struggle or resist. Last night I confronted him. As you can see," he said, gesturing his head towards me, "he is now not a threat."

A brief gasp from the collected horses and a wall of cheers and hoof-stamping went up. Praetor blinked, taken aback."... no, I didn't mean it like that, I simply brought him down-"

But before he could continue, a guard had taken the initiative to step forward. "He brought him down alright! He took down this *thing* all by himself! While running through the streets of Ponyville in pursuit! It was *awesome!*"

Praetor's face became indignant as he bellowed with command, "Back in line, Quill!"

The din became a muted hush of respect as Praetor asserted himself, the guard known as Quill quickly finding his place in line and assuming his stern countenance once again. "We are to take Chester to the royal quarters now, fillies and gentlecolts. Please return to your duties; you will all be informed if anything happens."

The crowd parted. As I walked between the horses, I was struck with a flash of inspiration.

We were halfway down the corridor when I turned to the chattering horses, and said, "Hey."

Instantly I had all of their attention and the corridor fell silent. The entourage stopped in their tracks. All eyes and ears were on me.

"It's true," I said. "He really did kick the crap out of me."

The hoof-stamping that followed threatened to bring the entire castle down on our heads. Praetor urged me onwards with indignation; we passed a door to the rumbling of hooves, muted but not unfelt as the guards closed the door behind us. I caught Twilight's glance as I moved forward: interested, curious, analytical. As soon as we had passed from one room to another, Praetor spoke.

"I do not know what you intend, Chester, but it will not sway our hearts and minds."

Hobbling along with him for support, I looked at him. "What do you mean? What have I done?"

He did not face me. "We have made out what we can from the incoherent ramblings of your victim. The 'beast' in the 'forest' who 'has me'. We are aware of your handiwork, and if you do not mind my saying, sir, if I were not a colt of restraint and discipline, I would be hard pressed to restrain myself in your company."

"What the hell are you talking about? I haven't done anything, I was brought here by some sort of sickening..." I was lost for words. I hadn't had to describe it for days.

"Sickening what?" piped Twilight.

"I... was teleported here."

"What by? How did it feel?"

"I don't know, and... sickening."

"That doesn't help very much," she quipped.

I wanted to say something witty, but I was having enough trouble having a regular conversation with a purple horse as it was.

"You have brought your magic and your works upon none other than my treasured chess partner, Chester. I would ask of you to remain silent during the rest of our walk to the Royal Quarters."

"The Royal-?" I sputtered.

"Yes, my good foe. The Royal Quarters of Princess Arddun herself."

"Wh-!"

My mouth dropped open. Had I just heard that right? The way he said it sounded so utterly corrupted, like someone had scrambled the signal of a telephone conversation, but I had heard the words. *The Royal Quarters of Princess Arddun.*

I could only stare in dumb shock at him, too bewildered to ask questions. My mind had gone into overdrive. All I could do now was follow him as he took me to that which was meant to be my beloved, patron saint.

• • •

The castle was beyond magnificent. Massive windows depicting the universe filtered in the sunlight, shining its rays onto the white walls of the castle, full of well-cared-for plants, buzzing with caretaker horses that stopped their business to gaze at me in wonder. None of them asked a question of me, or my entourage. As soon as we passed, they resumed their business.

But I was too much within my own mind to notice. My only connection with the outside world was my legs, bringing me to the very celestial body I myself had named, yet here it was, produced from the mouth of a totally different entity.

I knew what had happened. He had said something else, a different name, but it had come through to me, through my understanding, as "*Arddun*". But even with such an easy description, the implication stood firm. He was taking me to Arddun, whether her name was Arddun or not.

We crossed a hallway, entered a door and began to climb a spiral staircase. In the minute or so it had taken us to do that, within that hallway, on that door and inside that spiral staircase were paintings, pots, furniture, perfections of light and acoustics, tapestries and decorated windows that would have been seen as jaw-dropping masterworks on Earth, but I had the chance to appreciate none of them. Every step brought me closer to "*Arddun*". My every nerve wailed in fear, but my legs trudged on, against the pain of exertion and the fear of what lies at the top of the very staircase that I climbed.

Finally we came to a door, and this door was the most awesome of all. It was painted in a dark blue that was the sole possession of the midnight sky, adorned with such detailed stars and a picturesque moon that for a moment I imagined I was standing before a door into the night itself.

Praetor pushed open the door with a hoof, and we walked into the private chambers of Arddun Lleuad.

There she was, lying on a bed in the centre of the room, her bed surrounded by light, transparent cloths that sparkled like the stars in the night sky. The ceiling was lost amidst a magical miasma of darkness, in which I could see the moon, far, far away, hanging up in space; even now, in the middle of the day. The inky blues of night spread over the room like an all-encompassing, benevolent shadow.

Beyond the bed in which Arddun lay was the Sun. Her hair wavered in the wind like the Aurora Borealis, set against a stark-pure white coat; all of her appearance seemed to be there simply to compliment her eyes, which spoke to my very soul of forgiveness, of warmth, of generosity. To look into those eyes was to know peace.

The Sun rose to her feet, looking down at the Moon as she did so.

"It is a pleasure to meet at last that which my beloved sister has been speaking of," deigned the Sun, who moved around the bed in infinite grace to approach me like the oncoming of seraphim. "I am Princess Celestia."

"I am Chester."

I should have been overawed, without words, beyond myself. But her voice was so soft, so warm. If the rays of the sun on a spring day, lying in the fields and meadows of Wales could speak, this would be their voice. It was a voice to which no man, of Earth or otherwise, could fear, and I was no exception.

"My sister has spoken often of you. I imagine she has spoken of you as much as she is able. I pray with all my heart that you can help her in some way."

With that, I looked down at the Night, laid there on the bed, twitching slightly... she was Arddun. No, she wasn't. She was... something... I couldn't discern. At length, I saw her...

She, too, was horse, a perfect picture of night blue set against the lighter, brighter shade of her mane. To see her was to know heartbreak, as she looked like she was in pain. I stepped forward to the side of the bed.

"You think I've done this."

Celestia nodded slowly. "She has been speaking of a being in the Everfree Forest, but she speaks only in whispers and delirium. Do you have any idea of what might have done this to her, if not you?"

From anyone else that would have sounded confrontational. I never stopped looking at her, the Night itself, in this state. Fully conscious of my actions, I reached out to her with my palm.

"I don't... but I want to help in any way I can."

Praetor, standing nearby, so far silent, spoke up. "Why?" was all he asked.

Something sparked between the Night and I as my hand lowered onto her cheek. And as my body touched hers, my eyes widened and my head snapped back, mouth open in sudden, mind-eroding awe.

The memories came thick and fast like lightning strikes, bam, bam, bam, bam, one right after another while my brain almost crumpled from the shock of it all. I couldn't see, I

could only see through the inner eye, flashes of places I was never meant to see, bam, bam, bam, bam. Something older than I would ever be, something ancient, was moving within me, behind my eyes, beneath my heart, before my brain - moving in a place beyond my body - timeless, rushing, flowing, *mending*...

And then, when it was done, I understood everything.

• • •

She looked down upon the world below from her lunar prison.

Conjuring a sheet of paper, she began to write. First the date. 29th Day, 6th Month, 297th Year. And then, with painstaking care, she marked the paper with the finest letters she could manage, one by one, until an entire line had formed, reading only one word.

Princess Celestia

With care equal to before, she began to draw her.

Initially she had drawn other things. Constellations. Canterlot Castle. Her ideal stallion. Her dream dress. It didn't take long before Celestia was the only thing she wanted to draw.

She had never been much of an artist, prior to her banishment. But anyone could do anything, given enough time.

When she was done, she looked for a brief moment at her sister's visage.

"I miss you", she said, as she slid the scroll with the other one hundred and eight thousand, six hundred and eighty eight.

• • •

17th Day, 2nd Month, 997th Year.

For almost a millennia she had looked down on Equestria with remorse.

But something had happened. Something had changed that. It had happened so slowly, over years, decades. But it was undeniable that where she once looked upon those lands, wishing to be among its denizens once more, now she was starting to believe that Equestria might suit it's colours a little...

...darker.

• • •

Applejack, who reassured me when I was in doubt...

Fluttershy, who shamed the manticores with her compassion...

Pinkie Pie, who banished fear by laughing the face of danger...

Rarity, who calmed a sorrowful serpent with a meaningful gift...

Rainbow Dash, who could not abandon her friends for her own heart's desire...

And the speaker, whose name I could only remember as Twilight.

I would not forget these names.

• • •

The day after that nightmare had escaped her, she lay on her bed, her head refusing to stop spinning. There was so much that had changed, but her sister remained the same, and for that, she was grateful. But what she wanted the most was someone who would come and see her during the long nights alone, of moving the moon, when she would be able to again. For she was still the same pony she was before her banishment, and though she treasured each moment, she knew it may very well happen again.

A knock on the door and a call to enter from her produced a handsome, tall stallion, white and grey and blue all at once. He was wearing saddlebags next to a cutie mark of a chess knight. He bowed low.

"Good evening, my Lady. I am Praetor."

She inclined her head to him. "Good evening, Praetor. Please, what brings you up here?"

"Your permission to enter, my Lady."

"Of course." How chivalrous, she thought.

"I am told that you are in need of companionship."

She looked kindly at Praetor. Truthfully, he did not seem like the type to be particularly gifted in the art of companionship, but his intentions were so pure that she could not turn him away.

"Please sit with me, Praetor."

As he came near a table, he reached into his saddlebags with his mouth and drew out a chequered wooden box, that rattled as it moved.

"I am told that you are quite adept at games such as these, my Lady. If I may, I would have the honour of being your first opponent since your reacceptance into Equestria, in the game of Chess."

She could not help but be delighted. Something quiet, thoughtful, where conversation needn't dominate, but that she could connect with somepony. And a stallion like this one, a pony of valour, of chivalry; someone who would never leave her.

"I would be delighted," she said.

• • •

"Will you not stay?" she asked him.

The Praetor of the Guard always kept a stern, confident air, but after their time together, walking through the castle grounds, playing Chess in her quarters, she had learned his mannerisms, how to tell his discomfort. And it had never shown more than it had now.

"My lady -" he began.

"Luna, please. My name is Luna."

"My La- Luna," he corrected himself quickly. "I... I cannot stay with you tonight."

"All I wish for is a friend to see me through the night, Praetor. Nothing more. Just someone to be with me."

"I understand, Luna. I shall ask the castle staff to-"

"No," she interjected. "I want a friend. I want you, my friend, to be with me tonight. We can play as many games of chess as you like," she offered, despite her tiring of the game by now.

Praetor looked at her with eyes that held themselves aloft, yet shined with a hidden sorrow.

"Forgive me, my Lady," he offered as he took his leave.

• • •

They had welcomed her with open hearts. All was forgiven. She was welcome again. For centuries she had dreamed of this moment, and the days to come. She had promised herself to enjoy each moment of every one.

But each face, smiling and happy, brought guilt. Each present brought to welcome her back - she was unworthy of them. She had been accepted so easily.

She didn't deserve it.

But she wanted to. She wanted to deserve her sister's bountiful, flowing love, the acceptance of her subjects. She wanted to be a truly benevolent Princess, worthy of the kingdom and its people.

Within the private library of Princess Celestia, the tomes reserved for royalty, lay entries and pages of incredible magical power, locked away by one of the strongest forces in the universe: the wisdom of Sun Princess.

She had poured over the texts that her sister had entrusted her with, in that perfect way, that all-forgiving way that she did not deserve. And as the night soared overhead, she found a way.

Her spirits soared as she read of the spell, its effects, its safeguards. She read of the first time it had been used, in times of antiquity long past:

'... the most remarkable creature. It stood on two legs like a monkey, but straight, with less hair, save on its head, where it was most concentrated. It wore a cloth draped around its chest and odd leather sandals on its feet. Initially, it was most confused and hysterical, but after translation, it became in awe of us, and we in awe of it. We learned much of each other, and we showed him much; if memory serves, he was most interested in the style of our guard's armour, and also some of the local beasts. As a matter of fact, one of the younger colts became quite enamoured with him; they spent much time together. He stayed with us for a few days before wishing to head back home. When his young colt companion questioned why he had to go, he said the most amazing thing: that 'a Praetor's work is never done until he sleeps eternally'. Upon casting the spell of forgetting, the creature's

mind was wiped clean of what it had seen here and we desummoned him. He had assured us that this was what he would have wanted. It is impossible to tell if we completely removed all images from his mind of what he had seen here, admittedly; but for the most part, his knowledge of Equestria was wiped clean.'

• • •

She stood in her private quarters, ready, capable, prepared. The spell required three Unicorns, but she was the Princess of the Moon; her power would suffice, and the thought of walking into the castle with a legendary creature in tow had made her heady, her judgement impaired. Ten centuries of being unworthy of their forgiveness was to end tonight.

The spell required four requests of the being. The first three were of her choosing, however, it was strongly suggested to request a peaceful creature; but the final request must be the same: for the safe passage of the being, from one land to another. She had decided her requests: a peaceful being, a being of impressive feats and a being who wished for adventure and exploration.

She took a deep breath, and readied her powerful magic.

As her astral fingers wove the fabric of magic through space, as her consciousness touched that of the living universe, as the room began to hum and resonate with the arcane, she made her first request clearly in her mind:

'Bring to me someone capable of incredible things.'

The spell had begun to form. Already she began to feel the weight of magic intended for three. But she was equal to the task.

Without delay, her second request was made. 'Bring to me someone of peaceful-- intentions.'

She had made a mistake. 'Intentions' should have been 'heart'. But to be of peaceful intention was no different to being of peaceful heart. With resolve, in the midst of intense, whirling magic, she made her third request.

'Bring to me someone who wishes to see that where no other of their kind has seen.'

She had done it. The third request was made, exactly as planned. The magic around her ebbed and flowed in her own private maelstrom of sound and fury. With triumph, she brought her mind to bear, and stated to the arcane cataclysm her final request:

'Bring me a friend for the long nights alone.'

She had a single instant in which to gasp at her terrible mistake before the magical maelstrom became a fantastic catastrophe.

For a magical storm such as this one, the eye was not the safest part; where the Princess of the Moon stood, it was the strongest point, focused entirely on her. It pulled and tore at her being, until finally, something gave way.

Lying there in her private quarters, the disastrous spell winding away back from whence it had come, she was mostly intact. Mostly; for a part of her had been ripped away, now with that magic that was flowing somewhere, and where it would land, only the magic knew.

• • •

I can see my moon.

I've always loved my moon. Even when I was trapped inside it, I could not begrudge it. Perhaps my sister had chosen to banish me within as an act of mercy. It was certainly a kind thing to do.

I didn't know where I was. I'd tried moving, tried calling out, but my movements were not my own. My body was not my own.

But it was okay, because my moon was there, sometimes. Even as I was, I couldn't help but grow happier with my moon in the sky.

My beautiful moon.

• • •

I...

Should I be survived by ten generations of my children, my line would not be as long as her incarceration.

Alone.

She... oh, God.

I can't...

Oh, *God*.

Something was trying to talk to me.

"Chester? Are you okay?"

She was drawing near. I could feel it behind me.

"One..." I tried.

"Chester? What's wrong?"

She was reaching out for my shoulder.

As I felt the warm touch of an avatar of celestial love on my shoulder, I whirled around, fist clenched, and swung straight at the face of all things good in the world.

"ONE THOUSAND FUCKING YEARS!"

I barely registered that my fist had struck hard metal as I lunged for Celestia's throat.

"ONE THOUSAND FUCKING YEARS!"

I had been wrestled to the ground, pinned under colossal weight, but that would not stop me. I raked my nails against the leg that held me, I kicked, I spat, I struggled until my arms fell dead to the floor under massive weight. And as I did so, only one cry did I scream.

"ONE THOUSAND--FUCKING--YEARS!"

Something was said and Praetor stepped off me, magic dissipated around me. My body floated up, held in stasis, as I was brought face to face with the face of all things worth fighting for in the world.

"Shhhh," she emitted, horn giving a small flash. "Please, Chester... tell me what's wrong."

My rage was depleted. But my cause was not.

"*Why*, Celestia? Why an entire-?"

"She left me no choice, Chester. The world cannot live in eternal night. Plants would die, animals would lose their way-"

"She's your *sister*, Celestia. Your *little sister*," I said, tearing up. "You're meant to take *care* of her."

"I tried, Chester. I tried to talk to her, but she would not see the error of her ways. She would not let go of the bitterness in her heart."

"She wrote your name on a scroll every day, Celestia. She dated it, and she wrote your name, and then she drew a picture of you, because she didn't want to forget what you looked like."

Celestia's eyes lowered, and her mouth parted slightly. She looked at Luna, with a face that spoke of the burdens of the world, and said quietly,

"She was not the only one."

I was lowered slowly to the ground. Praetor watched my every move; Twilight looked on in resolute fear. But my only move was to stare at Celestia, and then to Luna.

I walked to the other side of the bed from Celestia, and sat down carefully on it. At length, I broke the silence. "She will be okay now."

Celestia nuzzled her sister; the sight of it made me look away, for I had come close to a terrible sin, had Praetor and Twilight not intervened.

"She has had quite an ordeal. Come, let us leave her in peace until she awakens."

"Celestia... Your Highness," I breathed heavily, still feeling raw adrenaline, raw hate. I looked down at Luna for a long time. "I wish to stay with her for a while yet."

Princess Celestia nodded in understanding. "Perhaps that will result in something wonderful," she said.

She gave her sister a long, affectionate look before arranging something with Praetor and Twilight, and leaving the room.

I didn't hear what they were talking about. Still my brain was trying to process the feeling of an entire millennium, spent alone, looking down at this frail form that had gone through just that, something I could not even begin to imagine.

As the door closed - I did not even hear them finish their conversation - I was simply sat on the edge of her bed, looking at her, just she and I, this equine form that had gone through so much that ten millennia of tender, loving care could not erase.

The same equine form that had opened its eyes, and was looking at me.

I didn't know what to say. Neither, of course, did she.

Every moment seemed stretched while we simply looked at each other, but it was not uncomfortable. Actually, the silence felt somehow... *appropriate*.

Here I was, sitting on the bedside of a pony princess whose memories over the last millennium-and-then-some I had just had installed into my brain, who had been sealed away in a moon for about fifty of my lifetimes and may have lived for ten times that, but somehow I couldn't feel out of place. Though I was hardly an expert, she gave me no signal that she was any different towards me. She returned the look with slightly parted lips, unafraid eyes.

While I studied those emerald eyes, I put my finger on it: the night was best accompanied by the silence of a sleeping landscape.

Finally, I spoke. "How do you feel?"

"...whole again."

Her voice - calm, still, clear. Its tones reminded me of the moon reflected on the mirror that was the surface of a motionless lake.

"How was it, being like that?"

"I was divided..." she started, "I could see through you, but I couldn't move... or I was trying to move, but... it was certainly an experience." A tired smile formed on her face. "It's Chester, isn't it?"

"Yeah. And you would be ... Princess Luna."

"Yes..." she smiled. "*Not* Princess Arddun." A frail silence. Then, after clearing her throat, she murred, "That's a terrible name."

"Huh. *Well*, excuse me. *I* thought it was pretty."

She laughed a rich, pleasant laugh. A moment passed between us.

"Chester..."

"I know. You're sorry you brought me here, for what I had to go through. Right?"

"Actually, no." I blinked, she smiled knowingly. "You've always wanted something like this to happen. Needed it to happen. The spell wouldn't have chosen you if that weren't true." There was strange emphasis on *true*.

I couldn't help but chuckle and grin. "*To boldly go where no man has gone before.*"

Catching her blank stare, "... yes. I've thought of being somewhere else."

"Thank you."

It was something in the way she said it. It was so sincere.

"For standing up for me," she finished.

"You call it standing up for you. I call it attacking a walking avatar of the Sun like a rabid animal."

"You weren't yourself, Chester. I'm just glad you're not in a coma after all that magic going through you."

"That's... comforting, Luna."

"I mean it," she pressed, a little uncertainly, fidgeting. "I'm glad."

In the dim half-light from the frail stars, I gave Luna a look. "My father is a very wise man. He raised me well, and I'm glad he knows as much." I raised my head to look into the enchanted ceiling, a perfect replica of the night sky. "He told me something someone important said: '*If we were to read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.*' I knew it was true, but I never dreamed it'd be like this. I never..."

I planted my hands behind me on the bed, gazed at the stars above. "No, that's a lie. I've always dreamed of stuff like this. *Adventure*," and with that, a quiet smile adorned my face. "It's amazing. Just so many days here and I've seen and done more than I ever would have on Earth. Chased by a mantichore, fought for my life, seen an alien race..."

Luna rose, shifting on her bed to sit next to me. The Night itself at my side was simply another incredible thing that had happened to me; but this particular thing had far more meaning.

"And... it's been terrifying. I could have altered your race forever with just my phone." I gave it a pat in my chest pocket, to confirm it was still there. "But I wouldn't give up these past few days for the world."

It was strange to think maybe I'd given up the world - my world - for the past few days. I lapsed into silence.

We sat side by side, looking up at the blanket of stars. Staring into the middle distance, they seemed to spin and sway slightly. The magic sparked and danced in places; they all seemed to really wink high up above the clouds, the sky, the world, the jumbled mess of the past few days...

After a while like this, I turned my head to face her. My eyes changing focus from the night sky to the Night Princess seemed almost effortless. Celestia was grand, magnificent; but Luna... Luna was the kind of "beautiful" that didn't vie for attention. It was a guarded, strange beauty; it was a beauty that needed to be understood, to be cherished, not to be polished and magnified. *Like the night sky itself, I thought.*

It was her colours, I think. She was dark dark blue to between-the-stars black, dark green eyes like cut emeralds. They all worked and blended together...

I'd been staring at her. I bit my lip, finally positing, "There is one way you can thank me," I suggested quickly.

She looked bemused. "And how am I to do that?"

"No more sadness." I expected her to quirk an eyebrow - which I would have liked to see in a horse, something about the arc over the eye - but instead she looked at me inscrutably. Coughing a bit nervously, I threw out my hand, all-cards-on-the-table, "I know, it's trite. But, Princess, if someone went through... all that you've gone through," my voice cracked a little under the strain of her still-fresh memories, "and not find a way to be happy after all that-- that's what I call a tragedy, Luna."

If there wasn't a curious expression on her face before, there most assuredly was now. "I think I can manage that, Chester."

Grace. I blinked as the word occurred to me. That's what she was. She was wonder and *grace*.

"Good," I managed.

I didn't know what to do.

I knew what I *felt* like doing. I needed - *she needed me* - to curl a finger and drag it gently down her cheek and look deep into her eyes. It would feel right, to move closer and wrap her in a gentle embrace. I knew, she knew, the tense silence all knew she needed it. Every second of her life that I had been witness to, said she needed it. One thought kept me from doing it. Those things. The right thing.

She was a **horse**. I looked at her, crooked smile and bright-cobalt hair and all, and I saw she was a **horse**.

A woman that I understood more than I thought I ever would a woman. A girl who had sat quietly through the days and the nights, while she yearned for a friend to be with her. Someone who'd been crying for an end to long nights alone.

... but she was still a **horse**. I paused.

I stared at a point just beyond her left ear as I paused and thought.

She was a lady. She was a *noblewoman*. She represented - *was* - the moon, a symbol of beauty and *woman*. Through the magic she'd shared, I'd seen her history and her very heart laid bare. Her whole amazing and painful life was still achingly clear in my mind. I had seen centuries longer than I would ever live. *She* had lived them. I'd experienced the waft and weave of another soul, and now it was in my power, but only in *one instant*, to make the dream that had rung through each day of her life come true.

She was a horse... but she was also *someone*. A someone who I had it in me to bring something wonderful to. My mind was made. In fact, my course could not be clearer. If there was anyone who would do anything else in my shoes right now, given this choice, then they were no man I would give so much as the time of day to.

"Chester?"

The timber of Luna's voice broke my reverie. I must have been staring at her the entire time. Her expression said as much; genuine concern.

Again, my hand knew where it *should* be. I had a vague idea I, myself, was meant to be right there beneath her room's vaulting stars. Wordless, I brought my hand up to her face, and stroked her cheek with the backs of my fingers, barely touching. Her skin was wonderfully cool and smooth.

She stared in disbelief... but she didn't shy away. I could feel her start to tremble, but she made no resistance. The intensity of expression held its own gravity, pulling me in. Lips slightly apart, her eyes were filled with a revealed anxiety and weariness, both swept away with every blink, with every finger-drag.

"Come here," I whispered. My hand found purchase through her mane, at a place down her neck. With care I folded her gently in both arms. Moving as if in a lucid dream, she rested her muzzle and settled her warm breath in the crook of my neck. I could feel her horn brush against my nape, and my eyes met with her own. They were blinking in disbelief.

I can only imagine mine were too.

For a time, her body was tense in disbelief; she shook slightly, drew long breaths. But soon enough, her body relaxed against mine. In the darkness of the room, cradling the Night, time stood still for me. We could have spent hours like this, silent, eyes picking out magic-construct pinprick stars on her bedroom wall.

She had wanted this for so long, and after the truth had been told about my entrance into her life, I wanted nothing more than ... to provide it for her. To be there for her. It was like the Universe knew it, and I was just barely smart enough to puzzle it out. I shifted to support her weight and bring her close; she wriggled to ease against me more deeply.

She didn't cry. Drifting into exhausted sleep, she sighed into my collarbone. Based on the slack in her frame, it had come from deep down, from-the-hooves.

It felt right.

So few knew of what was happening in this room, far above the ground, in the bedchambers of royalty. Only the stars above our heads, and the stars in the night to come, knew that something had happened, something the universe had held breath for a millennium for. The magicked heavens seemed to sing: *Princess Luna had someone.*

Holding her in the chamber of night, Her night, I knew these were not the actions of a man intending to leave this world.

• • •

Luna returned to the waking world in the very arms in which she had left it. I had waited for this moment - for her to come out her slumber to find me still there. My arms around her, the warmth of my body pressed against the side of her face, spoke to her in that

moment of doubt, when one awakens and asks if it was all simply a pleasant dream, to evaporate upon waking. I cradled her close, to make it known to her waking mind: *I am real, Luna.*

There was the softest little breath from her, and she shifted on my lap, in my embrace. Feeling her mane wash over my shoulder and chest drew a tiny sigh from me.

When she murmured, the good-morning voice of two awakening to a Sunday, her voice came to me in that equine language; the translating spell had dissipated. But magic wasn't necessary for me to understand what she had said.

"Hello, Luna."

If she was surprised at my sudden change in language, her body gave no signal.

There came a courteous knock at the door. While I jolted in alarm, Luna's leg curled around my arm and held me fast. *Not yet* it said. I could only agree.

Luna had to speak twice for the new entrant to open the door; once, a quiet, contented whisper into my chest, and again as she realised that only I had heard the first.

The door opened slowly to admit the countenance of Praetor. While Luna stayed in my arms, eyes closed, not wanting to miss a second of what she was feeling, I turned my head to meet Praetor's eyes head-on.

He had begun to enter the room, and had stopped abruptly. Our eyes locked. Upon seeing my back to him, obfuscating Luna from view, his lips had parted, his eyes stared, perhaps even his breathing had stopped.

After an imperceptible heartbeat, he spoke. Luna raised her head, and I lowered mine, our eyes meeting. That was when she responded with a single word. She brushed her nose against me, her face a picture of affection; my palm spread over her jaw whilst I rested my forehead against hers.

A moment before Praetor spoke - an uncharacteristic pause - sent a twinge of apprehension before me. When he did speak, it was at length. The final syllables of his speech were pronounced with major hesitation. As soon as he had stopped speaking, Luna sat bolt upright. Her face shocked me. She had emerged from the nest she had made for herself in my arms with a mask of horror, looking aghast at the grim messenger. She repeated the same syllables Praetor had spoken; in response, he bowed his head.

Luna turned to me, and I knew *fear*. I had a moment in which to feel that fear before she leapt from the bed and tore past Praetor, who barely had time to step out of her way before she was all but gone, the clapping of her hooves growing distant and faint.

My heart had begun pounding, my face taut, and my body suddenly cold with the sudden, cruel omission of Luna's cool warmth. Staring at Praetor in search of answers, but finding none, a moment passed before he bowed his head with sincere, solemn respect and closed the door.

Just like they did with the Roman. They're going to desummon me. They're going to take me away from her.

*I imagine the Roman didn't also **attack royalty** while he was here.*

I began pacing around the room, frantic. *Search for something to help you escape, Chester, you might need it. Luna might not have time to come back before they come for you.*

The room yielded little of anything that could aid in an escape attempt. Her desk was covered with medical supplies - clearly used in the first few days of her delirium - but nothing I was stupid enough to think could help me, even if I could read the labels. The rest of the desk held personal notes of equine hieroglyphics, stationery odds and ends - nothing I could use.

Don't let them take me away from her.

Behind the star-threaded curtains was a window, the catch of which gave me some trouble before I opened it. I looked out for an escape route. So high up, the ground seemed more like an abstract concept than a physical thing. There was no other routes of escape beyond the window. Nothing I could use in this room. I stared at the door before deciding it was worth the risk.

Move, Chester!

As I reached for the handle, the door swung open. Luna had returned, horn aglow with the task of levitating a familiar book. As we were revealed to one another, the world afforded us a single moment to feel what it would be like if she and I were the only ones in it.

I backed up to grant her entry and she brought the book to reading level. She treated me to a front-row-centre view of her spellcasting for all of two seconds before a welcome warmth seeped over my throat and ears.

"Chester," her voice burst forth like a violent comet, "They want you to stand before the Court of the Sun."

"The Court of the Sun?" I repeated. As she calmed herself to explain, I sat back down at her bedside, and she took her place in my arms, for strength.

"They'll make you explain everything, why you're here, what you've done, why you did it," she explained, the side of her face on my chest, eyes closed.

"Oh, thank *God!*"

"-how is that a good thing?"

"I thought they were going to desummon me. Take me away from you."

"Oh-!"

She nuzzled my neck fiercely in apology. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking. I haven't had someone like you before - to think of..."

I delayed speaking for a second longer than was necessary. Her muzzle felt so *good* against my neck.

"But now you do, Luna." I wanted to take her away from that desolate past, lead her towards her moonlit future. Sighing with contentment as she continued her consolation-nuzzling - well in the knowledge that I had forgiven her already, I imagine - I asked her, "What do we have to fear from the Court? We've got nothing to hide, Princess." A thought occurred. "Unless... you want us to be a secret."

"No," she shook her head ever-so-slightly against my chest. "I couldn't keep you secret. I don't want to."

"Then we explain everything - together - and make sure they understand."

She was taking steadying breaths that broke my heart to hear. "Shhh now... tell me what you're afraid of. We can take anything that comes our way. Anything." My fingers ran through her mane, down to her back, bristling with the feel of her coat and that night-air coolness I had come to know and love about her.

A stabilising exhale. Then, she said, "I'm sorry... the last Court of the Sun I attended... didn't end very well for me."

The look on her face, the tone of her voice, both said it all. "I see..."

I didn't have that memory of hers. The memories I'd had flashed into my mind must have only gone up to a certain point.

"If they decide to desummon me, they won't do it there and then, will they?"

Luna considered. "No... there'd be a bit more ceremony. You'd be taken somewhere else, they wouldn't desummon you in the Court."

"Then we have a window in which I can get away."

"If it takes my involvement to free you, then I'll do whatever it takes."

Don't argue on this point with a paragon of femininity, Chester. You can't keep a woman from doing what she has to, to save her beloved.

"I imagined as much."

"Chester... are you going to let them desummon you?"

"No. I'm not going back." I intoned quietly.

A smile appeared on her face; one of serenity, of tranquillity. She wasn't shocked, or ecstatic, because she knew I was staying, even without my telling her. But that didn't mean it wasn't good to hear regardless. "Why?"

I'd been thinking of the answer to that question as she lay sleeping in my arms. Luna craned her neck, cuddled up in my lap, to see my face; I examined her eyes, large and beautiful, while I spoke. Appreciating those eyes made me answer a second later than I had intended to. "I could go home to my family and friends. They're scared witless, thinking I've been abducted or stuck somewhere, or killed. They'll grieve, and they'll never know what happened to me. That's a tragedy, too."

I inhaled, exhaled, appreciated the feel of her on my palms. "But if I leave 'Equestria', then every night, before I sleep, I'll think of this world, and I'll think of you. I'll think of it every day in the car as I go between my nine-to-five job. Every time a bill comes through the door, or every time I eat a meal alone. Every time I look outside at the rolling hills and valleys of Wales, I'll think of what I've seen here, and how it doesn't even *begin* to compare. Most of all, there won't be a single soul I could tell without risking being thrown in an asylum. Having to pretend none of this-" I lifted my arm and swept it

around, gesturing to the lands of Equestria, as she had called it -"ever happened, and having to fit back into society when I know there is *so much more*."

"And *you*, Luna... I know you. I've *felt* you. In a way, you've cursed me, I suppose. No relationship I could maintain for years would ever come near to how *close* you are to me. Nobody could ever bare their soul in the same way. Nobody could even come close, given all the time in the world."

"But there's a solution to that," I continued, feeling *something* inside me rallying, building, with my every word, the feeling of conviction made manifest. "One that turns that curse into a blessing. And it's really not complicated."

After a moment's hesitation, I brought her nose up to my lips and kissed her between her eyes, now closed with gentle acceptance of my offer, even before I had said it.

"I will simply have to never leave your side."

We gave ourselves, in silence, over to the moment, which became a tiny forever.

I hugged her tightly; she squeezed my legs with hers. And while I ran fingertips delicately along her ear, her horn, the tips of her feathers, I sang to her, an old hymn from my primary school days:

*I'm going to paint a perfect picture,
A world of make-believe,
No more hunger, wars, or suffering,
A world I'd like to see...*

• • •

The guards that came to collect us found Luna's head in my lap, my hand gliding upon the moonlit oceans of her mane. After two confused seconds, we were asked to accompany them to the Court of the Sun.

So I was to stand trial for my actions. My intentions have been noble, despite the fight for survival I've been through. I prayed, not for my sake, but for my Lady, that whoever was to judge me would see the same, whether it was a jury, a council, or Celestia herself.

Luna and I walked side by side through the corridors and hallways of the castle. Despite spending seemingly hours with my arms wrapped around my Lady, the sun was directly

above us, setting the castle's architecture ablaze with sunrays that rebounded from every window, of which there were many.

The *sound* of the castle's halls was fascinating; there were enough tapestries and carpets to absorb echoes, but even without any sound, there was something *present* in the room, as if the castle itself was a benevolent entity that watched us all with a kindly eye. It was difficult to feel overawed by the castle when it radiated such a welcoming aura, like an old friend who was always glad to see you entering his abode.

We walked side by side, Luna and I. Despite the castle's grandeur, to say we walked without fear would be a lie. This was a fairytale kingdom, yes, and if a dream could come true it was here; but the case was already decided, then why the pomp and ceremony? Why not tell me that I could remain?

If I had to stand and fight for the privilege to stay by my Lady's side, then there was no man, beast or in-between that would stop me. On Luna's face, she wore the same face of determination, and I imagined, was thinking the same thoughts: *no-one shall take Chester from me*. I had awakened something within her; though I was not given to arrogance, I was certain that it was a bettering of her character, one that I would have the honour of seeing grow over time firsthand.

Come at me, I thought, as we approached the grand, resplendent doors of the Court of the Sun, three sets of hooves and one pair of trainers striking the reflective marble floor. *I am ready for you*.

As the guards took their place on either side of the doors and bent their legs around the handles, I stood firm. I could imagine the chatter and bustle that would emerge from within as the doors came apart. *Let the crowds see the defendant. Let the jury see their task. With the very source of my conviction by my side, I cannot fail*.

*Throw your very worst at me, Equestria! You may move mountains, bend rivers and construct wonders such that no man will see, but you will **not** tear me from Luna's side!*

*I am ready for you, Equestria. I am ready for you, Celestia. But are **you** ready for **me**?*

The doors groaned as they parted. With a reinforcing glance at Luna, I strode into the Court of the Sun.

Huh.

This was not what I had expected.

A blast of colours; living green, root-and-bark brown, sky blue, snow white. A magnificent tree stood firm and proud in the great Court, boughs shading a wide, circular patch of lush grass that dominated the centre of the room. Behind the tree, great and old, was the clear sky set against white columns, a perfect colour to accompany the blazing, radiant sun.

The light seemed to charge the very air with its warmth, for what reached my ears was just as peaceful as what reached my eyes. A low, relaxed hum of conversation, accented by pleasant laughter that spoke of closeness and comfort between two people, all set against a chorus of birdsong. There were no stands, no benches or desks; no crowds. Simply myself, the Night at my side, and nine others present.

Sitting under the shade of the oak, Twilight sat near a pile of books and a set-down saddlebag, along with the same wrench-adorned purple unicorn I'd seen at Twilight's library; a turquoise, rainbow-maned pegasus sat with the second horse I'd ever seen in Equestria, hat and all, in animate discussion; snow white coat and violet mane stood admiring a detailed, intricate tapestry on the left-most wall. Standing nearby, always on guard, was the ever-vigilant Praetor, who stood firm and stalwart, without detracting from the peacefulness, the serenity of it all. Fluttershy herself was visible through the boughs of the tree, conducting the birds that sang so sweetly. And at the centre of it all, in prominent position, sat the most aggressively bubblegum-pink bundle of hair and hooves I'd ever seen, talking animatedly to...

... Princess Celestia herself, who lay on the grass with her legs underneath her, tail and mane flowing with an unfelt wind.

From behind, it would have looked like I'd been struck in the stomach; a sudden convulsion, a tensing, of my body preparing to fight, fists clenching, teeth baring, adrenaline shooting through me like lightning. *Charge at her, my flesh screamed and craved; charge at her, rend and tear, make her know her terrible crime!*

And yet - against all odds - I stood motionless, eyes shut, will against instinct, fighting an intense battle of man's conquest over his Neanderthal ancestors.

I had lost the previous battle of self-control, but this time, I had my weapon; I had clarity of mind, reason, intellect. I saw that white-gold visage just beyond my eyelids, and the beast within all men roared for blood, roared in my own blood, like a wildfire spreading over every muscle and tendon. Against that beast within, man against monstrosity, I brought my reason to bear: She was an avatar of the very light of the world. Her golden rays spread over all that was, indifferent to their plight, their lifestyle, their choices; hers was an orb that shone upon all creatures, great and small, and granted life to all it touched. To me, however, she was more than that.

She was Luna's sister.

The countless decades of mind-eroding solitude, still alien, still an atrocity without compare, tore at my resolve like a grim, clawed spectre, but I stood resolute, for I would not bring harm to Luna's beloved sister. As the doors closed softly behind us, my fists uncurled into open palms, fingers stretching back as far as they could go. I inhaled, raised my head, and opened my eyes. The entire struggle of man against the inner animal had lasted for all of two seconds. Nobody had even noticed what was possibly my greatest triumph yet.

"My beloved sister!" Celestia rose like an angel taking wing, trotting to her sister who responded in kind, Praetor staying close, never taking his eyes off me. In response to his well-deserved protection, I gave him the most serene look I could manage. Looking at Celestia, I felt the beast give a dull roar, and a death rattle as the sight of her with Luna brought it's life to an end. The celestials nuzzled one another affectionately; the various ponies of the room began to draw near, looking around the embracing sisters, to behold me.

"It is so good to see you well again, Luna."

"It is so good to *be* well again, big sister... I have so much to tell you, so much I want to tell you."

Fluttershy landed behind Celestia, who held her head high, a picture of a resplendent goddess, and made a formal introduction. "Girls, allow me to introduce Chester."

I had expected tension between she and I, something to even *acknowledge* that I had previously tried to tear her eyes out in a frothing rage - but there was nothing. A genuine nothing, a total lack of any glances held for too long, any minor pauses in speech, no discernable body language that betrayed animosity. She almost made me believe what had happened, had never happened.

Rising to the occasion, I bowed. "I am honoured."

After a cautious sizing-up look, the violet-maned tapestry admirer bowed her head and spoke. "Your Highness, I would like to speak... rather frankly with Chester; with your permission, of course. There is something we would all like to say." The Princess nodded warmly in approval. The speaker produced the flamboyant, energetic voice of an indignant fashionista.

"A little late for polite introductions, isn't it?"

Taken aback, "I'm sorry?"

"Well I should certainly hope so, after what you did to poor Fluttershy here!" Her hoof turned upwards, gesturing at the semi-concealed pegasus. I followed her hoof to Fluttershy. Eyes locked. And then, that damn face from memory struck like a jet of fire.

"Your Highness, can I talk frankly too?" The turquoise rainbow-bolt was granted the same liberty in kind, with a small, hesitant delay from the Princess.

"You better have a good reason why, *Chester!*" Judging by how she had zipped over and began hovering *right in my face*, staring me down like a furious, airborne wildcat, she wasn't short of courage.

"Not *one* of us has left Fluttershy's side since you snuck into her room!"

I was lost for an answer. How could anything justify what I had done? But I was fortunate; Celestia intervened, gentle and kind. Gentle and kind, as these were clearly Fluttershy's friends, and had been supporting her through the ordeal I myself had put her through; they had all the reason in the world to wish for words with me.

"Enough now, girls, that's why we're here. To give Chester a chance to explain his actions."

Beg pardon?

I couldn't believe it. The Court of the Sun was nothing more than a place where people gathered and *talked about their problems*? But Luna had been so deathly afraid of the Court, and I didn't doubt for a second she had a good reason. Perhaps I was in more danger than the serene environs let on. But the concept of having to fight a battle of backstabbing and politics - in this place? - seemed... well, as ridiculous as getting teleported into a fairytale, naming the moon and worshipping it for two days straight.

"Chester, allow me to introduce Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Twilight Sparkle and Purple Tinker."

From Luna's memories I already knew their names, but Purple Tinker and Twilight *Sparkle* were new to me - I thought it was simply Twilight. Rarity took the opportunity to perform an equine curtsy; Pinkie Pie gazed unabashed with a curious, wide-eyed expression; Applejack nodded noncommittally; Rainbow Dash made a "hmpf" sound; Tinker waved a hoof.

"Let the Court come to session," announced Celestia. All sets of legs in the room, barring mine, moved and sat on the grass in the centre of the room, forming an expectant semicircle. Luna had settled next to her sister, at the centre of the arc.

"Please, sit before us, Chester." I took my place before the assembled Court of the Sun.

"Before we begin the reason for our gathering, I have an announcement to make. Praetor, would you be so kind?"

"Yes, my Lady."

All eyes turned towards Celestia; she raised her head and closed her eyes with an approachable air of office. The Praetor of the Guard took note using what appeared to be a golden-red feather pen.

"To honour the return of my beloved sister, the Court of the Sun is to be given a more fitting name, to better suit the oncoming of our joined, mutual rule. What do you think of the Court of Dusk and Dawn, Luna?"

Luna looked utterly shocked. "I?... I *love* it, big sister." Then she added with visible happiness, "That's so kind of you."

They nuzzled one another in sisterly affection, and no face in the room was without a smile as they stomped their hooves in emulation of applause; not even Praetor. It was more than a gift, but also a symbol of trust and peace. Even so, I was determined to find out one thing about the banishment, from the horse's mouth, as it were:

Why an entire millennia? Why not less time than that?

Celestia began. "We are gathered here to understand Chester's actions, and to give him the opportunity to give us his side of the story. Fluttershy is here as she was one of the ponies who had first contact with you, I believe." Looking at her now, still somewhat

nervous around me, still vulnerable, it made me question my own decency as a human, knowing that I had caused her trouble for reasons that were, to me now, ridiculous. Perhaps now I would have the chance to make amends.

"Purple Tinker here is in attendance to explain what she can about your device, the device that you went to such lengths to recover." I nodded in acknowledgement and looked into the large, inquisitive eyes set beneath an unkempt, purple-white mane as they bobbed up and down with an equine bow.

"And finally, Praetor is here as he was the valiant to whom I entrusted the task of finding you. I heard you had quite the dramatic confrontation in the streets of Ponyville."

Praetor simply looked at me, stonewalled, silent. Surely he was not here simply to regale us with tales of his conquest over me.

"Twilight and her friends insisted that they attend with Fluttershy. Who was I to say no?" Celestia finished with an ironic smile. "We will begin hearing of where you come from, Chester. We have not met one such as you for a long time. And you're always such trouble when you come!" She finished with a warm laughter that left no room to suspect she had insinuated more than a simple tease. She was, of course, referring to the Roman who had given Praetor his name, but her use of plural... other humans had visited Equestria since then?

"I am a human from Earth, your Highness. Did you say other humans come to Equestria too?"

"Not for a very, very long time, I'm afraid. A matter of decades now."

I wanted to know more about the most recent person to have appeared in Equestria, but I had bigger fish to fry. Celestia seemed to have read my mind, for she announced to the Court that it was now in session. She did so with a smile in her voice.

"My sister, allow me to stand by Chester's side," came the clear bell-tones of Luna's voice; of all the sounds of the Court, this one was the sweetest to my ears. All heads turned to face her in surprise. Celestia nodded, and Luna rose, gliding like a black cloud over the night sky to my side.

"I am the one who summoned Chester to Equestria."

A collective gasp of astonishment, and Luna began in earnest. "I wanted to do something amazing, after my return to Equestria. To make up for my time as Nightmare Moon."

Luna's memories of being Nightmare Moon were... scattered. Like trying to look at something, and only looking *past* it. There was something ominous about those memories; they were distant, out of mental reach. I wanted to reach out and touch Luna, to tell her it was okay, that I would never let it happen again so long as I live.

"I found a tome in the royal library about bringing an amazing creature to Equestria, to learn from, and share with, and send b-- and share with," she stammered. Her last words were to be *and send back*.

"He doesn't look very amazing to me," snarked Dash. Despite myself, I grinned a little; I could only agree with her. Applejack and Rarity laughed a little. Pinkie Pie... was *staring* at me. It was rather disconcerting.

"The spell was meant for three unicorns... and I knew that when I tried casting it alone. But I wanted so badly to deserve all the acceptance you gave me, after what I tried to do."

The shrill, wavering pitch of Pinkie Pie responded, happy and energetic, but somehow not out of place in this quiet sanctum. "Oh, Lunie, you didn't have to do that!"

"I know... but I wanted to. And I did. But I made a mistake while casting the spell."

The air in the grand room shifted at the phrase 'mistake while casting'. Slight motions from Tinker, Rarity and especially Twilight set me on alert.

"Instead of pulling something safely, I pulled Chester into the Everfree Forest, and right in the middle of the magical misfire, I..." She searched for words, for feelings. "... *split*. Something *split* and the next thing I know, I can see the Everfree Forest, and I'm moving, but it's not me moving. I tried calling out to whatever was carrying me through the forest, I tried to run, but I felt so *distant* from my body, from everything."

"Oh, it sounds *ghastly*, dear..." said Rarity.

Luna considered for a moment. "It wasn't so bad once I saw my moon. My beautiful moon..." As soon as she had even mentioned it, her voice was sanded away of weariness. "I felt a lot better after I knew my moon was nearby."

Celestia rose, wearing a face of sadness and concern, and approached her sister from across the grass. She came close and low, and asked, eyes shining with sincerity, "How do you feel now, sister?"

The Night looked at the Day with meaning and love. "I feel wonderful, sister."

Celestia brought her head alongside her sister, and kissed her on the cheek. As she did so, she whispered something, something I could hear, but only just:

"I lost you once before... never again, Luna."

"Never again, sister," came the response.

After Celestia had taken her place once again, Twilight nervously began.

"Luna... you said that Chester's being here was caused by a magic misfire."

"Yes... it is."

"Do you know of any other side effects that might have happened? All that magic, backfiring... the split might not have been the only thing. Any strange behaviour? Anything... out of the ordinary?"

She had felt my alarm, I was sure; for her next words were so final, so convinced, there was no room for doubt. "No. There are no side-effects that I know of. A memory shock, but other than that I am aware of none."

It was Tinker's time to speak, her searching, inquisitive voice asking, "A *memory shock*? Between you and Chester? What memory was it?"

"The memory of... everything since my time in the moon."

"Since you were released?" Tinker questioned.

"No... since I was imprisoned."

The weight of those words filled the room with a moment's silence.

Twilight was the first to speak. "Chester... are you okay? It looked like it all happened in five seconds up in Luna's bedroom..."

"Yes. As you know, for a small time I couldn't control myself, I flew off the handle. And for a time afterwards it was... was..."

I trailed off.

So alone.

Years upon years.

Never stopping.

Never changing.

Just the low, inner moonlight, for hour upon hour upon hour upon hour, decade after decade, everything she knew slipping away into dust, cities rising and falling as she sits, surrounded by towers of scrolls -

"Chester..."

I gasped in alarm. Everyone was staring at me.

"Chester... I'm okay now."

Luna's hoof was on my leg, but I could barely feel it. I stared at her, unseeing, for two seconds, and shook my head.

"Yeah. I'm. I'm okay. I'm fine."

I took a deep, steadying breath, trying to remember the conversation before... it had happened.

"Yeah. I went crazy." Then, rubbing the bridge of my nose with forefinger and thumb to scatter the darkness of the memories, I said, "I attacked Celestia."

Heads reared up in surprise. Dash yelled, "You **attacked** Princess Celestia!? How come you're not a pile of ash?"

Praetor spoke. "I restrained him before he could cause our Highness harm." Dash's eyes lit up.

"Did you stomp on him for good measure?"

Praetor chuckled. "It was not an option I had completely ruled out."

"Celestia," I began, drawing all eyes towards me. "I am so sorry I attacked you. It was-"

"Already forgiven," she stated, curt and simple. "I cannot expect you to act naturally when you have absorbed twenty of your lifetime's worth of memories of isolation in less than five seconds, Chester."

I couldn't believe it. It was almost too good to be true.

"If it is any consolation, Chester," began Praetor, in a quite uncharacteristic manner, "you will be happy to know you were never so much as close to an actual threat to her Celestial Highness."

"Yes, that is of immense comfort to me. Thank you," I said sarcastically. Praetor gave a tiny nod, with a hint of a smile.

"Alright, enough about you, let's talk about Fluttershy," came the southern accent of Applejack.

Immediately, the five friends banded together near Fluttershy. They made for an adorable group; one that would have warmed my heart to see on Earth. Here were friends that enriched your entire life, no matter when they left it. I rose, moved closer, and sat facing them. It was time to make amends.

Even if Pinkie Pie was still *staring at me*.

It was time to just go for it. "Fluttershy," I began. "I snuck into your house because I wanted to see how you all live. How you wonderful ponies live your lives, day by day, because it *fascinated* me," and with that, I came alive. "How you live! What do you eat? How do you stay warm in the winter? What books you read, how... how you prepare your meals, *everything* like that."

I talked directly to Fluttershy, who returned a look through her mane, shy and vulnerable. "Yours was the first house I came upon, while I was searching for water. I stayed outside for what must have been hours before I mustered up the nerve."

"So what's with the touchy stuff, huh, Chester?" my multi-coloured antagonist chided.

I drew a deep breath. Within the Court of Dusk and Dawn, this peaceful sanctum, there could be no lies drawn from my lips, and so, I told the absolute truth.

"She's beautiful."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash were set immediately to full alert. Twilight cocked an eyebrow - the arch over the eye was truly worth seeing, after all - while Rarity backed up, eyes wide in surprise. Fluttershy herself blushed profusely and drew herself small.

Pinkie Pie... started to *grin*.

"I stood next to your bed, and I looked down at you, and you were *adorable*," I ploughed on. "We have a legend of a pegasus on Earth, but to actually *see* one, to be near one... before I knew it, I was reaching out to touch your wings. I didn't realise I was doing it until I nearly put my hand on you. I managed to pull my hand away as soon as I realised what I was doing... and that's when your rabbit tried to slice my leg off," I finished rather quickly.

"Sounds like Angel, alright," remarked Applejack, tone humorously flat.

"I'm gonna stuff that rabbit so full of carrots it won't be able to walk for a WEEK when I see him next!" came Rainbow Dash, triumphant, ever-vengeful. *Christ, is she loyal. Wish she was on my side.*

"Chester... Fluttershy told us she tried fighting you off and you bolted like she was some giant, beefy stallion who chews wood for breakfast." I nodded in agreement with the memory. "You were...*pretending*, weren't you?"

"Yeah, I was."

"Ah-HAH! I *knew* it!" Her front hooves pounded the ground in triumph. "I love it when I get things right! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!"

In the midst of her celebrations, she learned swiftly that she was the focus of everyone in the room, who had fallen silent with amusement.

"Aaah... sorry," she blushed and lowered her head with an awkward grin.

Quickly I continued to cover up Twilight's embarrassment. "I thought if I pretended to be too afraid of her to come back, she wouldn't be scared of going to sleep again."

"Well, that was quite noble of you... if true, of course," remarked a sceptical Rarity.

And then, a tiny voice reached our collective ears, barely a soft little whisper, and yet the voice with the most impact of that moment.

"Why did you hurt my Angel-bunny?"

A silence fell over the room.

"I..." My voice failed me. "I tried to run, but he was still in my leg. I was scared, so I grabbed him-"

"You're bigger than he is." Her interruption was just a little louder than a sigh, but my own voice was instantly drowned out. "You *hurt* him."

Oh, God.

It was the closest I'd come to breaking down so far. In the end, I overcame it, but only just.

"Then I'll come by your house every day for the next week and let him gnaw on my leg until he gets better," I mused. "How does that sound?"

Fluttershy was about to gasp in horror when Rainbow Dash intervened. "That sounds like a great idea!"

Applejack spoke to Rainbow Dash - it was the first time I'd seen two of the friends speak to each other since entering the Court. "A mite vengeful, Dash?"

"No pony scares *my* friends and gets away with it!" she proclaimed fiercely.

"Dash, with all due respect," I said, looking at her with a small smirk. "Does being brought before court mean I 'got away with it'?"

"No," she returned my look. "Because you *still* haven't even said you're *sorry*."

I blinked. *She's right.*

My gaze shifted from turquoise and rainbow to light cream and pink. "You cannot imagine how sorry I am," I began. But before I could continue, she spoke softly.

"It's okay... but you should apologise to Angel."

"I will."

She gave a small, little smile, and it was the second most soul-easing thing I'd seen in Equestria yet.

Maybe everything was going to be okay. I would see to it that fluffy ball of rage and murder was properly placated, and the damage undone. Destroy my phone somehow, and live with Luna, devoting myself to being that which she has dreamt of for so long, exulting in the capacity to become my own lover's dream. Learning of the ways of this

fairytale world - becoming useful, a citizen, a worker. To quietly settle into Equestria and live my days as Luna's lover and faithful one.

I turned my head to look at Luna, to dare to hope that maybe everything was going to be okay. Luna was smiling, relaxed -

"YOU'RE IN LOVE!"

"Jesus *Christ!*"

Everyone in the entire room was leaning away from the sound-explosion that was Pinkie Pie's shrill, glass-shattering voice. Some, like Praetor and Celestia, simply leaned away from her in surprise. The rest of us, who were at ground zero, had either sheltered from the blast if they were ready, or they had been caught unawares by the shockwave and was reeling. I was the latter.

Her initial explosion done, she defied all expectations by exploding twice, this time as a controlled combustion of leaping around me, staring at me with a huge grin, speaking faster than I had even thought possible.

"You're in love with Luna! First you walked in together, and I thought, that's weird, why would they be together? And then she walked over and sat next to you, but just a teeeeny bit too close, and then I thought," and with this she gave a theatrical gasp, "No way! That can't be right! And then she started talking about you, and she said she felt wonderful, and I thought, why would she be feeling wonderful, I mean, she's just been in a coma, and then I remembered she saw you, and it started making sense, but I was like, 'I need more evidence to support a theory like that!'"

Everyone in the room just stared at the cosmic force that was Pinkie Pie - save Twilight, who was somewhat taken aback at the apparently-accurate mimicry of herself.

"And then you said Fluttershy was pretty, and that was it! I knew you weren't some nasty old horrible ugly thing, 'cause you think ponies are pretty! And then you looked at Luna just now and **BAM!**"

She finished with a shrill crescendo, an appropriate aftershock to the megaton blast that had begun this... 'speech'. And as quickly as she had begun, she finished, sitting in front of me, wrapped in the total silence of the room, leaning towards me with big eyes and a massive smile.

"Well? Am I right?"

I was reminded of the phrase "*No power in the 'verse can stop me.*" Turning slowly to face Luna, her face shone with agreement.

"Yes."

To a backdrop of stunned gasps and wonder, I climbed to my feet and took my place by the Night's side. Once I was seated, Luna and I faced the collected Court of Dusk and Dawn.

Twilight broke the silence. "... you only just met this morning."

Luna and I looked at one another. "We know," we said together.

"It was love at first sight!" swooned Rarity. "Oh, how utterly *Romantic*... if only that could happen to *me* one day!"

"Princess Luna, I... this is awkward, but..." stammered Twilight.

After an encouraging nod from the Night, "Are you sure this isn't something from the summoning misfire? Magic can have very diverse side-effects, especially backfired magic."

It was my turn to answer, before Luna did. "No. Because if it was that, then I wouldn't feel the same way for her." Luna agreed by giving me a tiny smile. In the midst of the Court, it was utterly enchanting.

"So you're going to stay in Equestria? You're not going home?" asked the force no power in the 'verse could stop.

"If I'm allowed to stay."

Luna and I turned to Celestia, and waited for her to speak. She was quiet for some time.

"I must request that I speak with Luna and Chester privately."

Not a word of protest was said as the Court was vacated - not even Praetor, who had acted as a bodyguard - leaving only Celestia, Luna and I on the lush grasses. The doors shut with an echoing boom, and Celestia spoke.

"Are you certain this is not a result of magical backfire, Luna?"

"As certain as I can be, sister."

Celestia addressed me. "Chester, you'd give up your world based on your experiences over the last few days?"

"The last few hours, your Highness."

"I see." She was quiet for some time. "There are difficulties involved in something such as this. But if I listed each and every one, I believe I would find you both willing to meet them all head-on."

I nodded once, iron-willed, determined.

She continued. "It will never be my place to tell you what your heart says, my sister. I would not dream of it."

"Even so, big sister. I want you to know, and I want your approval. It would be beyond nightmare to have to ever choose between you and Chester."

"Then we will simply have to make it so that you never have to, my Night," I spoke quietly. Celestia and I looked at one another; a moment passed; the air grew lighter around us.

The time had come. "Celestia, I have something I need to ask you. I, too, see the rather large disadvantages involved with finding myself on your list of enemies, but... I have to ask. I need to know."

"Of course, Chester."

"Why *one thousand years*?"

Celestia looked at me, and she wore a mask of sadness and burden. But I wanted the truth.

"Because the alternative was eternity."

I blinked. Then, "Please, go on."

Celestia drew breath, raised her head high, and began her tale. "When Nightmare Moon and I did battle, there was something about my foe that was beyond anything my beloved

sister could have conjured forth from the very depths of her heart. It was something that threatened to overpower me, something that called for only the most urgent action.

"I could not imprison Nightmare Moon within the Sun, for the Night cannot exist inside the Day. If she could have survived within the Sun, it would have been within my power to determine the duration of her banishment. But as it was, I had no choice but to use the Elements to imprison Nightmare Moon within her namesake.

"But I am not the custodian of the night. Though I could banish into the moon, I was not able to reach inside the night-symbol, to look within, see and feel my beloved sister, trapped. Just as the Night cannot exist inside the Day, it is not the Day's jurisdiction to invade the Night. I could move the Moon once I had lost Luna, but only by moving the Sun in kind, by pushing the Night with the Day. Thus, the nights to be far less beautiful, far more erratic with their duration. I was not the celestial artist that Luna was, and the nights that I brought about served as a constant reminder of my sister, and the masterful art that were her nights.

"And so I devoted myself to learning all that I could, to find a way to bring my beloved sister, free of her nightmares, from her lunar prison. I spent days and nights, poring over tomes, reading the history of the moon, anything I could find, anything I could request of the libraries of the whole of Equestria - until I found a way.

"I was not master of the moon. But I was master of the stars.

"The stars, tiny suns that glistened in the heavens, granted to the night from so long ago; even with their being of my celestial prowess, were still part of the night. And so I devoted myself to creating four new stars in the night sky, that surrounded the moon, and to these stars I gave of myself freely, joyfully, each and every night, for they were to reunite me with my sister.

"It began to work. As the four stars blazed and danced with the moon, I could feel my beloved sister, trapped within, and I began to feel my strength over the night's crowning jewel growing. I was so close to freeing my beloved sister... until something *changed*.

"It had grown *darker*. There was something there, something that held my beloved sister in sway. It had been centuries, and finally I *felt* my sibling; but before I could free her, I felt the very same nightmare, twisting away within the celestial prison. Nightmare Moon had returned.

"I tried to gather the elements of harmony once more, to bring about an end to Nightmare Moon and free my sister from her grasp. But this time, I lacked a single element. After feeling my sister locked away for centuries, after coming so close to being reunited again and finding her so close, and yet so far away, wrapped in a bitter darkness, I could not bring myself to harness the element of laughter.

"When Nightmare Moon and I had first done battle, at the critical moment, I could see my kingdom under the balance of Night and Day; I could see my subjects, happy and alive, living and playing in the years to come, and then I knew laughter, if only for an instant; but it was enough. But after coming so close to having my sister at my side again, and finding myself so far away at the last moment... I could not bring to me, that final element.

"The stars were already set to release my sister; too much of my love and devotion had been poured into them to stop them. I was now to release the elements to new holders, they who had yet to know the pain of loss that comes with time. Upon my sister's release, Nightmare Moon was defeated and scattered to the winds... and you are with me, at last, Luna. *At last.*"

Nothing in the room moved. Tears rolled down every face - even mine. The Night moved slowly to the Day, coming beside her, and leaned her body against the snow-white skin of the Sun, resting her head on her sister's neck, shedding tears freely.

"I love you so much, big sister."

"I love you too, little one."

I did not know how long they remained like that, for I had quietly risen and left the Sisters Celestial to the Court of Dusk and Dawn.

• • •

Speculative, curious conversation drifted into the Court as I pulled a door open, slowly as to not disturb the sisters, and hushed immediately as I made myself visible.

I put a finger to my lips as soon as the previous occupants of the Court saw me, and closed the door, softly as I was able.

As soon as the door was closed, Tinker asked, "Well?"

I took a small breath, looking into the distance before I answered.

"They both need time to be alone for a while." After adjusting to the change of conversation, "Nothing was said about whether I should stay or go."

"For each session of the Court, there is a customary wait of one full day before the Princess gives her judgement," said Praetor. "By this time tomorrow, you will know if you are to be a citizen of Equestria."

"Alright. Sleeping on it - wise. I'd do no different," I acknowledged.

"Until then you are a guest of Canterlot Castle, Chester. Should you require anything, I am honoured to be of service."

"There is one thing that I might ask of you," I said, to the general interest of all present.

"Something to eat that *isn't apples*."

• • •

Truly, the hospitality of Canterlot Castle was without compare. As we dined together in a grand hall, Twilight and Tinker were most interested in me, and also the most understanding of why I couldn't tell them about my world and how things were done; essentially, I was speaking to high researchers of magic and machine respectively, and the threat it posed to let even a single tidbit drop carelessly was too great for me to become absorbed in the conversation. I was, in fact, stunned that not a single comment was made about my hands, and my opposable thumbs, and this shock remained with me until I saw that the ponies were somehow *grabbing things with their hooves*. Upon asking Pinkie Pie how she had held her sandwich, she simply replied, "With my hooves, silly!".

I was asked to explain my earlier comment about apples by, of course, Applejack, and she was irked that I'd stolen some from her orchard, and greatly appeased by my sincere opinion that they were the best damn apples I'd ever tasted. The horses - or *ponies*, as I had been corrected by Rarity - dined on flowers, salads, carrots, various baked confectionaries and some assorted vegetables. I took what I could from what was on display, although at Rainbow Dash's dare, I tried a flower sandwich, and found it to be not totally unpleasant. The kitchen staff of the castle were utterly fascinated with me and how I found my meal; upon my wholehearted approval, they let loose a cheer with a stamping of hooves that rumbled throughout the castle.

Once the meal was done, I had to excuse myself, and ask for time to consider upon the day's events. Praetor, who was eating with several of the guards under his command, led

me away from the dining hall and into the resplendent halls and corridors of Canterlot Castle.

In the small hours of this day, I had been neck-and-neck with this beast, as he tried to bring me down. Now I walked under his hospitality, and if he was anything, he was learned in the ways of tending to guests with the utmost diligence.

"Praetor," I began as we walked through the corridors, to a backdrop of running water and happy, daily lives in the rooms we passed.

"Yes, Chester."

"Praetor is your title, yes?"

"That is correct."

"I imagine you're not called Praetor Praetor."

Small pause, and "... that is also correct."

"So what's your name?"

He was quiet for a moment. Then, "I do not wish to disclose that at this time."

I blinked. "Why? Does the Praetor have to take up the name as a sign of commitment?"

"No, that is not required of me."

"So you took up the name Praetor voluntarily?"

"That is correct."

We walked together. After some time, I began to grin.

"Your name's embarrassing, isn't it?"

Praetor was silent. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Alright. You're a fan of chess, aren't you?"

A fleeting sideways glance at me showed more than his words. "That is true, yes."

"Then, should I ever beat you in a chess match, you must disclose your name to me."

Praetor smiled, the roguish smile of a gentleman in his element. Then, "Under the proviso that each time I win, you and I spar."

"Spar? What, you mean to want to *fight* me?"

"Revere the mind kept sharp through constant learning. Treasure the muscle kept strong through constant trial." And finally, "Fear the enemy about whom nothing is known."

"Praetor," I grinned like a Cheshire cat. "I can only accept."

• • •

Sprawled on the bed, body crying with gratitude over conscious rest and relaxation, the day's events swam in a viscous miasma in my mind. Though the Court of Dusk and Dawn had gone better than I had ever expected, it was still within Celestia's power to deem me too unstable, too violent, too *anything* - and desummon me accordingly. I could not imagine her doing so to Luna, but the possibility was there; I would be a fool to ignore it.

It was not long before I was joined by the Night, who granted the room grace simply by entering it. She moved gradually, like a lazy ocean wave over a moonlit beach; there was a peace about her, something that had finally fallen into place.

Silently, always looking into my eyes, she rose onto the bed, and lay facing me; I moved her bed-facing foreleg gently, let it run past my shoulder, beneath my neck, putting my forehead against the crescent on her chest. Her body curled around mine; my free hand caressed her side, palm tender with the touch of wing and mane.

"I am here," I said simply, not as a subject to his ruler, but as a consort to his princess. "I am staying with you."

Every tear she shed, I brushed away with my fingertips, for they had no right to adorn her face. Not anymore.

• • •

A shadow had entered the castle.

To those it passed, it manifested itself only as a passing chill, a momentary shiver, forgotten in less than moments.

It seeped, invisible, over doors and floors, glided through walls, melted through masonry, moved unseen up the winding parapets of the castle towers, until it came to a door.

Within that door, two star-crossed lovers were dreaming of their strange, happy future together; the Night shed tears that now, at last, someone caught before they left her face.

It lingered outside the door, like a forgotten face on the edge of memory, for all of a few seconds, and departed into the castle.

Before the night was out, the shadow had work to do.

Pinching a carrot from the wooden bowl on my lap, I held it level to her mouth. Luna bit off a piece and chewed slowly, eyes closed with the task of appreciating the texture, the flavour, everything that could be savoured about every bite, while my free hand caressed the far side of her neck in long, smooth motions.

I cannot lie. It felt *strange*, putting delicacies to her lips in the same fashion one would feed treats to a pet horse, but two things kept me from stopping; for one, this was surely something she had dreamed of a beloved even before her imprisonment, and for two, though it went unsaid, the way she savoured every single taste, how she sampled her meal, spoke of just how much she had missed real, lovingly prepared food, instead of what she had conjured for herself over the long centuries alone. I was quick to put my discomfort with the situation aside.

A warm, pervading aura surrounded her horn, and she cleared my lap of any obstructions, laying her head on my leg. "I'm sorry for worrying you so much about the Court."

You are a night sky given flesh.

"It's quite alright, Luna. Hah, actually I had to laugh. I expected something very different."

"Please, go on?"

"I can't really tell you that."

She rolled, legs in the air, to look up at me. "Why?"

"Well, if I'm correct, judging on what Celestia said when she renamed the Court, soon you'll be co-ruling over Equestria with your sister."

"Yes..." Then she stated simply, "I am prepared."

There was such a passive, feminine power to those three words. None who heard them may have doubted her resolve. "If I talk about how things are done on Earth, then that might influence your decisions in some way. I can't have that."

"But I want to learn where you come from, what wonders exist in your world. Or do you prefer being the big mystery stallion?" She batted me playfully on my arm with her hoof.

After a moment, "Do that again," I said past a growing grin.

She batted me curtly on the arm once more.

"That is *adorable*."

"Don't change the subject," came her fond irritation, and not without a blushing smile, as she righted herself and sat beside me, eyes on mine. "I want to know who you are, Chester. I want to know about the world that brought me my consort."

My consort, she had said. It felt so right.

"I can tell you bits and pieces, but not the how or why things work. I come from a planet called Earth", and with that, on my *List of Things That I Dream Of But Will Never Happen*, I put a mental checkmark against the item *Say 'I Come From Earth' To An Alien Life-form*. "We don't have magic, and our-"

"No magic?" She was shocked.

"No magic, my beloved."

"Amazing..."

"Says the magical talking unicorn princess."

"Says the giant monkey from another world who fell in love with her."

"Touché."

I ran the tips of my fingers ever-so-lightly across her wing, skin bristling with the feel of feathers.

"You are truly a beautiful creature, Luna."

She looked at me, then, as a lover to her loved one; her wing unfolded under my caress, feathers sliding across my palm, until the very tips of her wingspan brushed against my cheek.

A tiny sound of wonderment escaped me; they felt so *soft*, like I could lay my head down upon them and sleep forever. I brought my quivering hand up to the truly magnificent form that stroked the side of my face; my free hand touched the underside of the wing,

and, fingers splayed, glided along the wing to the tip. She hooked her foreleg around mine. Every sensation on my palm was softness and warmth; for her, by the way she half-closed her eyes, every sensation on her wing was of electric intimacy.

It took some time before either of us spoke. It was unsaid, but we had mutually agreed that this moment in eternity was ours to savour, and ours to keep.

"Luna..."

Her look acknowledged me - and also made my heart grow twice its size.

I love you.

"What will they do with me, if I'm allowed to stay?"

"First, you'll be made my consort, in an official capacity," she murred, still enjoying my palm. "But something tells me you'll want to do more than sit around, being fed and cuddling me."

"I don't see the downside."

She batted my arm again. It was just as adorable as last time.

"Of course I'd like to make myself useful," I confessed.

"You could always apply to be made a member of the Royal Guard," she suggested. "Serve under Praetor. He'd be very happy to have something like you in his plans."

"His plans?"

"Oh yes. As Praetor of the Guard, he sees himself as personally responsible to be ready for anything that should befall the castle."

"*'Always be two steps ahead of your enemy.'* That explains the chess mark."

"I think he has plans and drills prepared for a full-scale Gryphon invasion, hydra attacks, parasprite infestations, dragons, trolls..."

Dragons? Gryphons?

"Wait. Dragons. Trolls? Hydras? How do you defend yourselves against those things?"

"With might, magic and Harmony."

The way she said it made it sound like it was spelt with a capital H. "*Harmony?*"

"Harmony, my love. And the elements thereof. Oh, there is so much to teach you... !" She nuzzled me tenderly, happy at the prospect of educating me, and my smile was wide.

"I, indeed, have much to learn. Do you have researchers here?"

"Absolutely. The library is always full of the researchers of magic, chroniclers of our time and affairs. You would need to learn our language, of course, but I feel that was in your intention anyway."

I nodded. "This translation spell is all well and good, but if I'm to be a permanent citizen I want to learn the language. I'm sure you'll all be laughing over my atrocious Equestrian soon enough."

"I promise not to laugh too hard, my love."

"You are a bastion of comfort in a harsh, cruel world, Luna," I said, dripping with sarcasm. "You people must not have much need for labourers if you have magic, though."

"Actually, we ponies make use of our strength as much as our magic, especially the earth ponies of Ponyville."

I sniggered. *Ponyville*.

"What was that?" she asked, clearly confused by the strange noise I had just produced.

"Nothing, nothing to worry about. If a strong body is useful, then I'm more than happy to do that too. I might have joked about it earlier, but in truth I want to be as useful and productive as anyone else."

"Anypony else," she corrected.

"*Anypony* else."

I dragged my fingers down her cheek, slowly, gently. This time, her look of weariness and anxiety did not appear.

A knock at the door.

"Please, enter," Luna stated, this time audible on the first attempt.

Two armoured guards strode into the guestroom. I wasn't an expert on the matter, but it was clear by their expressions that their visit was one of duty, and not the hospitable kind.

"Pardon us, Princess Luna. We have been asked to keep watch over our esteemed guest and ensure that he does not leave his quarters."

Luna and I looked at one another.

"To ensure he *does not leave his quarters?*" she asked.

"Yes, Princess."

"I would ask why," requested Luna. There it was. The quiet ferocity of woman made manifest.

"Orders from Praetor, your Highness. At the judgement of Her Celestial Highness, Princess Celestia, has yet to be announced, the human is to be guarded accordingly."

Luna was quiet for a few seconds. The expressions of the guard's faces remained stolid and stalwart.

"I will have words with Praetor, and *our guest, my consort*, is to be free to leave his quarters at his discretion."

"His orders were very explicit, your Highness."

Luna rose. Before she called down a hailstorm of meteors to obliterate the entire planet, I intervened.

"Luna, I should comply with Praetor's request. If I was him, I would do no different in his shoes. Horseshoes. Ponyshoes. This is my first real day here - I shouldn't stir up trouble."

Luna sighed. "You're right, of course. But that does not make his order any less questionable."

"You feel free to find him and ask him, Nightwind. At least you'll know where to find me," I chuckled.

She stepped off the bed. As soon as she did so, I missed her being close.

"I'll be back as soon as I understand Praetor's intentions," she said, and after a nod from me, she trotted out of the door. There was a *confidence* in her poise and movements now. I couldn't help but feel a certain pride.

She left, and the guards flanked her on her way out. As soon as the door was closed, I missed her. Her night-air coolness, the feel of her skin. I rose to my feet and looked around the room; there was a door I'd yet to investigate. Pushing it open slowly, I almost collapsed with awe.

Before me, was nothing less than an actual *bath*.

• • •

I had nothing but respect and admiration for Praetor - he had stood in his position with dignity and diligence, born for the role - my very own sister had said as much. Walking through the castle corridors towards Praetor's study, I became certain that there was something more that I had not been informed about. After all, I had just spent the hours, cuddled up with Chester...

I missed him already. His touch on the underside of my wing... by the *stars*...

I collided with someone - blinking thrice before registering it.

"Ah - Silver Flower - I apologise! I was so absorbed in thought-"

"No no, Princess, I wasn't looking- oh!"

As Silver Flower rose to her hooves, she looked at me urgently.

"Your Highness, Praetor wishes to see you when you have a moment," she adopted the tone of formality well for one who's just been bowled over by royalty. "He is currently standing guard outside of Celestia's private quarters.

"I beg your pardon? Celestia's *private quarters*?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Thank you, Silver," I managed, a twinge of fear streaking my throat. "I shall visit him immediately."

It took all of my willpower to not break into full gallop on my way to my sister's quarters. There had to be some reasonable explanation for all of this.

As Silver Flower had said, there he was, standing proud and tall in front of the door to my sister's bedchambers. We had spent so many days and nights in her room, she and I; now, to have something stand between that room and me filled me with foreboding.

"Praetor, I wish you well," I greeted.

"Good evening, your Highness."

"I was informed by your guards that you have requested Chester be confined to his guestroom until he is given permission to stay in Equestria?"

"That is correct, your Highness."

"I must ask why, Praetor."

"By order of your sister, your Highness."

My blood ran cold.

"What?"

"By order of-"

"Let me by," I demanded, voice trembling. "I must speak with her."

"She has requested that you are not allowed to speak with her until tomorrow, your Highness."

"Why?"

"She said that she did not wish to see you until the deed was done, your Highness."

No.

"*Celestia!*" I cried out, voice breaking.

I waited. No response.

"I must ask that you leave the Princess be, your Highness."

No. This was not happening.

I was backing away. The sight of Praetor and the door was clouding over in mist from tears. I tried to turn around, but lost my balance and tripped from shaking; Praetor did not move to help me to my hooves.

He remained stolid as I walked down the stairs.

• • •

As Luna fled down the stairs from her sister's bedchambers, Praetor sat in his study, staring at his prized possession - a chess set that he had owned since days long past.

Beside the chess set was a picture of three ponies. One wore half-moon spectacles; the other wore a the face of one to whom challenge was lifeblood; the final stood tall and proud, chess-knight cutie mark just visible. The three friends stood close together, and each was smiling in their own way - a small smile beneath kind eyes, a boisterous smirk, and the grin of a champion.

All he needed to do was pack his chess set, walk to the guest rooms, and ask if Chester had time. That was all he needed to do to make a friend. He was sure the two in the picture would approve.

It was a long time of internal struggle before Praetor packed his chess set away, silently cursing himself, and began to read instead.

• • •

I ran as fast as my legs could muster. I had no idea where I was going to go - but my default destination was Chester. From now on, it would always be Chester.

"Luna!"

Before I had crossed the antechamber that led to the rest of the castle proper, Twilight Sparkle had called from a door on the other side.

"In here! Quickly!"

In my state, I could only follow her, whatever she wanted, feeling a siren song of hope that said she had some sort of explanation for all this. As I moved past the door, she shut it quickly behind me.

"Princess, I need to tell you something," she began, hurriedly.

She'd pulled me into a cleaning closet - well-lit, well-stocked, smelling faintly of lemon. Most out of place was a small, decrepit book, that even now made me feel the sadness that springs forth from seeing a decaying tome. It lay next to a satchel filled with papers and writing equipment.

"Luna, I think Celestia is planning to unsummon Chester - or *worse!*"

"*Worse?* How can it be *worse?*"

"Because... oh Princess, I'm so sorry-"

"Please, Twilight, tell me!"

"She... Celestia requested the bearers of the Elements of Harmony."

I couldn't breathe.

This can't be happening. This cannot be happening.

"She can't be planning to banish Chester. She just *can't* be." And again, to convince myself, "That's utterly ridiculous! What else might she want with the elements?"

"I don't know... but Princess, I don't think you should stick around to find out."

"No, Twilight! My sister would *never* do such a thing! *Why* would she? She has no reason!"

"The whole castle has been talking about it, Luna! Have you *seen* the Princess since the Court?"

"No-"

"Have you tried finding her to ask her what's wrong?"

"She..." I sobbed. I didn't want to face the facts. "She won't let me see her."

Twilight gasped in horror. "Luna, I think we need to act, right now."

I just shook my head.

This isn't happening. Oh stars and night sky, this is not happening. Someone tell me this isn't real.

"Luna... I'm so sorry."

I tried to ask her what she had planned; instead, I just sobbed. They couldn't be taking Chester from me. They *couldn't*.

"Luna... I have a plan."

My throat was too hard to talk. I nodded.

"If you just run away from the castle, they'll come looking for you. If Celestia is getting the Elements together, she must have something big in mind - if you just escape, Chester and you will be hunted."

Hunted. My lover, hunted. This wasn't happening.

"Celestia let me take a look at the summoning tome you used to bring Chester here... it mentioned a forgetting spell, used to make the summoned being forget his time in Equestria. But I think you can use it to make *Equestria* forget *Chester*."

"There's no way I could do that to everypony in Canterlot and Ponyville!"

Twilight was quiet. "Luna - there is a way." Surely she wasn't talking about-

"I'm sorry... Celestia, she missed it, when you were gone. She used to tell me about it when she missed you the most..."

"*That was a secret!*" I cried out, distraught. How else could Twilight know? "She *swore* - never to tell a *soul* - it was *ours* as *sisters!*"

"But you can use it with Chester, and with that you should be able to use the moon to put everypony to sleep at night, *and* erase their memories of Chester - and you'll still be together. I can handle things like diaries, mail, any records of Chester, if you can make everypony forget he ever lived."

She'd betrayed me. Celestia had betrayed me. That was our *secret*. How *could* she? But there was no other way Twilight would know.

"Twilight... this is *lunacy*. If I'm found out, that I made the entirety of Ponyville and Canterlot - that I manipulated their memories - Twilight, this magic is sealed away for a *reason!* I would be shunned by everypony -"

"Not if it goes according to plan," and she opened the book. It was the very tome that contained the summoning spell that brought Chester here. As the forgetting spell fell open, maps and diagrams of Canterlot, Canterlot Castle and Ponyville fell out, paths marked, notes written. I stared down at them, trying my hardest not to let tears drop onto the pages.

"Why are you doing this, Twilight?"

"Because you and Chester are so happy together. I can't let Celestia take him from you. I can't imagine what reason she has, but... I've just heard so much from the castle staff, and the Elements being called together, and..."

I lowered my head, hung like a damp rag doll on a wire. "Twilight - this is so wrong. There *has* to be a reason behind this. I have to find Celestia-"

"Don't waste the chance for happiness I gave you, Luna!"

My jaw fell open and I stared up at her in shock. She stamped her hoof and looked me dead in the eyes.

"I risked my *life* and the life of my *best friends* to bring you out of your Nightmare Moon state! And if you let Celestia take Chester away from you tomorrow, all that will have been for *nothing* and you may as well have not even *left* the moon!"

I was reeling from the sheer force of her words, but Twilight was relentless.

"What if she's jealous?" she suggested. "What if she saw you in the court, and thought, this is one thing my sister has that I don't, and if I can't have it, she can't have it?"

I drew a huge, haggard breath, throat threatening to collapse, every single part of my body hurting. Everything hurt.

Motionless like a statue I stood, Twilight's words only just reaching my ears. I was trying to accept what had become reality.

"She's going to take him away, Luna. And I can help you keep him."

The vision of Chester, desummoned, came involuntarily into my mind. I saw him fading away, reaching out for me, screaming my name as he vanishes forever-

"Twilight, yes. Please help me. I can't lose Chester. I *can't*."

Celestia's favourite student, now most cherished traitor, sighed with relief. "Go to Chester's quarters and do what you have to, Luna. I'll get everything set up. In that satchel is everything you'll need."

Twilight spoke soothingly. "I'll help you. Don't worry... everything'll be okay." She nuzzled me, in an attempt to depart comfort; it was most certainly my imagination, a side effect from the horror I was living, but from what I could feel, she was somehow cold.

• • •

Even on Equestria, this fairytale land, the guestroom was exactly as you'd expect; comfortable, uninspired and utterly boring.

Even with the luxury of a good, warm bath that had been denied of me for half a week - even without my hair feeling thick and dirty - I still missed Luna, and I, too, wanted to know why Praetor was acting so strangely, even if I believed he must have his reasons. Praetor was far too pragmatic to act on hunches, instinct or emotion.

It was some time before Luna returned. As she entered the room, filling it with that dark, night majesty, I could tell immediately something was wrong. Something was very wrong. She looked determined and distraught all at once; the moment she walked into the room, her defences broke down and tears started raining from her wide, beautiful eyes.

She found herself in my arms before she could talk, my face buried into her long, slender neck.

"Tell me what's wrong," I asked.

"Chester..." she sighed, and with her escaping breath, so much tension was released from her body that I squeezed her blue-black frame in acknowledgement.

"Chester, I think they're going to desummon you."

"What?" I backed up, looked at her from arm's length. "Where did you get that idea? The Court went so well-

Luna backed me up to the far side of the room, out of earshot of the guards outside.

"Twilight told me, and Praetor won't let me talk to the Princess - by her own royal orders!"

"*Celestia's orders?*" I repeated dumbly, in stunned disbelief. Luna nodded with heaving breaths.

Before I could do or say anything, Luna continued. "I've got a plan. But Chester... this is going to be *really* strange."

Even with this ominous presentation, it was still a ray of hope. "Anything, Luna- please, tell me everything."

"Chester, I am so sorry... I am *so sorry*, but we need to make everyone forget you ever existed."

The implications of that washed over my mind like a tide. No libraries filled with fellow researchers, working together to uncover new secrets of the world. No lending my strength to the people of this land. No sharing meals, no sharing laughter, no sharing sorrow.

But I would have Luna.

"Okay," I managed.

Luna was taken aback. "What?" she managed through laboured breaths.

Stroking her mane, I asked, "I won't lose you, will I?"

She stared at me like I was the Big Bang, eyes reflections of astonishment.

I focused on the task at hand. "So how do we do that?"

It took a moment before she could respond, still reeling from my answer. "There's a spell. We can cast it on everypony, and Twilight will make sure no written record of you exists."

I wasn't going to ask why Twilight was helping us - I was just glad for it. Never look a gift-horse in the mouth. "That sounds... extremely unethical."

She nodded gravely. "If anypony found out I was doing this..."

I refocused the conversation - clearly the results would be dire. "And you can do that? Cast the spell that many times? There has to be hundreds of ponies between here and that town."

"No," she stated. "We need to do something that will let me. Chester... this is..."

Confused, I encouraged her. "Anything, Luna. What do you need?"

She drew a long breath, and said, "Share your dreams with me."

My eyebrows flew up. "And that will help you how?"

"My sister and I... I used to share her dreams when we were younger... we did it as sisters. I think it's the closest two beings can get."

"And it will help us get me out of here? Help you make Equestria forget I exist?"

She nodded slowly, with an immense gravity about the issue. It didn't take long for me to decide.

"What do I need to do?"

The Night focused herself by closing her eyes, giving a tiny shake of her entire body. "Just lie down on your back... I haven't done this for so long, but I could never forget how it is done. Chester, I wanted to wait before I even mentioned this. But this is no time for platitudes."

"Truer words have never been said, Luna."

She took a deep, steadying breath, watching me lie down slowly on the guestroom bed. Never taking her eyes away from mine, she climbed onto the bed, one hoof at a time, and sat facing me.

"I imagined scented candles and the light of a full moon accompanying us the first time we were to do this."

"We will have that," I assured her.

Her eyes closed, her horn began to glow, and she brought it down onto my forehead. Instantly, the world grew dark.

• • •

Yes.

Yes.

Open him.

The shadow glided over the floorboards of the guestroom; it sank under the bed. It crawled up the walls, and it saw the two sleepers.

Open him.

It reached out into the bedpost, slithered down the smooth, wooden surface, and came so close to him. It had been waiting for so long for this. If it had a body, say, for sake of example, the body of a man, it would be salivating, its heart rate would be increased well above normal, and it would be unable to move its eyes away from the sleeping form on the bed. If it was a particularly convincing human, it may even have a look of a man whose famished hunger has made him hallucinate an entire tub of ice cream.

But the shadow did not have a body. Instead, it touched the yellow-pink flesh, and once within, it began to *search*.

• • •

I was a being floating in a sea of eternity.

I was a consciousness, an entity, an awareness, a soul, bound together by the starstuff of the cosmos, a mass without mass, a force without motion.

I felt her drawing near. We pulled one another across the infinite void, reaching out across space, finding one another unerringly.

We met, we collided, and we began to meld...

Take the concept of intense euphoria, multiply it by infinity and you'll still only have begun to grasp the most infinitesimal idea of how it felt. We were united; no boundaries, no walls, no emotion, no flesh. Simply she and I, as one.

The very essence of perfect Harmony.

• • •

I returned to a cumbersome construct of flesh and bone.

And everything it felt, felt *wrong*.

Without my volition, my body vomited and convulsed. Someone had filled my brain with acid, left my head hollow, an empty chasm inside a cage of marrow. My entire flesh felt utterly violated; limbs felt as if they would never move again, now mere towers of skin and muscle attached to my torso and shoulders.

The faculty of hearing returned with all the speed of a barren, harsh winter moving into spring. My ears began to decode the audio information it was receiving; it passed this decrypted message onto my language functions, which discerned the intention of the communiqué; finally the transcript of this event was passed onto my primary awareness, which informed me that I had been addressed, and that someone was asking if I was okay.

"Lu--na."

"Chester! Thank the *stars*-how do you feel?"

My throat produced a grunt that satisfied my end of this communication.

"Now that you're awake I can do something about this- Chester, I was so *scared*..."

I could see her now, as her horn passed over my body and spread a loving, tender warmth over every cell of the body that still felt foreign to me. Her skin, her coat, had grown illustrious with shine, and as she returned to me the gift of feeling, there was a permeating aura about her, one that filled my mind's eye with magnificent night skies and the welcoming, otherworldly sight of a field illuminated entirely by moonlight.

As soon as I could move, I tried to roll over to crawl into the bathroom and flush my mouth of whatever-the-hell-it-was I had eaten last. My attempts were in vain; the task was beyond me.

"The bathroom... to wash that off... please, allow me," she said, her voice serene and loving.

She was levitating me. With ease. Wrapping me in the soft blanket of her magic, I floated easily towards the door, which swung open with blue-black night-sparks of the arcane. She set me down with a gentleness that would put Fluttershy to shame, in front of the sink. I could barely stand; I reached out for the taps, but found myself lurching to the side if I removed the supporting columns that were my arms.

"Will you... allow me?" she requested, respectfully. I gave her the most loving grunt of acknowledgement I could manage.

The taps came on by themselves, and the water formed an aqueous stream that bended and rose in the air, a smooth, literal water-snake, sliding up between my lips and washing away everything that didn't belong. I didn't need to spit out any excess; every drop had flown easily down into the sink's drain.

Yet again I found myself on a bed of magic, and then again on the infinitely-more-uncomfortable guestroom bed. Luna looked over me with tender, loving care. I stretched my fingers to show her I was improving, and that she needn't worry.

"I'm so sorry, Chester. It worked - for me - but... for you... I don't know," she trailed off, shaking her head slightly. "You felt it too, being... with me?"

"Yeah... it was... *Christ*." Words failed me. Language failed spectacularly to describe the indescribable.

"Then why has it done this to you?" Her brows furrowed under her somehow-flowing-without-wind mane, her horn and her crown. She was right. It didn't make sense that something so esoteric, so astral, so spiritually incredible, could do something like this to me.

Her horn suffused with the blackest night once more and ran over my body, restoring my totally-lost vigour. At length, I was able to stand, and stretch, still finding the feel of fingers and legs stiff and alien.

"It looked like it worked for you," I remarked. "You look like... you look like a cosmic force more than a pony." That was how I had attempted to describe it. In addition to her skin, that twinkled with the sight of stars over an endless distance, her mane flowed on its own - exactly as Celestia's did - and the *feel* of being around her put my mind at ease with the feeling of warm summer nights spent on rolling meadows.

"When Celestia and I did this together, it was amazing... we always awoke and simply nuzzled for a while. I miss those times... I am certain we both do..."

Then she corrected herself, and I could feel the blade of reality cutting away the threads of her sweet dream. "Did. I am certain she did. But now... I don't know why she wanted you gone, Chester. But I will not allow it."

"You'll find no argument from me, night-sonnet. So." I took a deep breath. "Is it time to get this show on the road?"

"Yes. While the night is young. By the time Celestia arises and brings about the Sun to shower the world with morning, I will be the only one in Equestria who knows of you..."

"Admit it," I smirked. "You like that."

She awarded me a bashful little smile before she headed to the guestroom balcony. Something in the way she did so, with weight and burden on her shoulders, made me realise I was about to see some serious shit.

She sat down, facing into the twilight sky.

"Chester... come closer to me."

I took my place by her side. Below we could see Equestria, the beautiful lands of fairytale, rolling away into the distance in a palette of greens. With a hoof, she took my hand and placed it on her side.

"Don't take your... what is that, anyway?"

"My hand?"

"Don't take your hand away from me. If you stop touching me for a second, you'll fall under the same spell as everypony else."

I nodded, and fell silent, for two reasons. The first was to simply let her work; the second was to simply watch.

A sound like metal made of light colliding at high speed grew loud from its sudden genesis; Luna's horn had exploded into deep-blue starlight that wavered like the edges of the fabric of reality. The moon was rising over the horizon like the oncoming of a storm;

something about it pulsed and throbbed with an extreme, yet contained, power. Watching it rise, it instilled in me a primal fear.

The sound of a star exploding being stretched over individual moments rang through the room, and as quickly as it had come, everything simply *stopped*.

"It is done," she said, unfazed. "Let us begin."

• • •

The shadow did not know what to feel.

It lingered on the roof of the castle, where nothing could see it, for it felt the carnal urge for privacy. It had seen within something new, and expected so much, but *nothing* could have prepared it for what it felt.

It *felt* things it had never felt before. If the shadow had a body, say, for sake of example, the body of a man, he would be panting, sweating, giving off intense body odour. He would also be touching his body as if it were new, even though he had been inside it for years. He would be questioning these intense sensations that sprung from places of its body it never knew it had, that made his heart hammer, his pulse pound against his temples, his mouth wet with saliva. He would feel his mind bending and swaying to a deep, savage instinct, one that roared with ferocity, but had begun to exist only so many minutes ago.

But the shadow did not have a body.

Instead, the shadow simply craved *more*.

Fortunately, the main course was yet to come.

• • •

I held the door open for Luna as we left the guestroom.

No guards were stationed outside the room. I imagined they simply assumed I would be too honourable to break the law they had set for me.

The sound of shoes and horseshoes on the plush carpet of the antechamber was the only sound in the entire castle, but Luna and I were mutually unafraid. After all, it was difficult to fear the night, when the Night was at your side.

I pushed open another door for her, and we came upon our first victim. The guard was sound asleep, curled up pleasantly, armour having been taken off prior to his involuntary slumber. This boded well - it meant that they had time to find a comfortable, safe position, for the pegasi in flight to land, before Luna's night claimed them, one by one.

Luna bent her knees, emitted a flash, and a white mist formed from the stallion's forehead. There it was - me. The memory of me. It was thin, and wispy, like smoke; this stallion had only heard of me through the chatter and gossip of others. It evaporated into the air like the steam that it resembled.

There was no time to discuss our first mark. From the satchel around my shoulder, I extracted the list of castle staff, and checked off one guard.

We moved onto the next; a sweet, pink-shaded filly with a cloud for a mark. By the expression on her face, she was having a very pleasant dream. The same could be said of the next one, and the next one. All of them were smiling as they slumbered.

"Luna," I asked, as we ran between rooms. "You gave them all sweet dreams, didn't you?"

She glanced up at me as we ran, with a loving smile. "My subjects deserve the best," was all she said.

The map that Twilight had given us had a route plotted throughout Canterlot Castle that bore us through the castle in a crisp and efficient manner - we expected no less of her, of course. One by one, the memory of Chester Llewellyn moved from mind into matter, and was scattered into the air. But something was odd about just how much of a memory each pony had.

To some, the memory that manifested as white, silky smoke was thick and took time to dissolve. For most, however, there was nothing, and for a small number there had been a few threads that indicated I had been the subject of conversation, but little more than that. If I had been the talk of the pony-town regarding my escapades, it wasn't showing in their memories.

We trawled through the barracks, the war room - which was of *intense* interest to me, even for the short duration I had been within it - the guest chambers, the servant's quarters... finally, we came to our penultimate stop.

The castle kitchen had been in use, even in the middle of the night. Food was being prepared for some kind of banquet - this much was clear. Cakes, pastries, breads, fruits, salads and all kinds had been prepared with immense respect and care.

"A celebration of my departure, perhaps," I hazarded.

"I could only guess, my love. I wasn't aware of any celebration tonight."

Each cook and assistant - their marks somehow all having to do with food and the preparation thereof - had their memories of myself wiped clean, but most interestingly was that they each had strong memories of me, as if I had been the subject of intense discussion. We didn't have time to ponder this anomaly; we had one final room of Canterlot Castle to visit.

It was time to visit the Great Hall.

Luna and I stood before the grand doors, quiet in the midst of her night. By Luna's light, emitted from her horn, I examined our progress so far.

"According to this, there are meant to be a lot of ponies inside here," I observed. "There was a party going on tonight... big, too."

"I can't help but feel sorry for the poor soul whose party it was. Poor pony will feel awful falling asleep through it."

We opened the doors together.

We had been correct. There were balloons, streamers, white-cloth-laden tables lined with fanciful treats. The Night had claimed all of them in the midst of preparation; ladders were strewn all over, ponies gathered in groups setting up balloons and even balloon animals - *however the hell they managed that* - alongside drinks and snacks of all calibres.

There was Rarity! Sleeping peacefully alongside Applejack and Rainbow Dash! I had to confess, Dash looked absolutely adorable while she was asleep, not that I would ever tell it to her face, of course.

"Heh, this looks like it could have been a good party."

Luna was silent.

"Luna?"

She didn't respond.

She was staring up into the air, at a large, glorious banner that hung in the air. Adorned on it were strange horseglyphics - perhaps I would have the chance to learn how to read that, given enough time and material, wherever I might hide...

"What does it say, Night-song?"

She just shook her head.

"Luna?"

"*Chester...*"

Tears began to roll down her eyes, but she still stared, unblinking, at the banner, like it was the oncoming of the apocalypse.

"Luna - what does it say?"

"Chester... I am *so sorry*," she whispered, voice cracking from sorrow.

"Luna... what does it say?"

She closed her eyes, began to draw deep breaths, which became more and more rapid.

"Luna, it's okay. What does it say?"

"It says..." She shook her head, in what looked like an attempt to deny the banner's existence.

"It says, '*Welcome to Equestria, Consort of the Night*'."

I looked from her, to around the room.

I looked at my own welcoming party.

Every footfall was a tiny, distant explosion as I walked into the centre of the room.

The tables were lined with everything that I had said I approved of to the kitchen staff, after I had my meal following the Court. There wasn't an apple in sight.

All of the balloons had been tied high, so that I would have been able to walk freely around the room.

Purple Tinker was there, sat in a corner, constructing what appeared to be a pair of small automatons that bore close resemblance to myself and Praetor, as well as an abstract race course of the town he and I had raced through, complete with rails.

I walked closer to the three I had seen earlier. Rarity had sketched my outline, and upon it, had started drawing designs for what appeared to be a cloak. Various silly marks, like moustaches and what I could only imagine were I AM STUPID texts showcased Rainbow Dash's contribution to the project.

Praetor laid near a chess set, complete with two stools. I picked up the White Knight piece; it was identical to his mark.

Fluttershy was in a different corner. She had been speaking to her rabbit, who she had presumably brought here for us to make amends.

And most prominently, near the back of the room, organising everything, was Princess Celestia herself. Back at the Court of Dusk and Dawn, she had been talking to Pinkie Pie, element of laughter and master of parties, before she even knew why I was here.

She had planned for this.

Nearby, her crown had been set down onto the ground. Replacing it was a party hat.

It was well that it was such a surreal experience, as it kept me from feeling my heart breaking in half.

I moved as if in a dream. Every single body was sleeping soundly, smiles on all faces...

No, that wasn't true. Some of them wore looks of concern, where I swore I had seen them contented -

All of them wore looks of concern. Of regret. Of doubt and worry. Some, of *fear*.

Hooves started to move, as if they were running in their sleep. Heads shifted slightly. Some of them looked like they were in pain.

I turned to Luna.

She was looking into the distance, eyes completely unfocused.

"Luna."

Some of the ponies started to make tiny noises. They weren't waking up; they were having *nightmares*.

"Luna!"

She wasn't responding. Then, she closed her eyes, and started to speak, voice quavering.

"*This isn't happening,*" she said.

"Luna, listen to me. I -"

"***This isn't happening!***" she screamed, and began to sob. I heard muted moans from behind me, tiny whimpers, little shouts, all from the throes of terrible nightmare.

"Chester... I am so -"

She did not speak further, for I had silenced her with my lips.

My fingers were soft against her cheeks; for some time, I held the kiss exactly as it had found us, listening to the groans and shifting behind me grow quieter. I lifted my lips away, and looked into her eyes, glistening like stars from the tears she had shed. My fingers curled around the back of her neck, and we came together again.

The kiss was slow, and soft; I brushed my lips against hers, she simply closed her eyes and lived fully in the moment, accepting every touch, every sensation. I taught her how a first kiss should feel, how it would make you feel; done with love and respect, gentle like a flower petal, yet firm. Swiftly she became learned in the art, and we found ourselves sharing a long, tender kiss that stretched on for aeons in mere moments. Her tears fell freely from her cheeks.

When we came apart, I spoke.

"I love you, Luna."

Wordless, she accepted my embrace. The room was silent, save for the peaceful slumber of its occupants.

We stayed motionless there for some time before I held her at arm's length.

"This is for the best," I said, with unshakable conviction. "I don't want to influence this world in any way. It scares me, thinking what might happen, what might be my fault, just

a tiny suggestion here or slipped concept there. It's still for the best if I am forgotten. I know," I pre-empted her question and protest. "I'll have to live in secret, and I won't get to study under these great libraries, or serve as a guard, or... anything like that..." It hurt. I won't lie. It hurt like hell."... but I will still have you, Luna. And you will still have me. Screw the rest of the world."

Luna was silent, fighting back tears. "I love you too, Chester," she managed.

Like the damned tasked with a grim endeavour, we packed the party away, bit by bit. Slowly, my welcoming party came to a close before it had even begun.

As Luna came to Praetor, putting his prized chess set by his side, she froze.

I noticed as I deflated the last of the balloons. "Luna? What is it?"

"Praetor told me nopony could see Celestia. He told me I was barred from... where is Twilight Sparkle?"

"She's over here," I said, moving to the sleeping lavender unicorn, curled up with a book for a pillow. The book looked oddly like 'Parties for Dummies'.

Luna looked at Twilight Sparkle in horror. "But she was the one who convinced me that Celestia was going to desummon you!"

"*What?* Then-"

Luna and I looked at each other in growing alarm.

"She *lied* to us? To get us to do this?" I pulled out the carefully-plotted maps, the list of ponies in the castle. The route she had planned had the kitchen, and then the Grand Hall, as their ultimate stops, in that order.

"This was *planned!*" I gasped. "She *planned* this!"

Luna was shaking her head in disbelief. "No- she couldn't have. Praetor was acting in the same way. He would never... *why?* Why do this to us?"

Praetor, acting in the same way? The both of them- something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong.

"Luna, we need to go. Something is really not right here."

"The guards that came to us..." She was lost in inflection. "Making us see all this after it was too late to change it... Why? Why would anypony do that?" And then, with conviction, "No, no pony is *capable* of this. They couldn't have done this."

"We can suss this out later," I urged. But she was right. None of these fairytale denizens could have managed something as sickening cruel and cunning as this.

"We have one final pony to do before we leave."

She had been left until last.

We approached the majestic form of Her Majesty. After gathering our courage, I nodded at Luna, who, shaking, put her horn to her beloved sister's countenance, and began to concentrate.

A stream of pure white began forming from her forehead, rising easily through the mane that even now shimmered like the Northern Lights. Of all the ethereal memories I had seen thus far, this was the most beautiful by far. It, too, faded away into the air.

I didn't know it, but I had begun to cry, for part of me knew it had lost a very dear friend.

"Let's... let's go. We've still got Ponyville to cover."

As we left the Grand Hall, we both took one look back at the empty room with the slumbering forms of what might have one day been my fellow citizens, and some that would have been my friends.

"Thanks, everyone," I whispered. "It would have been a really great party."

I closed the door behind me.

• • •

The shadow was barely beginning to grasp the concept of emotions, but as it watched the lovers console one another in the face of tragedy - as it watched his plan go askew, and fall apart - he could muster his first attempt at emotion. It even had a word to go with it, a new word that was of immense interest to him.

Their writhing nightmares of twenty-strong ponies for all of a minute was music to its ears, a comfort to its existence, but the main course had been served before him - *and*

taken away. It was to have that new being in the depths of despair, and from that new being it would feed for *years* to come, on strange, new concepts and feelings.

But it had all gone wrong. Instead of lashing out, instead of breaking down into tears, the new being had kissed his beloved, told her it would be okay, that she was the only thing he cared about.

Fortunately, shadows cannot throw up.

But this shadow was beginning to feel emotion, and with emotion came expression; the shadow chose an expression he had learned from the new being, questing inside his brain, skimming the surface of that massive library of knowledge and new concepts.

The shadow internally expressed its new emotion - one of frustration - with the new word it had learned, which was 'Fuck'.

• • •

The Night and I ran into the castle courtyard. We had managed all of Canterlot Castle; it was time to go into the city of Canterlot. I had no idea how we were going to manage the entire city, *and* Ponyville before the night was out.

As if reading my mind, Luna spoke as we ran into the city proper. "Chester, I can do this faster on my own, and you need to gather supplies for - where are you going to go?"

"The forest I woke up in. I'm going to have to live in there."

Clearly the idea of her consort eking out a life in a forest shook her, but she replied quickly. "Gather what you need from the city - when you're done, meet me back here."

I nodded seriously. "Where can I find a fish and a ball of yarn?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A fish and a ball of yarn."

She was stunned for a second, then said, "There's a seamstress down that alley, and to the left... look for the spool of thread on a sign, and a fish should be easy - what on *Equestria* for?"

"Mittens."

"Who's-?"

"Later, Nightwing. We have work to do."

I kissed her once more, and she teleported away, still confused, in a flash of blue-black night.

I ran into the city. There was much to be collected.

• • •

The shadow had been denied of its meal, but it didn't matter. As the two beings scurried through the city, collected, observing, forgetting, the shadow felt a new emotion, one also plundered from the endless treasure that was the new being.

From their plight, it derived a glow, a *betterment* of its state, a sort of appreciation for its own existence. From their labour and their struggles, it felt... *lighter*. There was a word for this. It didn't know what it was. Eventually, it would have to *ask*.

It felt that wordless feeling as the two of them moved, exactly as it had planned it. For although it had missed out on its meal, the kitchen had never been so...

... *well stocked*.

• • •

I had everything I could find that I would need. I collected only from stocks; never personal items - isolated incidents that would never be connected to form the idea of a mass burglary, or so I hoped.

I had upon my person a bucket, and within the bucket was a knife wrapped in cloth, a bed sheet and pillow, a fish, a ball of yarn, a quill, an ink bottle and some parchment. I wasn't waiting long before the night flashed with magic, and my beloved appeared, hardly striking out against the night of which she exemplified.

"Chester..." We came together, and I held her tight against my chest. Her neck against mine, I breathed deeply of the scent of her mane.

"Chester, someone really has destroyed all written records of you," she began. "There are ponies here that were present when you were in the castle, and not one of them has written about you, even the record-keepers, even the chroniclers of our history."

"How is that possible?"

"Twilight told me that she would see to it... she would see to it that no written record of you existed. I was too distraught at the time to ask how she intended to manage such a feat, but..."

"You don't think that was Twilight Sparkle," I finished for her.

She nodded gravely. We were silent for a moment.

"Something wanted this. Something wanted this to happen. I don't know why, but something wanted me out of Equestria's memory."

Luna looked at me with loving eyes. "But it will never take you from mine."

"Never," I agreed. "Come what may, Luna. We will be prepared. Nothing will tear me from your side, I *swear* it."

We kissed then, again, under the silent moon.

"I'm ready to go," I said. "How are we going to get there? Can you teleport me?"

"Not that distance," she smiled. There was something about her that struck me as coy.

"Then... how?"

"Stand still, my consort."

Her horn glowed with an ethereal blackness, and I felt myself levitating, clutching my entire worldly possessions to my chest as she lifted me into the air and spread her wings.

"Fly with me, Chester," she whispered.

"Luna, wait-!"

She took wing, and the entire world rushed away from me, shrinking below my feet.

"*Holy sh-!*"

I gaped for air as the Night lifted me effortlessly away from the ground, higher and higher, my head spinning with the sights no man has ever seen before. The world had shrunk to a tenth of its size. All of Equestria lay open to me, in its awesome glory; the

rolling hills and fields that made up this fairytale land spread out in all directions, breathtaking, beautiful, perfect. I could see the forest in which I had awoken; a towering palace of clouds that hung in the sky; rivers and streams that glistened even from here. I saw the town of Ponyville, where ponies laughed and played and helped one another; behind us, shrinking in the distance, the capital, Canterlot, where the Princess most fair and kind ruled over her subjects with benevolence, wisdom, and a new joy in her heart.

It all shrank away from me, into the distance. I could have been in that world; I could have lived among those people. Seeing it all from the skies of Equestria, illuminated by pale moonlight, I saw full-on what I had lost.

But beside me, carrying me through her night sky, was the Night itself, whose eyes never left my face as she laughed, full of love and wonder, full of a joyous strength for whatever the future may bring for us, the lovers who crossed the sky; and I knew, that though I had lost so much this day, I had kept so much *more*.

She was not particularly given to the name that I had bestowed upon her, as she had told me herself; but to me, she would always be my Beautiful Moon.

She would always be my *Arddun Lleuad*.

It had been a month since the night that the sky had been streaked with two very unusual, very devoted lovers. Luna had walked through the city of Canterlot, had checked with the chroniclers of the castle; Chester had been truly forgotten.

Luna approached the cave in the dead of night. Within, a slow, rhythmic rumble shook the ground. The cave was dark, but the outline of the sleeping manticore was unmistakable. Luna's form was enveloped in a black shadow as she stepped into the cave mouth. The manticore stopped snoring, raised its head, and climbed quickly to all fours, snorting as it prepared to attack.

"Hello, Mittens," Luna said quietly.

The manticore leapt forward, and, seizing the helpless Princess in its massive paws, brutally nuzzled Luna whilst purring loudly, almost as loud as it had snored. Luna laughed and scratched the manticore behind its ears, which sent it into a euphoric paralysis. Mittens knew the reason for her visit, and lumbered to the back of its cave, pushing aside a large boulder. Luna nuzzled Mittens as she passed into the secret cave beyond.

Chester had been expecting her. He knelt in the midst of his subterranean study and accepted her with open arms. Every time Chester held her now, he breathed deeply of her mane and coat; it made her feel cherished.

A book was brought before Luna; a spell was cast; a now-too-familiar warmth seeped into Chester's throat and ears.

"I have something to show you," he began. "Over here."

Chester's study consisted of lit candles, a box of matches, apples, books that Luna had been able to smuggle to him, though were sadly too advanced for Chester to make use of; parchment that was almost black with shorthand notes, and a wooden staff, which was in fact just a thin tree branch. To Chester, it was home.

The Night watched as he picked up the staff and sat down cross-legged, and focused an intense gaze on the end of it, his left hand spread out slightly away from it. The Night took audience before him.

"I am not the owner of a horn, but I have improvised. It's taken a lot of time. A long time. I was convinced that I was incapable. But I kept trying." He paused for a second, and then

added, "The cause has never been a better one to work for. And who knows what our unseen foe has in store for us."

The two of them had speculated endlessly together on just *what* had manifested itself as Praetor and Twilight Sparkle, all so quickly. There were beasts of illusionary magic out there, there were ponies that were capable of it - but none with the talent for that magic could be so heartlessly cruel, so cold, so calculating as to pull off a scheme of that magnitude against two such as they.

There was one explanation, with two severe downfalls: the remnant of Nightmare Moon. She had presented herself as three Shadowbolts to Rainbow Dash at one point; it may have even masqueraded as the guards that were outside Chester's guestroom. But Nightmare Moon had been utterly scattered to the winds under the benevolence of Harmony itself, the strongest force known to ponykind. But moreover, Luna knew exactly what Nightmare Moon was capable of. She was determined to bring about eternal night, not to revel in the suffering of a couple. It didn't add up - something in the equation was missing.

And so Chester had begun to prepare himself accordingly, for as he had said himself that a good man and a friend had once said, '*Fear the enemy about whom nothing is known*'. He closed his eyes.

Luna could see it was hurting him to try this. His face was not one of overt concentration, but pain. For a few intolerable seconds, nothing happened. And then, almost imperceptibly, a sort of tension eased around him, and something sparked between the staff and his hand; a tiny, instant spark, but it was there. Chester dropped the staff.

To Equestria, it was a tiny spark of magic that could have been done by a unicorn foal. To us, in the darkness of that cave, it was a spark of hope that shone brighter than the moon and sun upon their future together.

Luna approached the fledgling student of magic, and rewarded his efforts with a long, loving kiss.

Chester climbed to his feet, hand massaging his head. "The headaches won't stay... they're getting easier as I keep trying. It's like working a muscle you didn't even know you had," he explained. "It's going to complain when you find it's there and you want to use it."

The moonlit lovers walked out of Chester's cave-study, pausing to give Mittens a well-deserved fussing, to Mitten's great approval.

"Chester?"

"Yes, my Night?"

"What is that?"

His head whirled to face the cave mouth. There, placed perfectly in the middle of the mouth, was a white present wrapped masterfully in a red ribbon, with a small tag attached.

Chester looked at Luna. Luna looked at Chester. They approached the present in stunned wonder.

"The tag says..." Luna gasped.

"It says, *To the Consort of the Night.*"

The Consort of the Night stared at the gift like it was an alien substance. Like a man defusing a bomb, he reached down and began to unravel the lovingly-ravelled ribbon. At the slightest pull, it came apart and the material slid down the box to land elegantly on the ground. The two looked at one another before Chester put his fingertips on the lid, and lifted it away.

Inside were three books. The first was extracted, and held before Luna.

"My Very First Magic Spell."

The second was brought out of the box.

"I Can Write Too: Equestrian Writing for Foals."

Finally, the third.

"Five Steps Ahead: A Masterclass on Chess."

Nothing moved, or made a noise.

"Chester... there's something else in there."

She was right. The books were nested on something, which gave off a familiar twinkle. Chester put his hands around it; it was soft and silky. He raised his hands; Luna gasped as he brought the material to the candlelight.

Tasteful star patterns ran down the cloth; the hem of the cloak was embroidered with a shining silver. In prominent display was a shining, silver moon.

"Oh my *god*," Chester blurted. "Oh my *god*, it's *gorgeous*."

"Put it on," Luna said, stupefied.

The cloak fit perfectly around Chester's frame, clipping elegantly to his shirt. He stood before Luna and spread his arms.

Luna put a hoof to her mouth. "It's wonderful."

"Who knows about me? About us?" asked Chester.

But Luna simply shook her head. "I don't think our secret is in danger, my consort."

Chester considered for a moment; thereafter, he could only agree.