

The Choice

The Choice

by Jon Cooper

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The Choice

Chapter 1: Life

A vast and ragged army, more than a million strong, had finally reached the plains outside Canterlot. It was by far the largest army that Equestria had ever seen – and, perhaps, the poorest equipped. Only a few of its members were professional soldiers. The rest came from all walks of life. Some of its members were young, and others were far too old. A few of the ponies were trained in combat, but most had never lifted a hoof in war – well, not before this year, anyway. Not before the Nightmare came.

The army was composed of earth ponies, unicorns, and pegasi, who had willingly come from all across the nation. Every city and village had sent as many as they could spare,

leaving behind only the children, the wounded, and the dying. The stakes were much too great. Anyone who was able to fight had come, for this was the moment when the war would finally end. Equestria had at last been reunited, after the worst period it had ever seen. There was only one city left to retake.

Under normal circumstances Princess Luna would never have permitted so many civilians to join the force. Although she admired their willing spirit, war was dangerous; it was best left to the professionals. The ponies of Equestria were not a warlike race, and few had what it took to survive a brutal and bloody conflict. Ponies, after all, valued harmony and peace; they avoided war whenever possible. But this time things were different. Every pony who had made their way to the plain had lost someone

to the Nightmare. They had all been affected, and they were all determined to put an end to the needless suffering that Nightmare Star had caused. Luna could not turn them away. They all had a reason to be there – and the truth was she needed them. After six months of fighting there were almost no professional soldiers left. If she sent the civilians away, she would not have the strength she needed to storm the city that had once been her home.

But it was not just the ponies of Equestria who had gathered. The few surviving griffons had come as well, and were eager to lend their talents to the assault on Canterlot. Pony divisions had come from a dozen foreign nations. There were zebras and buffalo, and even some deer had joined the mix. The whole world had been affected by the terrible events of the past year, and they would no longer stand idly by while the Nightmare, who

recognized no boundaries or jurisdictions, burned their cities to the ground. Today was the day that the war would end – one way or another.

High above the besieged city of Canterlot, the sun shone with spectacular, blinding brilliance. A massive column of white energy streamed down from the sun and touched the city below. The sun heated the air around the city, making the plain almost unbearable. The pony army was drenched in sweat and there was no breeze to offer relief. The Nightmare had somehow amplified the star's output far beyond normal, and used its endless rays to power a defensive shield – one that was too strong for any army to penetrate. But they *had* to penetrate it, somehow, and their time was short. Every moment that they waited allowed the Nightmare to grow stronger.

It was up to the leaders of the army to decide on a course of action. Its three commanders – a griffon, the Princess of the Night, and the Princess of Friendship – had to make a difficult choice. The group was at the top of a small hill that overlooked the plain. The army was spread out below, divided into units of a thousand, and the city was a few miles beyond. A small tent had been erected for the leadership, but it was far too hot to be indoors. There was nothing they could do but suffer through the stifling heat.

“So what would you have us do?” Balaak, the commander of the griffon legion, asked. The tough griffon had a deep scar across his face, and his right eye was missing. “With that shield in place, Nightmare Star is impregnable. Even you, Luna, cannot bring it down.”

“It is a coward's tactic,” Balaak's chief general remarked. “Since we have pushed her

out of the cities, she has hidden herself away in her lair. She is afraid of us.”

“My sister is a cunning foe,” Luna replied wearily. She was deeply tired, and in more pain than she wanted to admit. She had an ugly wound along her left flank that made it difficult to move – an injury she had acquired during last week's battle over the ruins of Ponyville. It would heal eventually, but the scar would remain as a lifelong reminder of the war. “As long as she is protected behind that magical wall, she will gain power and strength. Her dark magic is now fueled by the sun itself, and her resources are beyond comprehension. If we are to defeat her then we must wrest its control away from her. We have no other choice.”

“You still refer to that monster as your *sister*?” Balaak asked incredulously. “How can you still claim her as family after all she has

done? The Nightmare has laid waste to cities all over the world. Thousands are dead, and she has tried to kill thousands more. My entire nation has been reduced to ash. She is evil, your highness. She stopped being your sister long ago.”

“I do not agree,” Luna said coldly. “All I know is that something terrible has happened to her. I do not know what turned my loving, caring sister into an evil monster. None of us have been able to talk to her since the war began. At best we have seen her from a great distance, but that has told us nothing about how she became a pony of fire and darkness. I still believe she can be saved.”

“We all know what happened,” Balaak said angrily. “Celestia became jealous of Twilight's popularity and power, just as you once became jealous of Celestia. The Princess of the Sun was determined to destroy Twilight

and eliminate the pony she had come to see as her rival. She made a deal with Death and acquired unspeakable dark magic. Now, I will grant you this. It may be that she only intended to kill Twilight, but then the dark magic of death corrupted her soul and made her hate all life. Perhaps she did not intend at first to launch the final war. But it is clear that she is beyond saving. No one can come back from what she has done.”

Twilight Sparkle struggled to stand up. She was battered and scarred, and her neck was still freshly bandaged, but she refused to give in – and she refused to give up hope. “We don't know that. All of that is just rumor and speculation. No one has gotten anywhere near Canterlot since Nightmare launched the war, and we have no idea what has been going on in the city. For all we know Celestia may have been poisoned in some way by

some unseen foe. Perhaps a spell went wrong and damaged her mind. But the fact is it just doesn't matter right now. We can decide what to do with Nightmare Star once we have her. But we don't have her yet – and if we can't break the source of her power then she will remain unbeatable.”

“You speak wisdom,” Balaak agreed. “So are you ready to make the attempt?”

Twilight Sparkle looked up at the sun. “I am ready to try, but it's hard to believe this will work. I know that Luna and I are alicorns, but we are much weaker than our adversary. She has gained enormous strength. I don't know if we can wrest the sun away from her.”

“She has only darkness on her side,” Luna pointed out. “We have harmony and light. We can do this, Twilight.”

Twilight frowned. “But I don't have my friends! Don't you see? If my friends were

here I'm sure we could win. Nightmare Star would be no match for the Elements of Harmony. But my friends *aren't* here. That's why this has all been so hard. I haven't seen them since the start of the war.”

“It was a clever tactic,” Balaak agreed. “On the day before the war began, Celestia invited all of you to Canterlot. It was fortunate you were delayed and not able to go. Had you joined them, you would be in her dungeon as well. It was brilliant of her to separate you from your friends before she launched her attacks. She put you in a weakened position.”

Twilight grew visibly angry. “Nightmare Star has had my friends imprisoned for *months*. She has done terrible things to them – but today it ends. Today we are going to save them from her and set them free.”

“And justice will be done upon her,” Balaak added. “I want to bring her head back

as a prize. She has destroyed the griffon race.”

Luna frowned. Despite everything that Celestia had done, she had no intention of allowing anyone to kill her. She still had hope that Celestia could be saved. But she knew it was not wise to mention that to Balaak. The whole world wanted to kill her sister. That was why they had gathered on the plain below. “There are many nations that share that same desire. My sister has used the sun to do terrible things, and has made many enemies. But the future is uncertain. I do not think she will allow herself to be captured.”

“She will not have a choice,” Twilight said coldly.

The purple alicorn looked up at the sun again. “This would be so much easier if Starlight Glimmer were here. She was a powerful magical user. She could have helped.”

Balaak nodded. "Glimmer was indeed a valuable soldier. Her spirited defense of Manehattan saved it from being completely obliterated by the Nightmare. No one else could have accomplished what she did. Her sacrifice saved many lives and forced our foe to retreat. Her name will not be forgotten."

"She would still be alive if it hadn't been for Trixie," Twilight said angrily.

"That was not Trixie's fault," Luna said gently. "Nightmare Star has gained the ability to overpower ponies' minds. Trixie was not in control over herself."

"Besides, Trixie is dead," Balaak said. "She is no longer a threat. She will never betray anyone again. Her days of being a pawn are over."

Twilight closed her eyes and tried to focus on the task at hoof. She knew what had to be done; she just did not believe that she

could do it.

But she *had* to do it. Her friends were counting on her, and she had to free them. She could not allow her former mentor to torment them for one more day. It was time to set them free. She *would* do this – or she would die trying.

It was time.

Twilight looked at Luna. “I’m ready.”

“Very well. Then let us begin.”

* * * * *

On the highest tower of Canterlot Castle, Nightmare Star stood on the balcony and overlooked her city. The heat was stifling, but Nightmare was immune to it. The dark magic that now flowed through her veins had completely transformed her. Her white coat was gone, replaced with a black coat that was

laced with fire and rage. Her eyes glowed a brilliant purple color and her white horn was blood red. Her mane burned with intense fire. There was only one thing that she wanted – and she was going to have it.

Down below, the entire city prepared for combat. Her control over her subject's minds was complete. All of them would fight for her and die for her. That they did this unwillingly did not bother her in the slightest. She was in charge. They were simply pawns, to be sacrificed as she thought best.

Outside the city, beyond her protective barrier, she could see that a mighty army had gathered. The army did not frighten her. *What idiots! They will throw themselves uselessly against my solar barrier and will perish. Once they are dead I will lower the barrier and attack. Twilight and Luna will be easy prey – and once I have defeated them,*

*there will be no one left to defend Equestria.
It will at last be mine.*

She laughed at their stupidity. Attacking Canterlot was the height of foolishness! She thought Luna was wiser than that. Surely she must know—

Nightmare Star gasped. A magical force had grabbed her sun and was trying to drag it out of the sky. Her sun! The source of her power, and the unending heat that fueled her rage. She could not lose it. She *must* not lose it.

Nightmare immediately lit up her horn and grabbed the sun. She pulled back against the force that was desperately trying to move it.

The fiery pony gasped when the sun began to go dark. “No!” she screamed in rage. She could not allow her sister to darken the sun. But how could her sister have such

strength?

Twilight! It had to be Twilight. Luna was not doing this alone. She had help.

“It will not be enough!” Nightmare screamed. “I will not let you take my sun from me. Do you hear me, sister?”

* * * * *

Twilight strained at the sun. Sweat poured off her brow, and the muscles in her face and neck were taut. She was pouring every ounce of magical energy that she had into her spell, and still the sun would not move.

“It's not working,” she panted.

“Don't stop,” Luna gasped. “The sun is darkening. We are blocking its rays and cutting off Nightmare's power. She is losing her grip on it. We just have to outlast her.”

The two alicorns fought Nightmare Star with every ounce of mana that they had. The rest of the army could only remain still and wait. This particular battle was beyond them.

Balaak and his griffons watched the princesses in quiet amazement. They were astonished that any living creature had the power to control the heavenly bodies – although they would never admit that to the two princesses. This level of warfare was beyond their understanding. The griffons were glad that Luna was on their side. Without the help of the pony race, Nightmare Star would have completely eradicated them.

The army on the plain watched the struggle with quiet hope. They saw that the sun was still fixed over Canterlot, but they did not doubt their princesses. They knew that they would win. Nightmare Star had been pushed out of the ruins of Ponyville and

forced to relinquish her prize. Her army had been pushed back, again and again, until it was now pinned in the capitol. And now the last city would fall.

Twilight and Luna strained against the sun that was anchored above Canterlot. They knew they could not hold out much longer. With growing desperation they pulled the flaming star. They pulled, and pulled, and then –

The sun vanished. In an instant Nightmare Star lost her grasp on it, and it disappeared over the horizon. It was immediately replaced by the moon and the starry hosts of heaven. Night had come to Equestria – for the first time in more than a week.

The effect was immediate. The ground trembled beneath their hooves, and the protective shield that guarded Canterlot

collapsed. Luna thought she heard a faint scream of rage, but it could have been her imagination. *If my sister is not screaming now then she is about to*, Luna thought grimly. *Justice is coming.*

“Well done!” Balaak shouted. “The invasion can now commence. Canterlot will fall!”

“Wait!” Luna gasped. She was drained of magic and panting heavily. “There is still one more thing that must be done. I need to release the city from the spell that my sister cast on it. If I do that, its citizens will not fight against us. Then Celestia will be our only foe.”

“But you're too tired,” Twilight pointed out. “You can't possibly cast that spell on the entire city in your current condition, and there isn't time for you to rest. Besides, if we wait then she might try to raise the sun again. We need to act now. If we rush her while she

is weak—”

“The loss of life would be horrifying,” Luna protested. “I do not wish to see Canterlot burned to the ground. We have to at least try.”

“We're wasting time,” Balaak said. “What is your decision?”

Before the leaders of the freed Equestria could respond, Nightmare Star made the choice for them. A noise like a thunderbolt echoed from the city. It sounded like the world had been torn in two.

Twilight turned to look at the city. She gasped. Canterlot Castle was now at the center of an enormous, glowing red sphere.

“No!” Twilight shrieked. “She wouldn't. She can't! How could she do that?”

Luna's eyes filled with tears. “We have her cornered. I told you she would not let us take her alive.”

Balaak looked at the city. He saw the sphere, but it meant nothing to him. "I do not understand. What has she done?"

"I've got to save my friends," Twilight said urgently. "There may still be time!"

"You cannot stop her," Luna replied. "She has already begun to cast the spell. It is too late."

"But it is not too late to save my friends. I know I can do this. Please, let me try. I can't just let her kill them!"

Luna hesitated, for just a moment. She knew there was little chance that Twilight would succeed, but she could not deny her the opportunity to try. "Then go. I will command the army to retreat to a safe distance. We will await your safe return."

The purple alicorn vanished.

* * * * *

A year ago, Starlight Glimmer had altered the past in an attempt to destroy Twilight's future. To the surprise of everyone, Twilight was not only able to stop her, but became Glimmer's friend. The two ponies were both powerful magic users and had a great deal in common.

It turned out that Glimmer was especially skilled at time-related spells. Before she was killed in the war, she taught Twilight a spell that could alter the speed at which time passed. When a pony cast that spell, the world around them seemed to stop. As long as they held the spell, they could travel wherever they wished and time would not pass. When they released the spell it was as if they had been magically teleported somewhere else.

Twilight knew that she had very little

time. The red sphere was just the first phase of the weapon. There were four more – and the phases were only a few seconds apart. She had to hurry.

As soon as Luna gave her leave she cast the spell, leaped into the sky, and flew toward Canterlot as fast as her wings could carry her. Below her was the army, filled with hundreds of thousands of armed ponies. She desperately hoped that they would get far enough away from the city to survive the blast – but she could not afford to worry about that right now. She had to find her friends.

She knew exactly where they were going to be. There was only one possibility. Beneath Celestia's palace was a dungeon, where the worst prisoners of Equestria were kept. That was where she would find her friends. All she had to do was reach them, set them free, and

then bring them out of the city – all while maintaining the incredibly difficult time spell. Once she found her friends, her task would grow even harder because she would have to widen the spell to encompass all six of them. She had never even attempted that before – but there was no time to practice. Their lives hung in the balance. She *had* to succeed.

As Twilight streaked across the sky she desperately hoped that her friends could still walk. And that they were alive. The reign of Nightmare Star had been unbelievably brutal. There is no telling what she had put her friends through.

What happened to Celestia? Twilight wondered. *I don't understand. For a thousand years she reigned with truth and justice. She was a loving mentor and a devoted friend. What could have poisoned her? Who did this?*

Twilight realized she would never know.

When the doomsday spell reached its final stage, it would erupt with the savage fire of the sun itself. The city of Canterlot, and all the ponies it contained, would be instantly turned to ash. Nightmare Star would be killed and would take her terrible secret to the grave. That was *not* how Twilight wanted the war to end, but the choice was not in her hooves.

When Twilight reached the wall of the city she realized with horror that the guards could see her. As she flew by she saw that they ever-so-slowly began to turn their heads to watch her. *My spell is slipping!* Twilight thought with panic. *Time isn't stopped; it's still passing. I'm losing my grip!*

Twilight desperately tried to strengthen the spell, but she was too tired. Ripping the sun out of the sky had taken too much out of her, and she had very little mana left. She

closed her eyes and made one last effort to stop the flow of time –

– and crashed right into a building.

Twilight screamed as her body smashed through a stone wall, and then tumbled into a room and plowed through the wall on the other side. The time spell broke and Twilight fell onto the street. Her vision was blurry and her entire body ached. An intense, blinding pain told her that her right wing was broken – probably in several places.

And then she heard voices, and hoofsteps rushing toward her.

The alicorn blinked rapidly, to clear her vision. She tried to cast the time spell – and failed. She couldn't focus. There was too much pain.

The hoofsteps were getting much closer now. There were shouts of anger.

Her vision cleared enough to see that the

red sphere had turned yellow. The weapon was already in the second stage.

Ahead, down the street, an armed band of ten soldiers was galloping toward her as fast as their hooves could carry them. They were all heavily armed, and they looked intensely angry.

Twilight struggled to stand up, and tried one more time to cast the time spell. If she failed, she knew she was dead. Flying was simply not an option – not anymore. The pain from her wing made it almost impossible to focus. But she *had* to do it. She had to save her friends. She could not let them down.

The alicorn lit up her horn and cast the spell. She filled her mind with thoughts of her friends. She thought of Applejack, and the times she helped her harvest apples at her farm. She thought of having tea with Fluttershy. She thought of learning to fly with

Rainbow Dash, and modeling a dress for Rarity. And Pinkie – she had so many fond memories of her. Those ponies had been there when she needed them, and now it was her turn.

The spell wavered and then stabilized. Time slowed – but it did not stop. The soldiers were now moving toward her in incredibly slow motion. But they were still moving.

A wave of intense pain almost caused Twilight to drop the spell. She looked at her right wing and gasped in horror. It was not just broken; it was mangled. There was blood everywhere. Her wing had taken the brunt of the force when she crashed through the building, and it was shattered.

She knew she could not heal that injury with a spell. If she received immediate medical attention she might be able to save the wing, but there was no time for that. She

couldn't even cast a spell to relieve the pain, for doing that would mean letting go of the time spell – and if she let go the soldiers would kill her.

She had to press on – on hoof this time. Instead of flying through the city she would have to gallop through it. That would take more time, and there was very little time left.

It can't be helped, Twilight thought grimly. I can't believe I was that stupid! How could I run into a building? Rainbow Dash will never let me hear the end of it. She'll tease me about that for the rest of her days.

Twilight began running. She was tired and in agony, and her magical reserves were dangerously low. She didn't know how much longer she could hold out, but she had to try. She was going to give everything she had no matter what it cost her.

The alicorn raced through street after

street, getting ever closer to Canterlot Castle. She knew the guards she passed could see her, but they would never be able to catch her. She had the edge – for now.

But she knew she was in trouble. She was leaving behind a trail of blood from her broken wing. It desperately needed attention. Even binding it with bandages to stop the flow of blood would help – but if she stopped and tended to it, the blast would kill her.

As Twilight reached the castle, the glowing sphere turned green. Twilight raced even harder. That was the third stage. There were only two more left – and Twilight still had to find her friends and get them out of the city. If they were still inside the city when the spell ignited, they would all die.

The door to Canterlot Castle was open, and guards were streaming out of it. Twilight raced around them, then galloped down the

hallway in a desperate attempt to reach the dungeon. As she ran by, the guards stopped their march and began turning to chase her. Her time spell was slipping even further – but she couldn't afford to think about that. She had to find her friends.

It took only moments to reach the lowest level of the castle and open the door to the dungeon level. She knew it had taken far too long to get there, but she had done it. She had reached them at last. The joy that shot through her as she saw the dungeon's door was almost enough to overwhelm the pain from her shattered wing.

The alicorn stormed inside the dungeon – and found that it was empty, save for one guard. There was not a single prisoner inside any of the cells.

Twilight was shocked. *What has she done?* Twilight thought in a panic. *They have to be*

here! Nightmare Star is holding them as her prisoners, and this is where she keeps her prisoners. There's no other place they could possibly be!

The alicorn was desperate. She looked at the guard and decided that there was only one thing she could do. While she held onto the time spell, Twilight ran up to the guard and whacked him on the head. He collapsed onto the ground, stunned and in great pain.

Twilight expanded the time sphere around him, took his sword, and held it against his neck. "I will only ask this once," Twilight said through gritted teeth. "Where are my friends? Answer me, if you want to live!"

The guard laughed. His eyes glowed bright green from Nightmare's mind control. "What, did you think the Elements would be here? Why would Nightmare Star do that? Oh

no. My Queen had very different plans for them. She used her vast powers to turn them to her side. Your five friends are stationed at five different points in the city and are preparing to defend their Queen with their lives. They are not here.”

Twilight gasped. *I've been so stupid*, she thought angrily. *Of course she would use her mind spell on them! What was I thinking? She would want the Elements to be on her side. And all this time I thought –*

At that moment, the faint green haze that filled the air turned blue.

Twilight panicked. She knew it was over.

The princess had no doubt that she could cure her friends of the spell that Nightmare Star had cast on them. Luna had been very successful at doing that in the past, and she could doubtless do it again. But Twilight had five friends, and they were scattered at

unknown points throughout the city. There was no way to reach even *one* of them in time, let alone all five.

Twilight had lost. Her spell was slipping and time was passing despite her best efforts. She was weak, tired, in great pain, and beaten.

But there was one last thing she could do. If this was where she was going to die then she could at least face her former mentor in that last moment. She would not die here, in the dungeon – but there, fighting the Nightmare.

Twilight shrunk the time sphere so it no longer included the guard, and dropped his sword to the ground. With the last of her strength Twilight raced up the steps and galloped down the hallway. Time was creeping along more rapidly now, but it no longer mattered. Her bid to save her friends had failed. There were not going to be any

survivors. *At least I tried*, she thought. *Maybe I can apologize to them in the afterlife. I gave everything I had.*

Twilight reached the doors to the throne room. As she stretched up a hoof to throw them open, the sphere turned purple – the weapon's final phase.

The princess opened the doors. Inside she saw Nightmare Star hovering in the air above her black throne. She was surrounded by an intense purple glow and had a look of great satisfaction on her face. The Nightmare knew that she was about to win.

As Twilight walked into the room, Nightmare Star ever-so-slowly turned her head to look at her. A strange look crossed her face. Was that panic? Fear? Was the Nightmare afraid?

But it didn't matter. Twilight had no more cards to play. There was nothing that she

could do, for the doomsday spell could not be countered. Once it was cast the fight was over.

Twilight looked Nightmare Star in the eye and let go of her time spell. She could hold out no longer. It was time for the war to end.

But then something unexpected happened. The blast that Twilight expected never came. Instead, the world turned gray and everything stopped. Nothing moved – nothing at all.

Twilight took a cautious step forward. She could still move, but everything else was frozen. All of the color was gone out of the world – and yet, strangely, she was still her normal purple self. The room was gray, Nightmare Star was gray, and even the doomsday sphere was gray – but Twilight was not. Whatever just happened had somehow left her alone.

That's when she noticed that the pain in

her wing was gone. She glanced at it and gasped. Her wing was completely healed. Even the bandages on her neck were gone. She felt fine – for the first time in weeks.

“What's going on?” she said aloud.

From the shadows behind Celestia's dark throne, a voice called out – a deep, unnerving voice. It sounded like chains being dragged across broken glass. It was a voice that chilled her very soul.

“That is an excellent question,” the voice said. “An excellent question indeed.”

Twilight watched in terror as a shadow emerged from behind throne. The shadow coalesced into the shape of a pony – but Twilight somehow knew that there was no actual pony there. Two red, fiery, hateful eyes appeared in the dark pony's head. In a world of grays they stood out as points of pure fear.

It was a dreadful sight. The pony of

darkness was the most terrifying thing that Twilight had ever seen. She desperately wanted to run and hide, but she forced herself to stand her ground.

“Who are you?” Twilight asked, straining to keep her voice steady.

“I am Death,” the pony replied.

Twilight's heart skipped a beat. “Why are you here?”

“To make a deal with you,” Death replied. “Come, let's talk.”

Chapter 2: Death

Twilight Sparkle was more than a little nervous; she was terrified. She had heard stories of Death, but they did not prepare her for actually seeing him. *This is very, very bad*, she thought to herself. *Death never brings good news.*

Death stood in front of her, just a few feet away. He was motionless. He said nothing and he did nothing. He just stared at her, with his unblinking red eyes.

“Am I dead?” Twilight asked. “Is that what's going on?”

Death remained utterly expressionless. “Does this look like the land of the dead to you?”

Twilight looked around. Everything was

frozen in time, but she was still unquestionably in the throne room of Canterlot Castle. The color had been removed from the world and replaced with shades of gray, but the world was still recognizable. Nightmare Star was still there, on the verge of destroying the city. This was clearly not Tartarus.

“Well, no, it doesn't. But I don't understand. When I hit that building back there I broke my wing, and now it's whole again. My injuries are gone too. How is that possible?”

“You misjudge me,” Death replied, shaking his head. “I am not here to hurt you, Twilight. In fact, I have come to do you a favor – to present you with a choice. When I give you this choice, I want you to be at your very best. I do not want it said that I took advantage of you when you were at your

lowest ebb. Therefore, your wing has been healed, your injuries recovered, and you are at full strength. Is this not true?"

"Yes, it's true," Twilight admitted. "But you're *death*. You only kill ponies. You can't heal them."

"How little you know of me. Clearly your education has been lacking. Did you not know that I can appear as an angel of light?"

"I find that hard to believe," Twilight replied. She hesitated. The alicorn hated talking to Death, but she didn't see any alternatives. Death was clearly not going to let her go until he had accomplished his mission – whatever it was. "So, um, why are you doing this? What favor are you going to do for me? And why would you, of all ponies, want to do me a favor?"

"Isn't it obvious? Your valor in this war has been extraordinary. Even in the war's final

moments you rushed into Canterlot to save your friends, oblivious to your own safety. That love and compassion should not go unrewarded. It is true that you were unable to save anyone, but I have stepped in to help you. I will give you the chance to accomplish your mission.”

“You will?” Twilight asked, confused. “Really?”

“I will indeed. Why not?”

“But I'm out of time. Celestia's spell is going to go off any second. It's not possible anymore. It's too late.”

“That is why I stopped time for you. The procedure is simple, Twilight. I am surprised you did not think of it yourself. If you reverse your time spell, you can reverse its affects. Instead of speeding up time and making it possible for you to do great things in mere moments, you can instead freeze time. The

flow of time would stop for you and you alone, while it continued on for everyone else. All you have to do is find the pony that you wish to save and then cast your spell around them. When the blast occurs, it will not affect you because you are frozen in a moment of time. Once the blast is over, you can drop the spell and you will be unharmed.”

“Oh,” Twilight said. “Huh. I hadn't thought of that. That's actually a really clever idea.”

Death nodded. “So make your choice. I will allow you to save any pony that you choose. But you can only choose one.”

“Just one?”

“Think about it. Your friends are scattered all over the city, and you cannot cast a spell wide enough to encompass all of Canterlot. No pony can do that. All you can do is cover you and one other pony – or perhaps

two, if they are standing right next to each other. You are going to have to decide who you want to save.”

“I guess you're right,” Twilight said slowly. “But how could I make a choice like that? How can I decide who should live and who should die? I don't want *any* of them to die.”

“I'm afraid Celestia has taken that choice from you. However, this decision can be made very simply, by giving it a little thought. I'd be more than happy to help you. Let's start with Rainbow Dash. She's quite a pony, isn't she?”

“She certainly is,” Twilight agreed. “She's fast, she's brave, and she's a loyal friend.”

“I would not go quite that far. She may be the Element of Loyalty, but loyalty is simply not in her nature. She's a rather proud, arrogant pony who is quite full of herself. Do you not remember what she did when she became Ponyville's town hero? You had to

become the Mysterious Mare-Do-Well to teach her a lesson. To be quite honest, I'm not sure she ever learned it."

"I remember," Twilight admitted. "She can be a bit of a pain at times. But she is loyal."

"Is she? Was she loyal that night when you told Celestia that something was wrong with Cadence and she was not who she appeared to be? As I recall, Cadence had been replaced by the Queen of the Changelings, and you alone were fighting her. Did Rainbow stand by you on that fateful night?"

"Well, no," Twilight said reluctantly.

"And didn't Rainbow Dash once sell Fluttershy into slavery in exchange for a book?"

"But she regretted it immediately! She just momentarily lost sight of what really mattered. That's all."

"Rainbow is supposed to be the *Element*

of Loyalty. Loyalty should be the core of her being – the focus of all that she does. Yet I see very little loyalty in her. All I see is a pony who, if pushed hard enough, will eventually do the right thing – but only with great reluctance. Rainbow has not been a good friend, Twilight.”

“I think you're being a little hard on her,” Twilight replied. “All of my friends are good. Take Rarity, for instance. She's the Element of Generosity. She once made a dress for me for the Grand Galloping Gala. It was really nice of her to do that.”

“How sweet,” Death commented. “She did you one favor during the entire course of your relationship. And how many favors have you done for her? Did you not save her life when Tirek invaded? Did you not give up your magical powers to save her skin?”

“Yes, I did – and I would do it again.”

“And has she ever saved *your* life?”

“Well, not exactly. But I don't really expect her to. She's not an alicorn, you know.”

“It sounds like the relationship is a little one-sided. I seem to recall that you once modeled a dress for Rarity in order to help launch her new line of Princess attire. Did she ever pay you for that endorsement?”

“Of course not! We're friends.”

“Which apparently means that Rarity feels no obligation to treat you with any measure of respect. She would have paid any other model that she hired – but since you are her friend, she simply takes advantage of you and gives you nothing. When Rarity went to Manehattan to present her fashion lineup and discovered it had been stolen by someone else, you worked for hours to help her create a new set of outfits. Do you remember how she treated you? She yelled at you, as if you were some kind of imbecile.

She treated you with far less courtesy than she would have treated even a lowly hired employee.”

“Well, sure. But, I mean, you can do that with friends. Not that you *should* or anything. But sometimes that's how friends are.”

“Is that what friendship is all about? It seems rather poor to me that ponies treat strangers with kindness, but they treat their friends with rudeness and disrespect. You pay strangers for their services, but you yell at your friends when they help you and give them nothing for their hard work. How is this behavior the living embodiment of generosity? I see nothing generous here.”

“Rarity really is generous,” Twilight insisted.

“Is that so? Have you forgotten the time you celebrated your birthday here in Canterlot and Rarity promised to make you a

dress? Rarity did not keep her word. Instead of doing what she promised, she spent her time lying to the upper crust of Canterlot and making friends in high places. She never made the dress that she intended to make because she decided that trying to impress rich ponies was far more important than keeping her word to you. I see nothing generous in Rarity. All I see is a selfish pony who cares more about her image and her fashion line than her friends.”

“Rarity can be complicated,” Twilight admitted. “No pony is perfect. But one pony you can always count on is Pinkie. I've never seen any pony who cared so much about her friends. She's always throwing parties for them, and she remembers everyone's names and birthdays. She's the friendliest pony I've ever seen. You can't tell me that she doesn't embody laughter!”

“She certainly does do that,” Death agreed. “But she is also quite unstable. Pinkie is just one accident away from a complete psychotic breakdown. Do you remember what happened when you tried to throw a surprise birthday party for her? She replaced you with a rock, Twilight. She became utterly unhinged.”

“That was just one time,” Twilight insisted.

“Was it? Tell me, what happened when Cheese Sandwich came to town? How well did Pinkie handle meeting another pony in her line of work?”

“Well, it was sort of hard for her at first. But they did eventually become friends!”

“But that's *not* how it started out. As I recall, Pinkie became so upset that she gave up her entire line of work and tried to find a different job. She simply could not handle it.

Yes, it is true that Pinkie loves making other ponies smile. But you seem to have missed the fact that her life literally *depends* upon those smiles. Pinkie only feels that her life has value *if* she can make other ponies smile. If she ever starts thinking that she can't do that, she completely falls apart. She starts to believe that she is worthless and she snaps. Pinkie only values her life as long as she is the center of attention. If that attention ever stops then Pinkie will die. She is skating on very thin ice."

"I hadn't thought about that," Twilight replied slowly. "But I'm sure she can be cured."

"That's an excellent point. Let's think about that, shall we? Suppose that you save her life. Pinkie will know that you saved her life and, in doing so, allowed her other friends to die. Pinkie – the pony who needs friends in order to believe that her life has value – isn't

going to have those friends anymore. On top of that, she will know that they are dead *because of her*. If that isn't bad enough, all of Equestria will blame her for their deaths. How well do you think a pony as unstable and brittle as Pinkie will handle that? Will she endure it with joy and understanding?"

"Probably not. I guess you're right. I would never want to put Pinkie through that. I think Applejack could handle it, though. She's strong, honest, and courageous – and she has her family. They have a very strong bond."

"Yes, the Element of Honesty," Death said. "Amusingly, she is also the only pony among your friends who has ever broken a Pinkie Promise."

"Well, she didn't *technically* break it," Twilight said quickly. "She—"

Death held up a hoof. "Applejack

deliberately mislead you in order to avoid being honest with you. And why was she so insistent on avoiding telling you the truth? Because of her pride. She was willing to abandon her family, her home, and her friends over a little foolish pride. I would expect the Element of Honesty to be a little more *honest*. She didn't exactly live up to her role, did she?"

"What are you doing?" Twilight asked suddenly. "Why are you attacking all my friends?"

"That is my role," Death said coldly. "I am the Accuser. Did you not know? It is my task to evaluate the life of each pony, to see who is worthy and who is not. You may not want to hear this, Twilight, but your friends are *not* worthy. Rainbow Dash has not been loyal; she is an arrogant pony who cares more about herself than anyone else. Rarity has not been

generous; she takes advantage of you, she gives you very little in return, and she treats you worse than she treats her own employees. Pinkie Pie is unstable and depends on being the center of attention in order to remain functional. Applejack will lie, mislead, and abandon everyone if she decides it's in her best interests. And Fluttershy – Fluttershy is the most dysfunctional pony of all. She's terrified of everything and she can barely muster up enough courage to leave her home.”

“That's going a little too far. Fluttershy's not *that* bad!”

“Really? Tell me, where does Fluttershy spend Nightmare Night?”

“Under her bed,” Twilight admitted.

“Princess, I am not telling you anything that you do not already know. Your friends are deeply flawed. In my opinion they are

simply not worth saving. They have not lived up to their Elements. Most importantly, they have failed you.”

“But failure is part of life! Everyone fails their friends at one point or another. No one is perfect.”

“Don't you think you deserve to have better friends? Think of who you are! You are a princess of Equestria. You are charged with the defense of your nation – a duty you have carried out faithfully time and time again. You need friends you can count on and Elements who live up to their duty. You need a pony who actually *is* loyal. You need a pony who is generous enough to keep her promises. You need a pony of kindness who isn't terrified of her own shadow. Your friends are deeply flawed. Can you not see that?”

“But I can't let them die!”

“What about everyone else?” Death

asked. “Can you let *them* die?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look around you! At this very moment Canterlot is full of ponies who are one second away from being incinerated. Think of the guards who are patrolling in this castle. Think of the homes that are outside the castle walls. There are thousands of ponies in this city – ponies such as your own parents, for instance. They both live here in Canterlot. Are *they* worth saving?”

“Oh,” Twilight said. “I hadn't thought of them.”

“Exactly. They both live here, and they are both about to die. You know that, and yet saving them didn't even cross your mind. But why should it? After all, we both know that they don't love you.”

“Of course they love me!” Twilight said defensively.

“Are you sure? Tell me, Twilight. When you celebrated your birthday in Canterlot, why didn't they come to the party? They both live here in the city. They were both home. They had nothing else to do that evening, and yet they did not show up. Why is that?”

“They love me,” Twilight insisted. “I know they do!”

“How many times have they come to Ponyville to see you?”

“That's different. Look. They enrolled me in Celestia's magic school, didn't they?”

“They certainly did. The first moment they could they dumped you into a boarding school so they wouldn't have to deal with you anymore. That has love written all over it. Face it, Twilight. Your parents don't come to your parties. They don't visit you. They don't write to you. The only time they've ever showed up was at your coronation, and that

was because Celestia made them be there. But the real evidence is *you*. When you saw Canterlot about to be destroyed, you didn't even think about saving them. It never crossed your mind."

Tears began to form in Twilight's eyes. "But my parents love me!"

"The real question is, does *anyone* love you? Because I'm not seeing it. Your so-called friends just take advantage of you to advance their own interests and careers. Your parents ignore you. Your brother uses you to fix his problems, but he has never once shown up to help you. Shining Armor controls an *army*, Twilight. Yet when your life is in mortal danger he just stays home. He never comes to help you. You have gotten more help from *Discord* than you have from your own family."

"What are you doing?" Twilight asked, fighting back the tears. "Why are you telling

me these things?”

“I'm only telling you the truth. Think about it. You have saved Equestria time and time again – and yet when you tried to catch a cab in Manehattan, you were yelled at. No one treated you with any respect at all until you became a princess – and then all they cared about was your title, not your magnificent acts of heroism. Every pony in this nation owes you their very lives, but they never show you any gratitude. When you went out to fight monsters, did the citizens of Ponyville join you to defend *their own homes*? No. They didn't.”

“But that's not a fair thing to ask them! They're just ponies, not soldiers.”

“And for a long time you were just a librarian,” Death pointed out. “Pinkie is a baker. Fluttershy takes care of animals. Rarity makes dresses. Rainbow Dash manages the

weather. Applejack is a farmer. Twilight, *none* of you are soldiers.”

“Hold on just a minute,” Twilight interrupted. “Outside this city is the largest army the nation has ever seen. All those ponies are fighting now. Doesn't that count for something?”

“They're fighting because Luna commanded them to fight. They have all come to get their revenge on Celestia. Yes, they are there now – but they never showed up when *you* needed them. This is not the first time you've tried to save Equestria. Haven't you noticed that you never got any help? Even Celestia and Luna didn't lift a hoof to help you defend *their own home*. You have always been on your own.”

“That's not true! You're making everyone sound horrible.”

“I'm only pointing out what they've done,”

Death replied. "Twilight, you are fighting to save friends who have treated you poorly and taken advantage of you. You are fighting to save a nation that has never been there for you when you needed them, and has never shown you any gratitude. You think you have friends, but you don't. You think you're loved, but you aren't. You don't have admirers; you only have ponies who wish to take advantage of you for their own ends. True friendship and love may exist, but you have never found it."

Twilight was struggling not to cry. The weight of Death's words was dragging her down. Had she really been a fool? How could she have missed the fact that no one actually cared about her? She had done so much for others. Why were all her relationships so one-sided?

Death saw the effect that he was having on her. "The real question, Twilight, is this:

why save any of these ponies? What have they ever done for you? You don't have to do this, you know. You can simply walk away. The ponies of this city owe *you* a great deal – but you don't owe them anything. You aren't in their debt.”

“You're right,” Twilight finally admitted. “I *have* done a lot for them. Even if I could save all of them, the chances are they'd never be grateful for it. They've never thanked me in the past.”

“Exactly. They are unworthy. In fact, the truth is you should be their Queen. You should be the one ruling over them. After all, you deserve it. Think about it: you are a princess, you have great power, and you have put your life on the line for them time and time again. Why shouldn't you take Celestia's place and rule over Equestria? Who else could be more worthy than you?”

Twilight looked at Death. She knew he was telling the truth, and yet she also knew that it was not the whole truth. There were a great many good things her friends had done that Death had failed to mention. Death was painting a very grim picture – but it was also a very misleading one.

Twilight tried to remember what she knew about this dark and unsettling character. *What is he up to? If there is one thing I know about him it's that he doesn't do ponies favors. There is something very wrong here.*

“You remind me a lot of Discord,” Twilight said aloud. “You seem to spread chaos and destruction wherever you go.”

“Ah, Discord,” Death said. “What a disappointment he has been. Discord could have been great, but he has failed to live up to his potential. But I can tell you that I am most certainly not Discord. I cannot be

reformed by the friendship of Fluttershy. I come from a much greater family. There are four of us, you know.”

“Four of you?” Twilight asked.

“Of course. Have you not been told? The first of our family is the white horse of Conquest. The second is the red horse of War. The third is the black horse of Famine. Then there is me – Death. I am the one who comes at the end. We are the Four. Thanks to Celestia, we have been set free to ride across Equestria. She is the one who invited us in.”

Twilight's eyes widened. She glanced over at the fiery horse who was still frozen in time. “Celestia did this?”

“Of course. Haven't you been fighting her for the past six months? Have you not seen what she has done? She is yet another pony who is not worthy of your love and respect. She is the one who marched out in conquest.

She spread war across the globe, which led to famine and death. She unleashed the four. Her immense greed led to our freedom.”

“Her greed?” Twilight asked, confused. Then a realization struck her. She stepped back in horror. “This was all *your* doing, wasn't it? You tricked her! Celestia would never have agreed to this. *You* turned her into Nightmare Star.”

“It came to my attention that Celestia wanted certain... knowledge,” Death said evasively. “As it turns out, I had that knowledge and I was willing to give it to her. It is not my fault that she failed to read the fine print. Knowledge comes at a cost, and great knowledge comes at a great cost. She got what she wanted and I got what I wanted. It was a fair exchange.”

“You lied to her!” Twilight said accusingly. “You are the reason she is corrupted.”

“She corrupted herself. Celestia was the one who wanted the forbidden knowledge. I simply gave it to her. She was destroyed by her own desires.”

“You did not tell her the consequences!”

“I am not her friend, princess. I am the adversary. I exist to kill, and steal, and destroy. I ruin lives and crush nations. That is my role in this world.”

“You are *evil*. You have been the real enemy all along! You are the one who started all of this, and you've destroyed countless lives. You are the true horror.”

“I am indeed, and I am proud of it. Yet, Twilight, in spite of your great anger, you can do nothing to harm me. You cannot even attack me, for I am beyond your reach. I have created a physical form so that you might glimpse me, but I am not bound to it. All of your magic and skill is powerless against one

such as I. Death is a foe that you cannot begin to fight.”

“But you *can* be defeated. You are not invincible.”

“How little you know. You are so ignorant – so foolish. Do you know where I came from? Do you know what gave me the right to step into this world? You know nothing about me. Even if you knew the answers, you would still be powerless. You are a creature of this world. Even you have corruption lurking within. None of your race can defeat me.”

“But you will be defeated all the same,” Twilight said boldly. “You will fall. Your end is coming – I can see it. You, Death, will be swallowed up in victory.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“Do you? Then, in that case, I have made up my mind. I want to save the life of Starlight Glimmer.”

“You want what?” Death asked, surprised. “But she is not here. She has already died. It is too late to save her.”

“But you are Death, aren't you? What difference does it make? One soul is as good as another. I want Starlight Glimmer back.”

“That is not an option,” Death replied.

“And why is that? I bet I know the answer: it's because *you don't have her*. You can't give me what you don't have! Starlight Glimmer was not an evil pony, so you don't have her soul. Her soul is residing in a very different place – one that is out of your reach. You only have the souls of the wicked – those you have managed to drag down into destruction. Which is exactly what you are trying to do to me. You haven't come to help me, have you? You are trying to destroy me – just as you did Celestia.”

“You cannot be serious! Twilight, if I had

not intervened you would already be dead. The only reason you are still alive is because of me.”

“Exactly. If I was dead, my soul – *and the souls of my friends* – would be forever out of your reach. You stopped time so you could corrupt me. You want me to become Dark, like Celestia, so you can drag my soul down into the abyss. You want me to betray my friends, seize power, and extract my revenge. That's what this is all about, isn't it? Well, guess what: I'm not going to do that. Yes, my friends have failed me – and I've failed them, too. But I forgive them, as they have forgiven me. Yes, Equestria hasn't been very grateful for all I've done for them – but I still love the ponies of this land, and I'm still going to save them. I am going to defend them from the likes of you. I'm not doing it because I'm being paid to do it. I'm doing it because *it's the right*

thing to do. I care about them, and I care about this land, and I am going to save it.”

“Then make your choice,” Death said. “But be warned that there will be consequences. Since you accuse me of lying to Celestia, allow me to be honest with you. Your strength only allows you to save one pony – or perhaps two, if they are close together. This city is full of young and old, rich and poor, parents and little children. You *cannot* save them all. If you save your friends, the city will hate you for your favoritism. If you save one family, the city will hate you for choosing them over their neighbor. If you allow them all to die then you will be hated for doing nothing. No matter what you choose, *you have lost*. You will be hated for your choice. And, lest you get any ideas, you cannot touch me. This is one battle you cannot win.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that your only real choice is to die. If you lost your life while trying to save your friends, why, that is something the city could forgive. You made a valiant effort and you failed. Then you would be remembered as a hero. But if you try to save somepony then you will never be forgiven.”

“You want me to *deliberately* kill myself?” Twilight asked, horrified.

“It's up to you. You are free to do as you wish.”

“I will *never* do that,” Twilight said decisively.

“Then choose. Whatever you choose, I will not interfere with your choice – you have my word. I will abide by your decision. So what will you do?”

Chapter 3: Eternity

Two ponies marched across a dreary and forlorn land. The sky above was gray, overcast, and threatening to rain. A hot wind blew through the air, ruffling the mane of the unicorns who were alone in the wilderness. They were far from civilization – and in a place where no pony in his right mind would ever venture.

The unicorns carefully picked their way through an old trail that wandered through an enormous, untamed forest. “Ages ago this was an actual road,” the elder pony remarked. She had a white coat, a silver mane, and a circle of black stars for a cutie mark. She was called Blue Onyx, for a reason no one could remember. Onyx should have retired years

ago, but she insisted on teaching semester after semester. Today she had taken one of her students on a rather hazardous expedition.

All that was left of the ancient road was a few broken stones. The area was thick with tall trees, and the ground beneath the trees was filled with thorns and brambles. No one ever came this way – no one sane, anyway. But Onyx was famous for investigating things that others preferred to leave alone.

There was nothing around for miles – nothing but a sprawling forest that had been there for centuries. The nearest city was more than a hundred miles away. It was a barren, forbidding place.

“We shouldn't be here,” Jasper insisted, for the tenth time that day. He was a tall green stallion with a blue mane, and had a quill for a cutie mark. “Do you know what will

happen if we get caught out here?”

“No one is going to catch us,” Blue Onyx said calmly. “There's no one around for miles. Besides, I happen to have a permit to be in this area. It was given to me by the Party Chairman himself.”

“Sure – a hundred years ago,” Jasper retorted. “Do you really think it's still any good?”

“I think it will hold up on court. But as I said, most ponies have too much sense to be around here. They avoid this area, even though no one remembers why it was made off-limits in the first place. Well, almost no one. *I* remember, for I have done my homework. But few ponies bother to study history these days.”

“It should be enough that it is forbidden,” Jasper said firmly. “Nothing good can come of exploring that which is off limits.”

“Oh, young one, you have so much to learn. You are far too trusting. Some things are forbidden simply because powerful ponies have secrets they wish to keep hidden. You would do well to ask more questions, and not simply believe what you're told. Ponies in power rarely tell the truth.”

The two unicorns continued on, fighting their way through the underbrush. The air was thick and humid. Flies buzzed around, but the air was still. It was as if someone had hushed the world.

“There it is,” Onyx said at last. The pair had reached the bottom of a small, grassy hill. In the side of the hill was a stone tunnel. The passageway looked old, abandoned, and in desperate need of maintenance. “I knew it was there! That is what we have been looking for. And to think the faculty back home calls me crazy.”

“That doesn't look safe,” Jasper said nervously.

“Oh, it's not safe at all. That is quite true. But it is the only road left that will take us into Canterlot.”

“To Canterlot?” Jasper asked incredulously. “You can't be serious! That city is a myth. If it ever existed at all it was lost thousands of years ago. There is no such place.”

“But there was, once,” Onyx replied. She peered inside the darkness, then lit up the tunnel with her magic. “I think the tunnel is safe enough – for one more trip, anyway. I might have to come back later and do some repair work to keep it from collapsing, but I'm getting too old for that sort of thing. It will stand a little while longer, though. Come on. Follow me.”

The white pony stepped inside the

tunnel. Jasper hesitated, and then followed behind her.

“But this makes no sense,” Jasper protested. “Canterlot was supposed to be on the top of a mountain. It wasn't underground.”

“That was a long time ago. As the centuries passed, the ruins of the city were covered by debris and by time. Haven't you noticed that all ancient cities have to be dug up in archaeological digs? Why would this city be any different? What little is left has been buried. But it can still be accessed by this tunnel.”

Jasper looked critically at his surroundings. The tunnel ahead of him continued on into the darkness, which seemed to stretch on forever. The stones in the floor, walls, and ceiling were old and worn. There were metal support beams at regular intervals, but they were battered and in poor

shape. “We're going to get buried alive,” he complained.

“What do you know of Canterlot?” Onyx asked.

Jasper thought for a moment. “According to legend, Equestria was founded by two alicorn sisters – Celestia, who controlled the sun, and Luna, who controlled the moon. The two sisters founded the city of Canterlot and ruled over the nation with peace and harmony. That is, until Celestia went mad and declared war on the entire world. The war destroyed Canterlot and brought an end to the reign of the alicorns – and to the monarchy itself.”

“You are close to the truth,” Onyx remarked, as the two unicorns walked down the dark and dusty tunnel. “But there is much more to the story.”

“*None* of it is true! It's just a myth – like

the story of the Mare in the Moon. I don't even know where that particular legend came from. The Moon has no features that look anything like a pony."

"Oh, it used to – a long, long time ago. But that is a much older story."

"Your historical resources are dubious at best," Jasper remarked. "There are no other historians that agree with your conclusions."

"And yet you still volunteered to come with me on this trip. Even though you knew where we were going. You complain a great deal, and yet I have not misled you."

"I know. Maybe I shouldn't have come. It's just that – well, you have proven me wrong before. I wanted to hear you out."

"And that is what makes you so special," Onyx replied. "You can be reasoned with. For most ponies it's a waste of time to change their mind. Their minds are already made up."

The two unicorns continued walking down the dark tunnel. Their hoofsteps echoed off the stone walls. It was the only sound they could hear. The silence was almost eerie. Jasper felt as if they were descending into the heart of the world. He wondered what they would find. His teacher had told him that she had something remarkable to show him – but she would not say what it was. He had to see it for himself, apparently. As the ponies marched into the darkness, he began to grow nervous. What could possibly be hiding down here?

Onyx spoke up. “As I said, you are partially right. The war was devastating. Equestria was never the same afterward. Despite what you have been told, two alicorns survived the war: Princess Luna and Princess Cadence. The problem was that after the devastation wrought by Celestia, the

world thought it was too dangerous to allow immortal, all-powerful alicorns to rule. They believed that if one pony wielded that much authority, they might go mad and start another world war. Alicorns were immensely powerful, you know. A single one could destroy entire armies.”

“If they ever actually existed,” Jasper replied.

Onyx ignored him. “So in the years that followed, ponies began experimenting with various forms of democracy. Instead of being led by a single ruler, ponies elected their rulers, and they governed for fixed periods of time. That has led to the rather horrible state of affairs that exists today.”

“You're against democracy?” Jasper asked, surprised.

“What we have today is *not* a democracy. We have corrupt politicians who do the

bidding of a corrupt Party, and who stay in power by bribing stupid voters. It's not a good system, Jasper. We were much better off when we were ruled by alicorns. There hasn't been peace and harmony in Equestria in centuries.”

“You would bring back the monarchy? That's insanity!”

“Is it? The problem with politicians is that they are easily bought and easily corrupted. What could be better than being ruled by a perfect, incorruptible immortal? A pony who could not be bought and who would always do the right thing would be a perfect ruler. If that pony never died then it would be even better. Plus, the power of an alicorn would make sure that any potential threats could be easily dealt with. It was a great system, and it worked well for a long time. There was more peace under the reign of alicorns than there

has been in all the centuries since.”

“But no pony is incorruptible,” Jasper said firmly. “Legend says that Celestia turned dark. She became a pony of great evil.”

“But she was the only one who ever fell. Luna never turned evil. Nor did Cadence, or Twilight. In fact, Twilight made the greatest sacrifice of all. If it was not for her the pony race might have been wiped out.”

“Who was Twilight?” Jasper asked.

The tunnel continued into the darkness – but there was a change. Ahead, through the gloom, Jasper saw something. Was it a light? He couldn't be sure.

“Twilight Sparkle was the Princess of Friendship,” Onyx said. “When Celestia fell into darkness, she joined forces with Princess Luna to defeat her. The war was difficult, but under their combined guidance they succeeded in pushing Celestia back into

Canterlot – back into this very city.”

“This doesn't look like a city to me.”

“Only ruins remain. But at the time it was a great city. On the last day of the war Twilight and Luna managed to break Celestia's power over the sun, and they prepared to invade Canterlot. Twilight's friends were imprisoned in the city and she was determined to save them. But that was when the unthinkable happened. Before Luna could launch the attack, Celestia cast her doomsday spell and ignited a runaway reaction. In a matter of seconds that reaction was going to engulf the entire city. It would kill everypony inside – including her friends, who she loved dearly. Worse, there was no way to stop it.

“Naturally, Twilight could not let Celestia commit this terrible atrocity. So she slowed down time and flew toward the city. In an instant she disappeared.”

“Wait a minute. She slowed down time? But that's impossible! No pony can do that.”

“Twilight could. She was an alicorn, remember. As I was saying, she flew toward the city to save her friends. Twilight, though, had a problem. She could not stop the reaction, for once it was ignited it *would* erupt. But at the same time, she could not save all of her friends. Even with her immense power and her ability to alter the flow of time itself, she could not reach all of them in time before the eruption happened. So she had to make a choice. She had to decide which of her friends she was going to save.”

“What did she do?” Jasper asked, in spite of himself.

By now they had reached an archway that opened into a small chamber. The room was filled with light, despite being deep underground.

“She chose to save everyone,” Onyx said quietly.

Jasper walked into the room and gasped. In the back of the room was a throne – dark, crumbling, and clearly incredibly ancient. The throne was partially hidden in shadow. In front of the throne, frozen in midair, were two alicorns. One of the alicorns was a black pony with a mane of fire. Above the pony's horn was a sphere of intense, unstable energy that lit up the room. Nightmare Star was in the act of casting a spell – or she had just finished it. It was impossible to tell.

In front of her, also in midair, was a purple alicorn. Her wings were spread, her horn was lit up, and every muscle in her face and neck were taut. She had a focused, determined look on her face – a look of triumph.

“I don't believe it,” Jasper said

wonderingly.

“Twilight was very clever,” Onyx remarked. “Somehow she reached Celestia and froze the two of them in time. It was a brilliant strategy. Since the unstable vortex was caught in time, it did not erupt. That allowed plenty of time for me to reverse Celestia's mind spell, evacuate Canterlot, and save the lives of everypony.”

“What do you mean, you?” Jasper said.

Onyx lit up her horn – and her appearance changed. Her white coat turned dark blue, and her silver mane became magical. Its silver color vanished, and the stars themselves flowed through it. Her cutie mark changed to a crescent moon, which laid on a sea of night. Wings appeared at her side – a magnificent, enormous pair of wings.

“I was there,” Luna said. “Two thousand years ago. Twilight disappeared into the city,

and a second later the blast sphere disappeared. At first I couldn't understand how she canceled out my sister's magic. I quickly freed the citizens from their mental enslavement and evacuated the city. When I reached the throne room I found the two of them like this. Twilight used her magic to buy us the time we needed to save everypony. She saved countless lives that day – and yet she has been forgotten.”

“I don't believe it,” Jasper gasped. “You are an alicorn? You are *Luna*? How is that possible?”

Luna ignored him. She continued looking at Twilight. “Do you know what I think? I think Twilight meant to give us enough time to evacuate, but she did *not* mean to freeze herself for all of eternity. Twilight was a smart pony. She knew what she was doing and she did not make mistakes. I think this is the work

of an enemy. Somepony is scared of Twilight and has imprisoned her here, because they are afraid of what she will do when she is finally freed.”

A look of horror appeared on Jasper's face. “The blast! If her time spell ever ends, the blast will vaporize this entire area. This place will be turned into a crater!”

“Which is why Canterlot was abandoned and never rebuilt, and why this area has been off-limits ever since. Until that spell goes off, this is a very dangerous place to be. We could be killed at any instant.”

“Then why are we here?” Jasper asked, in a strained voice.

“Because you needed to see the truth. The only way you would believe what I had to tell you was if you saw it with your own eyes. Jasper, I think we have an enemy. It would take a very powerful pony to freeze Twilight

in time like that. I think someone cheated. Someone was unhappy with Twilight's choice, and decided to not play fair.”

“Who could possibly do that?”

“The same pony who corrupted my sister. Since that enemy could not corrupt Twilight, he imprisoned her instead. But I think he will have a very unpleasant surprise one day. There are powers greater than he, and I am convinced his treachery has not gone unnoticed. He made the mistake of taking something that did not belong to him. One day Twilight will be freed – and when that happens, there will be a day of reckoning. His days are numbered.”

“Who are you talking about?” Jasper asked.

Luna smiled. “You would not believe me if I told you.”

“Won't the blast kill Twilight, though?”

“I think Twilight can find a way to survive. She's a very strong pony.”

“But hasn't Twilight already lost? I mean, Twilight's friends would have all died a long time ago, right? Twilight is going to find herself in the distant future, alone and forsaken. Well, except for you, I guess. But there will be just the two of you against the whole world.”

Luna shook her head. “The rules have been broken, Jasper, at the highest level. There are powers greater than alicorns, and they will not let this act of treachery go unpunished. Even before the breach, Twilight could control time itself. I suspect that when she returns she will be given options that no pony has ever been granted before – and she will make aggressive use of them to right all the wrongs that have been done. She will be formidable.”

“When do you think she will be released?”

“When the time is right. And when that happens, I will be here for her. I've been waiting a long time. The two of us can set the world right again.”

“But when will that be?”

Luna smiled. She lit up her horn and transformed once more into Blue Onyx. “Come. We need to head back. It's a long walk home, you know.”

As the two ponies left, Jasper peppered Luna with questions. The two voices gradually grew fainter as they made their way down the long tunnel. Soon the two alicorns were left alone once more, trapped in time.

In the shadows behind the throne, two red eyes peered out. The eyes regarded Twilight with a special intensity. They noticed her determination, her drive, and her passion. Those same eyes had seen her before, long

ago.

But this time, the eyes were afraid.