ARC 01

Eriwen wakes to find the world she knew has been lost.

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1. As You March Towards Your Death...

Eriwen opened her eyes to a world of ash and ruin. The last thing she had recalled was her mother pushing her underneath the throne, and the smell of strong magic. When she awoke, rather than the high ceiling of their hive's throne room, an overcast sky peering down the crater that was once her hive awaited her. The air stunk of char and the lingering scent of ozone, a distinct feature of powerful magic.

"Mother?" Eriwen's sweet voice cracked, her throat dry and burning as she inhaled microparticles of ash. As she looked around, a gasp ripped from her. Skeletons. So, so many skeletons. Drones who had begun to flee into the throne room leaned in piles against the ruined frame that once held the door, some traces of chitin and leathery skin hanging off of their bleached bones.

Eriwen nearly vomited at the sight of drones she could no longer recognize in piles, torched away with some foul spell. It was then she spotted a skeleton far larger than the others, lankier and more elegant, slumped over the top of the throne behind her.

The scream that escaped Eriwen was inequine and primal. Carefully, Eriwen held one of the twisted bones of her mother's hoof in her own warped forelegs. She sobbed, reaching to push some of her mother's rosy mane that remained plastered to her skull away from her empty sockets. Eriwen barely registered the fact that her poor mother's mane had fallen out and withered away at the slightest touch. She simply couldn't believe anything she was seeing.

"Oh, Mother… how has this happened…?" she whimpered, "what do I do…?" Eriwen spoke to the corpse of her mother as though it still held a modicum of life, as though her mother would suddenly look at her with the same smiling green eyes ever again. However, the bleached bone pile did not answer, deathly still.

Eriwen would sit there for hours, the overcast sky darkening until a terrible downpour rained down upon the ruined hive. Even then, Eriwen did not move a muscle. The crimson-maned Queen simply wept, and when she ran out of tears to cry, she sat completely still. She cared not if a predator or rival Queen heard her relentless blubbering; her pain was too great.

It was only after the next dawn when the rains would subside that Eriwen shifted at all. Her hunger had begun to gnaw, and some part of her still willed her to stand. Eriwen's eyes, once a bright golden, were dulled and sunken after a night of grief-driven howling. Her voice was long since lost to the endless screaming. So it was silently that Eriwen stood to her full height, gazed down upon her mother's skeleton with a hollow expression, and walked away. She didn't notice the crunching of drone bones or sifting piles of ash beneath her hooves as she departed her hive for the last time.

2. Letting Our Loneliness Out Into The Atmosphere...

A week had passed since Eriwen’s awakening. Food was scarce; most of the land surrounding the old hive had been destroyed. Almost nothing survived whatever had eradicated her home, save small animals that she had to completely drain to even remotely slake her hunger. No ponies wandered the ruined village outside of the jungle mountains she’d once called home. There, too, were skeletons, which contained no lingering energy she could consume. Eriwen needed a plan, she needed to survive. For her mother, if nothing else.

Eriwen had wandered another few days until she found a patch of untouched forest a ways North of her old haunts. Therein were non-sapient creatures such as deer and rabbits a great deal stronger than the withered beasts back home. Eriwen took only what she needed, as she was trained. While most other hives were bottomless pits of hunger, Eriwen’s mother had always taught her to respect those Changelings needed to feed upon to survive.

“Everything is a cycle, Eriwen. When one part of the great machine of life loses its balance, the entire ecosystem will be destroyed in time. We must respect the beings we feed upon, as the ponies must allow their fields of grass to grow again or the squirrels must allow their trees to grow new nuts.”

Needless to say, it was an unusual lesson for a Queen. Most of the other Princesses Eriwen would meet at the Queens’ Summit would tell tales of how they’d killed ponies by taking too much, or hunted lone ponies in the woods to take them prisoner. She was not like them, and would instead keep silent of her sylvan lifestyle as her mother always asked. Eriwen looked back on those lessons fondly, but supposed her mother simply wanted to retain some semblance of dignity in front of their peers... A Queen was always going to be a Queen, no matter their values.

After Eriwen had what she needed to survive, she moved on from the wooded land with some hesitation and wonder. How was it that such a beautiful place had been protected from the blast that had seemingly destroyed everything?

Eriwen needed a plan... She couldn’t survive off of woodland critters and hope forever. A plan, a plan...

3. To See The Sun Far Above...

Three weeks. That was how long the sun was obscured from sight, and how long Eriwen had been wandering the ruins of Southern Equestria. More patches of pristine land had been located, and she had steadily been mapping them out mentally to return to later. However, with the sun's absence, it wouldn't be long before plants began to wither and die. There were already signs of what little grass remained starting to shrivel away.

Eriwen's hooves ached, but she kept walking Northbound. As she walked, she saw towns and villages half-destroyed, with bleached skeletons just the same as the last. Signs once vibrant and full of character were worn away, blasted to pieces or bleached away as though they'd been there for centuries.

Eriwen did her best to ignore the crippling horror growing in her chest each day she awoke to find her nightmare unending. She had to focus on her newfound goal; reach Canterlot, and find out what happened. Ruined roads led her to the Northern fields of Equestria, where the capital of Canterlot was said to be seated on a mountain summit high above the rest of the country. She had heard tales of the great seat of pony power, but had never been there herself. If it weren't for the destruction of the land, she wouldn't have the chance to. Truly it was a bittersweet sort of thing, but the crimson Queen tried her best to keep her glass half full, and not empty…

The world was not dark. The sun still moved, but it hid like a coward from the world below. The clouds, Eriwen realized halfway through the fourth week, were not natural. Perhaps the world itself wept with its great loss, or something else was at play… Even so, the sun could not nurture the land by day and the stars could not guide the way by night. Eriwen relied entirely on her horn and magic, which was a problem when food was so rare to come by as she wandered further and further from her home. Well… her hive wasn't really her home any longer, she supposed. She needed a new home, but her desire for closure kept her from staying in one place for too long. No doubt the Sun Goddess or some other bureaucratic pony would know what happened and what was wrong with the sun, right?

That is, if they remained in Canterlot. It seemed as though Central Equestria was indeed the epicenter as 'oases' (Eriwen had thought it an obvious term for the pristine patches of land) became smaller and rarer the closer she trekked. She worried that if Equestria's capital was too close, that nobody would have survived, and her journey would be for nothing. It was worth a shot, at least… right?

4. Count The Bodies

Two months of wandering, feeding off of scraps and sleeping underneath invisible stars. Nothing remained of the legendary Ponyville. Straw-and-wood houses were hardly a match for such powerful magic, but Eriwen expected at least… something. The only thing left standing was a towering crystal palace that belonged to the fourth royal alicorn. What was her name? Twiggle Spark? Something like that.

Eriwen had been unable to go inside; it seemed whatever protected the flawless castle refused to let any sort of outside presence within. She'd sleep without shelter that night.

The next morning she resumed her trek. It was a lonely one, as her entire trip had been. This one especially; no skeletons had remained this close to the epicenter. The world was gray and white, no life or color left in anything. What did remain was covered in ash. It was like some ill-tempered god had razed the land and stripped away any vibrancy.

It was a wasteland. Only variations in elevation remained; trees, grasses and other flora were entirely burned away. The mountains surrounding Canterlot were visible from any direction now, and Eriwen could see the spires of the capital city. They were strange to her, ornate and colored a pale purple and gold. The fact any color remained in the buildings at all was strange, but she pressed on.

The gates were utterly destroyed. The bridges connecting the mountain passes to the city were still, miraculously, intact. However, that was where Eriwen's luck ended. As she walked through the nearly unrecognizable gates of the city, Eriwen stared wide-eyed at the buildings. They were half destroyed, but some were intact enough that she could still see storefronts, furniture and even some half-disintegrated skeletons laying upon the ground in various poses. Some part of Eriwen felt some relief at seeing more corpses; at least here she wasn't quite so alone with her thoughts.

The castle was beautiful, even in this state. She stood in awe at the palace and could imagine the bustling staff, marching guards and elegant aura. Eriwen closed her eyes and imagined the great Sun and Moon goddesses conversing in the gardens having tea and gossiping as sisters did… It was beautiful, but left her feeling morose. It seemed that nobody remained alive here.

"Who…" a voice echoed from somewhere ahead, causing Eriwen to yelp and jump, wings buzzing in alarm.

"Who…" the voice echoed again, "…are you? Why are you here?" it became more clear as it spoke, as though it had not rang out for a long, long time.

"I'm… My name is Eriwen," she decided to drop her title. Queen of what, anyways? "I'm here looking for answers… My hive, it was destroyed. I don't know where to go, what to do…"

Suddenly, a flash of gold and Eriwen gazed upon the most beautiful, yet revolting pony she'd ever seen. Half of the tall, beautiful creature was coated in alabaster fur, with a rainbowy flowing mane drifting on invisible wind. Gold seemed to be melted into her skin, as though she once wore regalia that had not survived a blast of fire. On the other half was burned skin and a hollow eye socket. Some of the pony's bones were visible through the char, causing Eriwen to flinch upon seeing them.

"Come with me," if the pony noticed her disgust, she did not acknowledge it, "if you want answers, that is."

"O-Of course…" Eriwen smiled nervously, not entirely sure if she could trust the pony. It was then that the pony turned around Eriwen noticed… wings. She contained a gasp, "you're--"

"I was once Princess Celestia. But I suppose considering current circumstances, we can forget that silly title…" Celestia chuckled sadly, "this is my home, Eriwen. Welcome," she smiled warmly on the side of her face that could still smile at all as she and Eriwen entered the castle foyer.

"Celestia… What happened here?" Eriwen held back tears as she gazed upon the ruined interior of the castle.

"I.. Well, I suppose you did come here for answers and not a social call," Celestia sighed, "let me tell you a story, Eriwen…"

5. Kuebiko, A State of Exhaustion Inspired By An Act Of Senseless Violence...

Nobody knew what happened to trigger Twilight's sudden paranoia. Some believed she finally snapped after years of nervous breakdowns and anxiety. Doctors believed she had a predisposition for certain mental disorders. Celestia believed in her no matter what. And perhaps that's what led to the destruction of all she worked so hard to build.

Twilight was a daughter to the immortal Princess of the Day first, and a weapon second. But she was still a weapon, tempered and dangerous. The most magically gifted unicorn since Starswirl so long ago, born at such a convenient time. Celestia supposed she was blinded by her optimism, that she ignored Twilight's shortcomings and problems.

Even so, they had not seen Twilight for weeks when the young alicorn suddenly broke into the throne room ranting and babbling about conspiracies with no basis. It happened so quickly, so unexpectedly…

Celestia moved to settle her student physically. Her horn lit up. Twilight snapped. A surge so powerful that it…

It…

"Celestia? Are you alright…?" Eriwen whispered, not daring to touch the sobbing alicorn lest she upset her further.

"I-I am not. I apologize," Celestia let out a shuddering, rattling breath, "I will finish the story."

Eriwen nodded silently as Celestia steeled herself.

The surge was so powerful that it destroyed the lands of Equestria and wiped out most, if not all, who lived within its borders. The spell tore away at mortal ponies and turned them to ash and bone, their souls sent to the Elysian Fields within the blink of an eye. The arcane nexus was wild, unpredictable and utterly destructive.

Celestia only survived thanks to her connection to the sun itself, her body only scarred and not disintegrated in an instant. Her wounds would never heal, but nor would she perish from them. A curse that would forever mark the destruction wrought by her hubris.

Luna, her dear sister, was nowhere to be found, but it could be assumed her lunar counterpart was similarly scarred wherever she had gone off to. Cadence, sweet Cadence, had not replied to attempts to contact her. Perhaps the spell reached as far as the Crystal Empire, and wiped out the crystal ponies who called it home. Celestia could not know; she was rendered flightless by her injuries.

“Could you not teleport?” Eriwen asked innocently. Celestia smiled wryly.

“I could, but the Sol does not speak to me. She ignores my whims, hides her light from me… I have very little power left, Eriwen. My time is running short,” Celestia looked up at the cloudy sky through a sizable hole in the throne room. The pair had wandered the halls until they came across the old throne room, which was… well, surprisingly intact for being the total epicenter of the disaster,

“I could never have imagined a Changeling Queen would find her way so far. Where are you from, Eriwen?”

“I’m from the jungles South of here. Me and my Mother lived with our drones in the mountains…”

“Ah, the Sylvan Jungles. I had always hoped to visit…” Celestia smiled, eyes warm with mirth she had not seemed to experience in months, “your Mother. Does she live?”

“…No, I’m afraid not. She- She saved me…” old wounds opened for Eriwen, causing her to feel a surge of emotion.

“Do you plan to rebuild?” Celestia asked, her curiosity growing obvious. For what purpose, Eriwen did not know.

“Well.. Yes, someday. I will have to, a Queen is nothing without a hive,” Eriwen spoke as though it were obvious, “I just hope that wherever we go… there’ll be enough food.”

Celestia’s gaze hardened somewhat. Eriwen whimpered and quickly explained,

“Oh, no! My hive… We weren’t like the others! The other Queens always took and took, but we respected the balance of life, Celestia. I swear on it,” Eriwen relaxed as Celestia shook her head with a smile.

“It hardly matters, dear. There is nothing left for me to protect, even if you did not hold such values…” Celestia sighed, “there is one thing I can do for you with the last of my power. But you must promise something to me, Queen.”

Eriwen furrowed her brow in confusion,

“I don’t make promises if I don’t know what I’m promising.”

Celestia stood to her full height, horn glowing with mounting power, “promise me you will use this gift wisely… And live fully.”

“Wait, what’s going on? What are you doing?” Eriwen gasped as the growing power surrounding Celestia began to blow her back, “Celestia!”

“Be calm, Eriwen,” Celestia smiled sadly, “my gift to you… is Equestria. Through my power I can heal the land. Through my blessing, I give to you what is left of my nation. Thrive, Queen Eriwen. Succeed where I have failed!”

Eriwen was too shocked to speak as Celestia’s body began to transform. Solar magic pulsed through the castle, through the mountains and deep into the earth as what was left of Celestia began to morph into a tree atop what was once the throne of Canterlot. It became so bright Eriwen tried to close her eyes, and still her pupils constricted into slits from the spell’s light.

“Twilight… Twilight, can you hear me…? I’m coming home…”

And just like that, the spell ceased. Eriwen hesitated to open her eyes, but when she did, she witnessed a mighty, spiraling trunk that rose hundreds of feet into the air, Sprawling branches with leaves of various pastel colors rustled in a newfound breeze, sparkling as the sun shined down for the first time in two and a half months. Fresh air replaced the stagnant choking smog that had claimed Equestria for so long, revitalizing Eriwen unexpectedly.

It was then, as Eriwen gazed upon the tree that was once Celestia, that the poor scarred alicorn had waited so long to reunite with those she had lost. Weeks of suffering, waiting for release… And her poor Twilight who had become so sick… Who had taken everyone. It was not Eriwen’s place to judge the pony royals, she knew. It was hers to take the pony’s place in this land, and become better. It was nothing more than a tragedy outside of anyone’s control, and Eriwen, as sad as it was, could not change the past.

So, for the second time, she turned away from the past and walked to the future. Atop a balcony overlooking the still-awakening lands of Equestria, Eriwen smiled. She had work to do.