

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..."

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