

The Citroton Saga

Seven Pony Stories
By Citroton



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Words Are Louder

Birds chirped happily in the trees that morning, as they did the morning before, and the morning before that, and every other morning since the day after Winter Wrap-up. They swooped from their nests upon the branches to collect their morning meals. The early bird, after all, does indeed get the worm. But, as Celestia's sun crept across the early reaches of the daytime sky, many ponies still slept.

However, in a modest house near the centre of the sleepy little town, one pony defied convention, as she did every weekday morning. The blonde mare made her way down the stairs cautiously, the early morning sunlight nearly blinding her through her descent from her bedroom. She had just enough time to grab a quick bite to eat before heading off to work for the morning, and if she was anything, she was punctual.

Digging into the refrigerator, only her bubbly flank would be visible to any pony standing in the hall. She lived alone, so she made no effort to stifle the clanking of bowls, or the pouring of cereal. Sitting on the table, however, sat a book she was reading the night before, pages still exposed to the ceiling above. The mare quickly retrieved her bookmark, nestled it into the spine, then shut her book, revealing its title to be "20,000 Leagues under the Sea". It was a literary classic written by none other than Burning Jewels, who lived over a hundred years ago, speaking of undreamt marvels.

A smile crept upon her face as she laughed inwardly at her own forgetfulness. How could she have left such a classic out in the open like that? After finishing her quick breakfast, she made sure to deposit it back on the bookshelf in her living room where it rightly belonged. The mare quickly made sure all the doors and windows were locked before she grabbed her hat off the stand by the door and left for work.

Sure, being a mailpony wasn't her first career choice... but she had to admit that the job had grown on her, and she simply couldn't imagine herself doing anything else. Derpy Hooves smiled as she took off into the early

morning sky. There wasn't any better time to fly then in the morning to her. The morning dew of the early summer morning still shimmered in the light, giving off the illusion that the ground below was made of precious gemstones.

Inevitably, there came the time when she had to descend from her lofty perch, landing in front of the Ponyville Post Office. It was a rather small building, considering the number of ponies it served, but they somehow managed to get the job done every weekday morning and afternoon. In the morning, the mail ponies would go around door to door and check every single post box for an outgoing letter. Then, in the afternoon, after sorting, they would be distributed.

Oddly, the thought never occurred to them to cancel that service and have the ponies drop off their mail in fewer, but larger collection boxes. They'd be guarded by lock and key to assure nothing got tampered with, unlike the current system. Derpy had tried to voice her idea before, but... there were difficulties.

The grey mare quietly rounded to the back door of the Post Office and slipped inside. Already, her fellow mail ponies were gathering their bags, or having a cup of coffee to get going before the long day ahead. As usual, nopony spoke a word to her as she walked over to her locker and collected her bag. Work didn't begin for another five minutes, but she liked to make sure she had everything. She had a bad habit of misplacing things.

"Morning, Derp," came a bright cheery voice when she emerged in the Break Room. Derpy quickly identified the pony as Fairybelle, a rather new pony to the team, but she seemed nice enough. Fairybelle was a bright and cheerful Earth Pony who sported a lavender pink coat and a short cyan mane. Her flank bore a cutie mark in the shape of a speeding letter. Obviously, she had a talent in getting packages and mail to their destinations quickly. Derpy had no doubt she would become Postmistress of Ponyville one day.

"Pickles fly!" Derpy replied, waving a hoof at her in greeting. The younger pony giggled a little at the unusual response as everypony did.

"Sorry, Derp," she smiled, realizing her faux pas. "It's just that you say such random things!"

Sadly, by now the filly had been exposed to her exploits by her coworkers. Derpy could tell she was apologizing just to make nice, but she really still thought of her the same way everypony did.

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Walking through town later that morning, the young mare slowly became apprehensive as the route passed her by. The exchange with her co-worker had left her doubting herself and her plans for the day. Derp's saddlebags began to dig into her back a little from the weight of all the mail she had picked up, plus a rather hefty package from Bon-bon to Lyra, which she suspected was jammed full of chocolates. She didn't care much for chocolate: Derpy would prefer a muffin any day of the week.

Speaking of muffins, the mailmare slowly approached her next stop. It was an old and interesting building in town, since it wasn't a building at all; but rather, a tree. She approached the Library a little apprehensively as today was Wednesday, and knowing the pony's habits, she probably had a letter to deliver. Ever since she came to Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle had attracted Derpy's attention. Not in the romantic sort of way, but in the kindred spirit sort of way.

Tales had spread wide and far about the purple mare's love of a good book, and her above-average intelligence. Derpy wasn't one to brag, since she could never seem to say what she wanted anyway, but the two had at least that much in common. Perhaps, her mind raced, they could even be friends one day. To this end, the gray mare took a deep breath and knocked on the door of the Library.

"Just a minute," echoed the voice of the unicorn from behind the door. The Library didn't have a mailbox, so Derpy had to receive the letters... right from the horse's mouth, one might say. She waited in anticipation at the door, hoping to Celestia that her lazy eyes didn't start to act up... or that she could get at least one word she wanted past her lips.

"Oh, Hi... um... Derpy," Twilight spoke as she opened the door. "I'm sorry about the delay, but Spike was begin his usual unproductive self." She shot a look back into the building as she spoke the last few words, dripping with sarcasm.

"I haven't eaten yet, what do you expect, Twi?" A whiny voice echoed from inside the tree.

The purple mare shook her head and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Boys," she remarked before reaching over to a side table and gathering up a letter in her teeth. Derpy took the letter happily and stuffed it into her saddle bag. She shuffled her hoof awkwardly at the door, trying to bring herself to say something.

"Um..." Derpy spoke softly. It wasn't often that she'd try to start a conversation, and even more rarely during her route. Still, disorder be damned, she was going to talk to this mare. She burrowed her brow in deep concentration, the look seemed to surprise Twilight, as her pupils narrowed and she stepped back nervously.

"Uh... are you okay, Derpy?" She spoke, concerned that the mailpony was having some sort of attack.

"I...I...icicles... like fish!" A look of horror came upon the blonde pony as she covered her mouth with a hoof. "K...kelp eats breakfast in Virginia."

Twilight couldn't quite explain what was happening, but it was beginning to creep her out. "Okay," she chuckled awkwardly. "Well, I'm sure you've got a lot of work to do, and I just remembered this fascinating book I've just gotta read so... see you later." With that, the door of the library unceremoniously closed in Derpy's face. Her ears drooping in despair, she realized she'd blown her one chance at a good first impression. Twilight must have thought that she was... that she was...

A tear dropped down her eye as it drifted to a corner of her face, the young mare's head hung low as she reluctantly continued her morning route.

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Derpy Hooves dropped her bag into the sorting room, having just wiped some tears off of her face. Her boss, a brown stallion with a grizzled, gray mane and a five o'clock shadow on his face frowned at her. "Derpy!" He exclaimed angrily. "You're five minutes late, you feather brain!"

"Kumquats," she muttered apologetically as she turned tail. Perhaps a walk through town during her break would take her mind off of things? She had about an hour to kill anyway... and there was only one thing that could cheer this sorrowful pony up. The winged equine decided to take flight to her destination, a haven in times both good and bad; a place that boasted itself as the haunt of a mare who could cheer up anypony: Sugarcube Corner.

It was around noon, so Mr. and Mrs. Cake were busy in the kitchen while their hired hoof, Pinkie Pie, minded the customers.

"Hi, Derpy," the pink pony cheered happily. "What kinda muffin can I get you today?" That radiant smile, Derpy swore, could lift even the most down pony. She paused for a minute, considering.

"Bumblefoot, turkey!" The Pegasus pony announced.

"You're in luck!" Pinky chirped. "The Blueberry ones just came out of the oven!"

Of all the ponies she had ever met, Pinkie Pie was the only one who could understand her insane murmurings. She'd try to get her to speak on her behalf before, but nopony would believe her. They seemed to think that Pinkie wasn't acting as an interpreter, but would rather insert what she thought Derpy was actually saying. Needless to say, the whole thing was quite frustrating.

Pinky's smile suddenly faded as she looked into Derpy's yellow eyes. They weren't 'derped' as everypony called it, so why did she stare? "Are you okay, Derpy? You look sorta sad."

Derpy shook her head. Was the whole incident with Twilight really that easy to read? Speaking of reading, the mare remembered a book she had at home on the subject... she'd long since abandoned her attempts to explain Pinky, much like Twilight previously. Unlike her, however, the gray mare didn't have to learn it the hard way, and she was grateful for that, considering.

"Lions nest in spring," Derpy started. "...bees sting on the dot. Light sink in a cupcake sky."

"Oh..." Pink voiced in realization. "Well, she can be all fuddy-duddy like that, but Twilight's okay when you get to know her. You just gotta try a different approach!" Again, the wickedly uplifting smile spread across her face, and the blonde mare couldn't help but return it. She passed the pink earth pony her bits and took the muffin in gratitude. "Then even if you made a complete, total disaster of the first go, you've got the second go to make up for it!"

Derpy Hooves spent the rest of her lunch hour in the break room back in the post office. The other ponies chatted idly among themselves while she sat at a small corner table and dwelt on Pinkie's words. Perhaps she did need a new approach to communicate with Twilight... but that begged the question: how was she going to go about it?

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A few days later, during her normal delivery route, she would find the answer. One of the ponies on her delivery route that afternoon was a special case. He was a typical stallion, nothing really remarkable about him. It was more his brother, who lived in Hoofinton, that was the remarkable one. The mailmare trotted up to the door and knocked on it lightly. The stallion of the home answered, his brown coat and black mane shimmering in the light.

"Ah, hey Derpy," he spoke softly. "I take it if you're here, then I have a letter from that dear brother of mine?"

"Fish paste!" Derpy chirped, handing over the letter. His brother, you see, had the most appalling writing anypony had ever seen. It was more akin to scribbles than it was to actual letters. Still, his letter, plus her translated version, was always well received by his brother. He looked at his newest letter, and a smile spread across his face.

"You know, Derpy," he started. "You have a talent for making things clear on paper that otherwise nopony would understand."

In that beaming face, an epiphany had washed over the mare. She could not help but share his smile, though he had no idea why. It was all so obvious to her now. Why had she not thought of it earlier? Derpy scolded

herself inwardly as she finished her route for that day. She must really have been stupid if it wasn't clear to her before! Suddenly, she was quite looking forward to her next encounter with Twilight Sparkle.

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It was Wednesday again, a week to the day since her first ill-fated attempt at talking to the purple unicorn. This time, however, things would be different. It was her afternoon route: Twilight had not been around that morning, meaning she had no outgoing mail. Ah well, that didn't matter to the grey pony, for she could fit her in regardless. She knocked politely on the door of the library, an annoyed and frazzled Twilight thrusting it open.

"WHAT!?" she exclaimed a little louder than she intended. "Oh, it's you. Sorry about that." Twilight smiled apologetically at her outburst.

"Jellyfish!" Derpy exclaimed happily, presenting the violet unicorn with a bunch of letters.

"Oh, thank you." The unicorn gingerly took the mail from her, and before she could say another word to the Pegasus, she had already trotted off on her route. "It must be nice to be such a simple pony," she added after she left.

Twilight's mail was of the usual sort. Letters from some ponies she didn't talk to very often, her subscription to 'Magic Monthly Magazine,' and the odd flier or two from some of the local shops in town. However, a curious letter lay among them that she just had to open first. On the envelope, you see, in elegant, cursive handwriting, which she briefly mistook for Princess Celestia's, read the word, "*Twilight*."

Interested, she placed all the others onto the side table and sat in the middle of the Library on a cushion to read aloud, to nopony in particular.

"*Ms Twilight Sparkle,*

I would like to take this moment to apologize for my abysmal behaviour this Wednesday past. You must think of me as a baseline idiotic pony, who can only speak in inane outbursts. While my speech impediment may ring true, I have no doubt that the extent of my mental capacity is making itself evident to you as these words pass your eyes by. Please, allow me to

explain myself to you, succinctly from the beginning.

I experience a mental block in regard to my vocal abilities. The only word I can seem to utter on command is "muffin" as well as its plural form. In addition, I tend to misplace items of importance and have a curious pair of lazy eyes.

As for my conduct last Wednesday, I sense I may have startled you, but I sincerely meant no harm. You see, I have admired you from afar for some time now. Not in a romantic capacity, but in a more... platonic capacity, I daresay. You see, I am an avid lover of both classic and contemporary literature and would like to discuss such with a pony of your intellect.

Alas, most ponies see me as dim-witted, or simply would not understand me should I deign to write to them in this fashion. However, I believe that you do. I apologize for my logorrhea, and shall get to the point of this missive. Last Wednesday, I simply wanted to ask you to join me at Mr. Shake's that Saturday afternoon so we could get to know each other a little better. You could use your words, and I a pen and pad to express myself properly. It is not something I'd do for anypony though.

If you are interested, please intercept me on my route tomorrow morning. Failing that, a simple visible token left on your door will do. It can be anything you wish.

Hoping to converse soon,

Derpy Hooves."

Twilight read the letter over repeatedly, wondering how her eyes could deceive her so. How could such a... unique pony like Derpy Hooves possess such a command of the English language? There were some words in that letter that she didn't think anypony else knew, and she had been the bookworm of any group for as long as she could remember! Perhaps... perhaps she had been a little quick to judge her... but never in her life had she been so wrong.

The purple pony needed a minute to clear her head. She stepped out onto the balcony and took in a breath of fresh air. If this Derpy Hooves was really so smart, perhaps she'd have to see it in person... have her write like

that right in front of her face. She probably just had a smart friend write that letter for her... that had to be it!

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A couple of days later, Spike was napping in the Library when the sudden slam of a door echoed through the building. "Spike!" came the all-too familiar bellow of a very bossy pony. He rolled onto his side and reluctantly left the warmth of his blanket behind. Obviously, he had not moved fast enough, since he heard his name called a second time with greater volume and urgency.

"Just wait until I'm all grown up," he muttered darkly as he walk down the stairs. "Yeah, Twi?"

"Take a letter, Spike," the pony replied. Spike couldn't help but notice a distinct mixture of shame, embarrassment, and a touch of envy on the face of the unicorn as he reached for a scroll and quill.

"Alright, shoot," he spoke in an irritated manner.

"Dear Princess Celestia,

Further to an earlier letter, about never judging a book by it's cover, I learned today that the same thing can even go for ponies you know. You never really know a pony until you've sat down and really talked, laughed, and shared interests together. You might just be surprised with how many acquaintances turn out to be friends you never knew you had.

On a more personal note, I also learned that, no matter how smart one thinks they are, there is probably somepony out there who is even smarter.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle."

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The End of  
Words Are Louder

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Blood is Thicker

Overall, the day had shaped up to be a usual one for the citizen of Ponyville. Early that morning, she woke up, took care of her usual morning chores, and then went about with her typical Friday morning. She trotted over to the market to buy groceries, stop in at Sugarcube Corner for a quick chat with Pinkie Pie, then went home for lunch. However, that was when her usual schedule ground to a complete and utter halt. Just as she dug into her daisy and daffodil sandwich, a knock sounded on her front door.

Irritated, the pony groaned. Couldn't she ever sit down to eat in peace? She reluctantly got out of her seat and walked over to the front door, opening rather suddenly, about to chew out whomever dared interrupt her meal. There, standing at the door stood the most introverted Pegasus she had ever known... none other than Fluttershy; Ponyville's resident animal expert. "Oh... um," she started, her voice barely more than a whisper. "I... I know it's close to lunch, but... um... would you mind if I... joined you? To talk?"

"Well, of course you can, Fluttershy," the unicorn replied with a sigh. How could she stay mad at the socially awkward filly? She opened the door and allowed her friend entry, fixing her a sandwich too, despite her protests to not bother. Once the initial unease passed, the two friends quickly got around to talking; they discussed animals, mostly. It was quite rare for Fluttershy to drop by unannounced, but after some pressing, the yellow pony revealed that she felt a little alone that morning, and simply wanted to talk to somepony she knew.

Suddenly, a knocking came at the door for the second time in an hour. "I'll get it", the mare spoke to her friend as she pulled away from the table. In true fashion, Fluttershy had ducked under it at the sudden and loud noises coming from the other room. Twilight Sparkle could easily guess just who would come around at this time of day. "Afternoon, Derpy," she smiled to her yellow-eyed friend. "What did I get today?"

"Chipmunk, diddly!" Derpy happily chirped. Her left saddle bag looked full

beyond its limits. In fact, the diligent mail mare tilted slightly to that side due to the weight. She slipped herself out of her saddlebag and nudged open the flap, motioning to her purple friend that she simply couldn't lift the heavy package. Using her magic, Twilight lifted the large box-shaped parcel out of the bag and gently onto the table she kept by the door for her mail.

"Squiddle, coconut!" The grey Pegasus pony added as she produced a clipboard, obviously asking for her signature. Using her magic, the purple unicorn floated over a quill that Spike typically used to write letters to the princess and signed for her package. She had to confess, she was confused about the parcel's origin. Twilight never mail ordered anything, and she didn't really know anypony who would send her a package out of the blue like this.

Her duty complete, Derpy slipped the saddlebag back over her neck and onto her back. "Before I forget," Twilight started. "I found that spell I was telling you about last week. You know... the one to help other ponies understand you? Did you... want to go through with it?" The blond-maned pony simply shrugged before taking off to continue her route, leaving her friend alone at the door.

The unicorn sighed as she shut the door to the library, sometimes that Pegasus could be so indecisive. Ah well, she wouldn't press it on her if she felt uncomfortable about it. Still, it hurt Twilight to have such a brilliant friend be viewed as... mentally incompetent. She sighed to herself and turned tail back to the kitchen, hefty package and letter in tow, floating behind her.

"Sorry about that, Fluttershy," Twilight started as she shut the kitchen door. "It was just the mailmare dropping off a package for me." She sat at the modest wooden table again and started munching on her sandwich, her friend spying the brown-paper-wrapped box with great interest.

"Y...you can open it if you want, Twilight... I'm kind of curious," Fluttershy confessed after a couple of minutes.

She would have become flustered again... had she not finished her sandwich just moments previous. Pondering about it for a few quick seconds, she recognized that she was curious and nodded to her friend. She slipped out the envelope nestled between twine and package and

opened it. His heart skipped a few beats as she recognized the writing on the letter and did a small jump for joy, startling her friend.

Twilight blushed and spoke sheepishly, "Sorry... it's just... it's a letter from my mom!" The unicorn was giddy with excitement... more so than she was for her first sleepover. It was a rare treat to get a letter from her mother, never mind a package. It wasn't because she didn't care, or didn't love Twilight... it's just that she was so busy just trying to support herself.

"My darling Twilight," she began reading to her friend.

"It's been too long since my last letter, and I deeply apologize for that. I've been as busy as usual, plus a little more since I've been collecting some things for you. You see, when I was about your age, your grandmother gave me a task that I'm about to give you. It's not exactly easy, but it's nothing compared to what you have accomplished, dear.

I'm so proud of you, Twilight. Words cannot describe how proud I am to call you my daughter. Yes, I have heard the rumours, and even asked the Princess herself about it. She was kind enough to tell me the whole story about how you freed her little sister, and I must confess that I cried tears of joy for you.

So now I feel that you are old enough to handle this obligation. You see, the firstborn foals in our family line have done this since long before Her Highnesses' reign. It is keeping our family tree up-to-date, a task which I have not done as well as I should have. However, in the package, along with the book, I have given you the materials necessary to finish what I have started. Please, heed their clues and follow them through. I have faith in you, my beloved little filly.

With Lots of Affection,

Mom."

Twilight was in a daze as she finished the letter. Her mother had left her unfinished business? She was now in charge of a book that was potentially older than her own teacher? Excitement gripped the young unicorn as the twine unravelled and the brown paper pulled away. She was licking her lips in anticipation, having never even known that such an old book existed.

The flaps of the box flew open, several papers and documents drifting lazily onto the table, followed by what she wanted to see the most. It was an old tome, no doubts about it. It wasn't particularly big, but it seemed to radiate whispers of ages long past, chilling her to the bone despite the summer's heat. Placing it in front of her, she carefully flipped through the yellowed pages, seeing what her ancestors had written about themselves and their lives. She'd read it more in depth later... for what she was really interested in was...

She simply couldn't bring herself to look, shutting the book before she even got close to the page she wanted. Her eyes were dangerously close to tears and her friend seemed to notice. "Twilight?" Fluttershy spoke with concern. "Are... are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," the unicorn lied, pasting a smile on her face. "Just a little nostalgic is all." The two friends continued to spend the day with each other, going out in the afternoon to watch Rainbow Dash try to break another silly record. Twilight enjoyed herself, but her mother's letter still ate at her subconsciously. Just what, exactly, had she failed to do?

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Just what did they expect she was? A simple show pony!? It was ridiculous the way they could treat a magician of her power and fame. The Great and Powerful Trixie paced the dressing room, back and forth, trying to piece together a new show. The attendants had given her a Barley Shake when she specifically asked for an Oat Shake! The nerve of some ponies! Ah well, she couldn't complain that much, considering she had landed a steady string of performances in a well-known theatre in Canterlot.

Every night she'd wow ponies from all walks of life in the city. In fact, some of her best customers were the social elite; tycoons of industry and even members of Parliament. In Equestria, you see, Princess Celestia had grown weary of managing the day-to-day functions of the country some centuries ago. So, she created the Royal Equestrian Parliament; a body of publicly elected officials to run the more mundane functions of the country. The Princess was still the final authority and had final say in all actions and laws passed by the house.

The Great and Powerful Trixie looked in the mirror of her dressing room, trying to get herself ready for this particular performance. The Prime Minister himself had given word that he would be in attendance. If Trixie played her cards right, perhaps he would give her his official endorsement and allow her to perform for the Royal Court! Of course, after the performance, she had a rendezvous that she looked forward to. She glared at herself in the mirror, repeating a phrase she uttered before every performance she ever made. "You are The Great and Powerful Trixie... You are The Great and Powerful Trixie!"

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The last couple of days had found very little sleep for the purple unicorn. It wasn't really out of the ordinary for her though, since she would typically go on such binges when she had found a particularly interesting spell, enchantment, or field of study. This time, however, it was genealogy that so wracked her brain. Twilight had taken her mother's request to heart, and dug through the records and ledgers provided... still not having a clue what she meant yet.

Spike, meanwhile, had been urging her that this could wait for a while since the person she was looking for was probably long dead and wouldn't be bothered if it took a little more time to find. "Come on, Twilight," he urged one afternoon. "You're not going to get anywhere by forcing yourself!" Normally, when she got like this, he wouldn't really mind, since it meant a few extra hours of sleep for him... but this time, she had been more bossy than usual, which was saying something.

Twilight sighed in defeat, "I suppose you're right Spike. I guess I could use a break."

"Now, don't you try to worm your way out of... oh." The baby dragon started, surprised when he realized she agreed with him. "Well... okay then!" Spike muttered to himself something about finally getting some sleep as the purple mare left the library to go interact with her friends. Although he didn't like to show it, he worried about her sometimes.

On his way up to his bedroom, he couldn't help but take some of the papers Twilight had been poring over. He didn't get why this was all so

important, dragons didn't keep track of their lineage, so the concept eluded him. If it was this puzzling and important to her, then she needed some help, he reasoned. Sitting on his little cushion of a bed, he took a look at them. At first, there was nothing to be found, but as he handled the papers, he felt extra ones in the ledger that one couldn't make out if they used magic.

Inside, he found two nearly identical papers in a small, easy-to-miss sleeve in the back of the book. He felt his jaw drop in sudden realization. "Holy Guacamole!" He said to himself.

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Flash and dazzle: wisps of light and puffs of smoke. Her performance had it all; grace, elegance, magic, and even a good story to add to the mix about how she heroically saved the town of Ponyville from a cranky Ursa Minor. They cheered, asking, no, begging for more of her amazing illusions and tricks. Most nights, she would be happy to indulge them. Alas, she couldn't this night, as she expected some company. It was obvious they were a secret admirer of sorts, which would explain why they signed anonymously in their letter.

It was only natural that The Great and Powerful Trixie had many adoring fans, but nopony ever had the courage to write to her before. Sure, they were vague about their intentions, but as she trotted back to her dressing room, she could imagine a tall and handsome stallion, asking to court her. Sadly, she had to keep her wild fantasies to herself, since it would be quite the story if The Great and Powerful Trixie should ever blush like that over a stallion.

Back in her dressing room, she paced. She simply could not wait to meet such a dedicated fan. Trixie couldn't help but dig into her desk and pull out the letter once more.

"Great and Powerful Trixie," the letter started, Trixie reading it aloud to nopony but herself.

"I simply cannot keep this a secret any longer. I should've known from the moment I saw you that you were the one. It took me a while, but I know it fully at last. If you wish, I'd like to meet you in Canterlot, in your dressing

room, after your performance on the night of the 15th. I have something of great importance to discuss with you, and I hope that we can become very close.

*Please write back soon,
T.S"*

Hanging up her new cloak and hat, Trixie began to groom herself... for her date.

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"Oh, Spike, you would not believe the day I had," Twilight spoke as she entered the library later that evening. Celestia's sun had just set below the horizon, Luna's night taking hold in its starlit glory. However, the purple mare didn't hear a sound from the baby dragon. Concerned, she trotted upstairs to find him sleeping peacefully in his bed. She let out a quite sigh and covered him in his blanket, deciding not to disturb him.

The unicorn walked down the stairs and back to her waiting work. So far, she had traced family records from the beginning of the tree to almost the top. Yet, for the life of her, she could not find any holes. Sure, some branches got cut-off and others disappeared with time, but with the documents her mother provided, she simply could not understand what she meant. She could be so vague sometimes.

Hours ticked by as Twilight gave the books and pages of her family tree a second look. She must have missed something, not like it was hard to do with the jumble of mostly yellowed sheets she had to work with. At around midnight, she found that she simply couldn't concentrate any more. She sluggishly pulled herself away from the desk and into the Kitchen to fix herself a cup of coffee. The warm vanilla scent tickled the insides of her nose, rousing her as they cooked and poured into the pot.

With a steaming cup clenched in her teeth, the purple mare walked back to her work, taking a small sip to help her get going again. What drove her to work so hard on this? Twilight reasoned that she wanted to impress her mother yet again; to make sure that she not only didn't fail, but to do it faster then she could. But then, there was the whole challenge aspect to the idea of tracking down a long-lost, distant relative.

Just as she was about to call it a night, two white sheets of paper captured her interest. They looked so crisp and clean compared to the others, as though they weren't very old. One of the two papers turned out to be her birth certificate. Like most, it stated her name, date of birth, attending doctor, where she was born, if she was a filly or a colt, and the name of her parents. Twilight couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow as she read out her father's name. Granted, he died when she was very little, but she still could remember him if she tried really hard, the images and sounds blurred with time.

In her mind's eye, she could still make him out. He was a blue, purple maned unicorn colt with a medium build. She could remember him pushing her on some swings when she was a foal, smiling and laughing in a soft, yet firm voice when she squealed in delight. In front of them sat her mother on a bench, a purple and silvery-blue maned filly, smiling at her husband and daughter as they played in the park. Twilight could feel tears welling in her eyes when she remembered how long ago it had been; far longer than she ever dare mention.

She sighed, nearly forgetting about the second piece of paper behind it. She figured it had to be her father's death certificate, since she didn't recall seeing it in the rest of the pile. However, she felt compelled to check it, just in case. She was glad that she looked at it. Shock swept over her entire being as she drank the words on the page like a pony that hadn't had any water in a week. The unicorn's eyes went wide as they dwelt on a particular name on the sheet.

"It couldn't possibly mean..." Twilight finally voiced, barely able to speak at all. Tears began to well in her eyes again as she pushed her memory to her very limit, able to make out something she hadn't really noticed before. No faces were visible, but there were colours, and those colours spoke volumes to the purple unicorn. She knew what she had to do.

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The Great and Powerful Trixie, as much as she hated to admit it to herself, grew anxious as the minutes ticked by. Time seemed to slow down just to annoy the blue unicorn and all her radiant glory. She needed her, to hug and hold... to voice her fears and anxiety to. Trixie bit her lip and

moved over to her trunk, opening it in a dazzling light blue glow. She risked a lot heading back into Ponyville after the Ursa Incident, but she simply couldn't leave this behind.

The cart, her fireworks, her makeup, even her trademarked hat and cape could all stand to be lost to her. There would be other hats and capes, other spell books... but what she risked so much to extract from the splintered ruins of her cart was priceless. Levitating out of the trunk was a purple, plush unicorn doll. Trixie had her as long as she could remember, and although her precious Bella looked disturbingly similar to the unicorn that nearly ruined her career, she simply couldn't part with it.

"Oh, Bella," Trixie started, snuggling her foalhood toy close. "Trixie finally has a fan that wants to get close to her. She hopes that he's rich, but he probably isn't. What does Trixie do?" She placed an ear close to the toy's imaginary mouth, and nodded at the imaginary advice that she whispered. "Alright, Trixie will try." She replied.

Suddenly, a knock sounded on her dressing room door, causing the pale blue unicorn to jump. She quickly tucked the toy back into the trunk, trying her best to regain her composure. Giving a last brush of her mane, and a reciting her chant, she replied to the knocking. "The Great and Powerful Trixie grants you entry!"

She kept her back to the door, head held high in the air. Trixie would allow them to gaze upon her godly body, to drink in her power and marvel at her beauty, before she would turn to face them proper and make their life complete. An awkward shuffling of hooves met her ears, the admirer clearly nervous about being in her awesome presence! The Great and Powerful Trixie smiled to herself as the hoof steps died. She had let them bask in her glory long enough.

"Y-you!" Trixie shouted, her voice ringing of anger, shock and, although she'd never admit it, fear. Standing before her, instead of the handsome and rich stallion she imagined, was that irritating purple unicorn again. Had she come to expose her to her loyal audience here? Have her outcast again to wallow like a... like a common pony!?

Twilight Sparkle saw the distress in the unicorn's eyes. It was evident that she hadn't forgotten the Ursa Minor Incident, or how she had essentially

run her out of town. It only made her task harder, but it had to be done... even if she would never accept it. "Trixie... I'm sorry about the deception. I can tell you're upset, so I'll just make this as brief as possible. Please, hear me out."

"No!" Trixie shouted. "The Great and Powerful Trixie knows why you are here, and she will never let you ruin her career again! Whatever it is you have to say, The Great and Powerful Trixie does not want to hear it. You can just turn around and march right out that door, Twilight Sparkle!"

The purple mare sighed at the unicorn's stubborn attitude. Then again, she remarked to herself, it was a trait they shared. "Look, I'm not here to ruin your career, Trixie. I just want to tell you something important." Twilight nudged around in her saddle bags for the papers she collected here in Canterlot. Along with the ones her mother sent, they should have made for an air-tight case. "I've been looking into my family history for the last week or so, and I discovered something."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie doesn't care to hear about your stupid family history!" Trixie replied, her snout held high into the air.

"Trixie..." Twilight started, deciding to be blunt. "We're sisters."

Silence hung in the air for a long time, as if breaking it would send the world over the precipice of disaster. Neither of the unicorns moved or made a sound for minutes, looking each other in their purple eyes. At last, the silence was broken by a sigh from Twilight. "I know it's hard to believe, but I have proof." Using her magic, the purple mare passed the papers over to the blue mare.

As she read, her eyes narrowed. It simply couldn't be true! There was no way she could be this... this commoner's... sister! She was The Great and Powerful Trixie, not the younger sister to Twilight Sparkle! Anger erupted in her eyes as she sent the papers flying back into the unicorn's face.

"How dare you shove these lies under The Great and Powerful Trixie's nose!?" She shouted in indignation, face flushing in anger and embarrassment. "There is no way in all Equestria that she is related to a sorry excuse for a unicorn like you! Yes, you may have vanquished a cranky Ursa Minor, but Trixie is still the superior magician! You disgust her

with your blatant forgeries! Now get out of her sight, before she calls the guards!"

Twilight sighed and left the dressing room, defeated. There was simply too much anger and hurt welled up inside her for her to accept the truth. "Maybe one day, Trixie," Twilight spoke before the door closed. "You will be able to call me 'sister.' When that day comes... you'll know where to find me."

Trixie slammed the door behind the arrogant purple unicorn, overwhelmed with emotion. Anger, hurt, jealousy, and fear swirled around inside her like a torrent just wanting to get out. She stomped angrily over to her trunk and withdrew her precious foalhood toy, slamming it roughly against the walls of her dressing room, crying out in anger and frustration. Trixie threw herself onto her bed after the initial surge of anger and brought her toy... her only friend in the entire world, close to her. Hot tears streamed down her face as she sobbed. She never meant to hurt her, and now her precious Bella had lost a limb and her horn. The blue unicorn cuddled her close, vowing under pain of death to find her missing stuffed limbs come sunrise. For now, she just wanted to sleep: to forget the pain and confusion.

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"Hey, Twilight!" Spike chirped happily to the unicorn. "How was Canterlot?"

She could hear a voice calling out for her, but the purple mare found herself lost in a fog of indifference. The purple unicorn hadn't said a word since she tried to show Trixie the truth... a truth she spit back in her face and rejected outright. Twilight made it a point not to cry: not until she was safe in her room and away from the prying eyes of the baby dragon.

"Twilight?" He called as she trotted past, not seeing the tears welling in her eyes.

Twilight slammed and locked her door tight; digging deep into her trunk, pulling out a blue unicorn doll her mom had given her before she sent her to the Royal Academy. Only now did she realize how much it looked like Trixie... like her little sister. She buried her head into her pillow and sobbed, recalling the letter her mother sent after she told her of her discovery. The

family had lived happily together for a couple of years... but a year after Trixie was born, their father died.

Her mom, unable to support herself, not to mention two filly foals, had to make a tough decision. She tried to send them both off to the Royal Academy, but they only accepted Twilight. Reluctantly, their mother had to separate them, despite her wish to keep them together. Trixie was put up for adoption and found a loving home. However, before they were separated for the final time, her mother gave them both dolls... each made to look like the other's sister so that, in some small way, they would always be together.

Hours later, Spike climbed the stairs into the bedroom, unlocking it with a trick he learned from Snips and Snails. He opened the door cautiously, expecting to be yelled at for interrupting. Instead, he saw the unicorn curled up on the bed, clutching her little doll in a death grip, tears still visible on her face. It hurt him to see her like this, but in time, he figured, she would get better. In the meantime, he crept over to her bed and pulled the blanket over her sleeping form.

"Good night, Twilight."

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The End of
Blood is Thicker
~ ~ ~

Sunset

Chapter 1

Dawn

A dark and stormy night: the perfect time to tamper with the universe's laws. Or so Celestia thought to herself. She couldn't explain why, despite her long years, but something just felt... right... about the whole thing. Maybe years of loneliness had finally driven her off the deep end? No, she was still quite sane. It wasn't like she was totally alone either. Sure, she had grovelling servants at her beck and call, but they were always far too formal for her tastes.

"Dear sister," Her Royal Highness, Princess Celestia of Equestria, Regent of the Sun spoke to a dusty old painting on the wall. "In twenty short years, you will return with well-deserved indignation. Curse Nightmare for twisting you like he did!" She slammed a hoof into the wall, knocking the picture of the smiling alicorn off balance. She frowned slightly and nudged it back into place with her muzzle.

The ancient mare closed her eyes and sighed, inhaling the scent of the oils from the painting as she breathed. "Don't you worry though; your big sister has a plan." A curt, and frankly creepy, smile spread across her face, thankful no pony was up at this time of night. Turning away from the face of her little sister, she began to trot down the hall, humming a happy tune to herself that echoed off the hallowed halls of Canterlot.

For years now, she had been reading up on a series of ancient and complicated spells. She had memorized all the steps, all the requirements, everything she would need. It would be much easier if she could get a volunteer, but she didn't like the idea of destroying a living pony for her own selfish needs. Besides, not just anypony would do. No commoner could ever hope to help her beloved little sister.

Trotting downstairs, past the darkest, most dank dungeon she possessed, she came to a dead-end. With a pink glow of her horn, the stone turned to wood and yielded to her, swinging open to reveal more stairs, leading to the lowest level of Canterlot. Torches magically came to life, illuminating the winding staircase as she descended. The air down here was musky and cool despite the summer's heat, cold enough for her to see her own breath as she came to the bottom.

She felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature as she clopped her way into the dark, dim room. Down here, she had stored the most evil of tomes and the worst of all spells she could find. Normally, she wouldn't dare step hoof down here, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Her mane and tail wafted in the omnipresent solar wind, hoofsteps echoing off the walls as she gathered the supplies.

A bucket of clay, a pail of water, a sculptor's chisel: all would be used to finish her creation. Using her magic, the princess of the sun unlocked a cupboard and levitated her masterpiece in the centre of the room. Years of hard work and patience were about to come to a head, at long last. Sure, she was no Pony d'Angelo: that much was for certain. Still, she beamed at her creation and hoped for it to beam back at her.

She was a unicorn mare made of naught but clay, with a straight and orderly mane and tail. It had taken the princess the better part of a century to get her this far, learning all about sculpting the entire way. In some ways, she would miss her little hobby, but in others she would be happy to finally finish her off once and for all. Celestia hummed to herself as she worked, giving the mare some more definition in her face, etching lines in her cheek from her smiling face.

In her mind, she imagined the little unicorn springing to life, hugging her like the mother she never had. Well, actually, she would be her mother anyway, so it all worked out nicely. A chuckle and a smile snuck past her lips at the thought, warmth spreading through her body that steeled her from the chill of the room. Bit by bit, the chunks of soft clay fell onto the floor at her hooves, the utensils moving to her magical whims.

Tonight would be the night; she could feel it. After about an hour of combing over the unicorn's details, the princess stepped back to admire her work. If it weren't for the clay, a pony could mistake her for being real;

just as she hoped. "I do believe you are my greatest creation, little one." Celestia spoke to her clay mare. "Even more impressive than Canterlot itself, I would say."

The Princess beamed with more pride than when she took control of the sun from her mother those six thousand years ago. If only she could be here today to see her greatest triumph! Not only had she created a masterpiece sculpture, but soon she would create the perfect vessel for her dear Luna's spirit to be poured into. Then, she could kill Nightmare Moon with nothing to hold her back, and finally apologize for not paying enough attention to her beloved sister.

She almost felt pity for a moment, since she would basically be creating a life for the sole purpose of dying. But then she reminded herself that the mare staring at her would have no destiny and no spirit. Celestia perked up a little bit at this rationalization. Besides, she could be honest with her so that it wouldn't hurt the filly. That would make everything morally right... right? With a shake of her head, the princess shook off the moral dilemma; she had more important things to take care of right now.

"Right," the mover of the sun spoke. She closed her eyes in focus, the most difficult part still ahead. Out of another cupboard, a stick of white chalk floated out and began to draw an intricate archaic design on the cold stone floor. Meanwhile, a small dagger emerged from the same place, floating over lazily to its mistress. Celestia poured her heart into the chalk. If even one symbol was out of place, it could have potentially disastrous results.

Several minutes passed as she manipulated the chalk, working it down to nothing more but a stub by the time she finished. The circle around the two figures was composed of complex sigils, meant to focus and amplify her godly magic of the sun. Not even she could create life like her great-great-grandfather, so she needed to resort to this. The white runes began to glow as the princess radiated magic into it, growing brighter and brighter still until the darkest corners of the room became lit.

Cautiously, Princess Celestia stepped over to the clay pony, dagger drifting behind her. She smiled, still elated by her work and raised the dagger to her long forehoof. She winced slightly as she felt the cool metal blade pierce her flesh, crimson blood trickling down the tempered steel.

Extracting it with a prick, she held the wound over her clay creation, and let a few drops of royal blood dribble onto her back and on her face. Satisfied, she stepped back and summoned some bandages to wrap around the voluntary wound.

"So it begins," Celestia started, raising her voice so that it reached the top of the high vaulted ceiling. She welded her eyes shut once more in concentration, uttering an incantation in a long-dead language. Her voice echoed off the walls of the empty room, nearly throwing her concentration off as she tried to recite the complicated spell purely from memory. Her majesty expected this, as she planned everything out five steps ahead and kept countless back-ups for each plan.

Celestia's eyes opened, her kind purple eyes replaced with an eerie white glow, obscuring them from behind a veil of magic. The magic circle became blindingly bright, but the princess remained transfixed on the clay pony. She dived deep into her body and felt the source of her magic, calling upon the sun itself. With the limitless energy of a billion explosions, her horn rocketed energy towards the inanimate pony.

The next thing Princess Celestia knew, she was lying on the cold, damp floor of the vault, exhausted, but still able to move. Had it worked? Did she actually do it? Straining her ears she heard raspy breathing that wasn't her own, but there were groans and moans as well. A strange musk, more prominent than the usual, hung in the air. It smelled familiar, but she couldn't recall no matter how hard she tried. Her eyes fluttered open, and the sight before her eyes nearly made her vomit.

Lying in the middle of the circle was a twitching mass of flesh and bone. It gurgled sickly as blood escaped various openings in its pink and bloodied body. The whole mass twitched with a groan that pierced the princesses' heart. Celestia pulled herself off the ground and considered the mass. It was alive, but deformed. She must have messed up the form quadrant of the circle. She took a deep breath and stepped lively around the quivering mass.

Sure enough, she found the problem and quickly erased the offending runes before going back to where she once stood, ignoring the abomination before her. "Take two," she spoke into the nothingness before summoning her strength again. The princess found the second run through of the spell

wasn't as taxing on her as the first, but still passed out after she cast it.

This time, in the middle of the circle was a miniature version of the pony she crafted. She was a beautiful filly with a purple coat and navy blue mane, sleeping soundly and happily on the floor. Celestia could not suppress a grin that spread over her face at her success. Sure, she hoped for a full-grown unicorn and not a foal, but it was a far sight better than her first attempt. Ah well, she would grow.

But then the gears in her brain clicked. A new fully grown Unicorn in the castle could easily be explained, but a foal? That would raise far too many questions then she found herself comfortable with. This simply wouldn't do at all, and she wasn't sure where she went wrong this time. The princess needed to act, and fast. Already, she could feel the moon getting low in the night sky.

Thankfully for her, she knew exactly what she would do. She quickly trotted over to the sleeping foal and closed her eyes in concentration. The princess' horn came to life again and felt all over the sleeping little pony before her. And happily, the filly contained no physical anomalies, meaning the process was a complete success despite the lack of age. Prodding into the sleeping pony, however, the princess saw something she didn't account for; the pony had overwhelming magic, where a void of spirit should have been, and would be unsuitable to hold her sister.

Her attempt to cheat the universe had failed.

It was too late to take it back though. This would simply have to do for now. The Princess had to make a last-minute change to her plan, but if it meant keeping her subjects safe, then so be it. Celestia concentrated one last time on the young filly, almost ready to pass out again as she was. A white light enveloped the golem-filly, her purple coat sparkling in the dimly lit room. Her spell was two-fold; one to keep her asleep and alive, the second... well, that needed to be seen.

Using the last bit of magic she could spare, Princess Celestia teleported in a wink of light, appearing back in her royal chambers. It was almost time to lower the moon and make way for the dawn, the storm of the previous night having finally cleared. If any pony came around, she would tell them that she simply wasn't feeling well today and couldn't perform her usual duties.

"Have a good day, my darling little sister," Celestia spoke as her horn glowed once more, the rest of her strength spent on raising the sun.

Exhausted, the Princess of Equestria climbed onto her soft bed. The pillows and mattress were stuffed with solidified clouds, causing her to melt into her bed with a content sigh as the wisps of sleep quickly swept around the majestic alicorn. Glimmering in the early morning light, the frame of her gilded bed sparkled intently, meant to impress despite that few would ever see this royal sanctuary. She shut her eyes and quickly fell asleep, dreaming of the reunion with Luna, who she missed more than anything else.

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Over the next couple of days, the Princess became aloof and detached from her subjects. Her mind raced with methods to revise her plan, since her creation was unable to hold a spirit like she intended. It was a minor set-back, given the time she still had, even if it wasn't a lot to a being like her. Eventually, she settled on a plan, granted it was a big gamble and would leave a lot to chance. Sadly, if she wanted her Luna back, it would have to do.

Celestia pondered hard about whom to give the unicorn foal in the basement to. They would need to be married and be close enough to her to trust with the truth. Only two names sprung to mind as she pretended to pay attention to some random colt blathering on about... well, she had forgotten what exactly. She smiled to herself, the stallion taking it as a positive reaction to his idea, or whatever it was. It didn't matter, she could request the minutes later.

As soon as the petitioner turned tail and left her throne room, she motioned to one of her royal messengers to approach. The colt was of strong build, boasting a yellow coat and an aqua mane. It was refreshing to see such bright colourations on ponies these days. He bowed low as he finished climbing the steps, like all the others. "What can I do for you, your highness?" he asked.

"Go out and find Mrs Shimmer Tail and Mr Night Wind," Princess Celestia started. "Tell them to meet me in my office as soon as possible. They are residents of Canterlot and reside at number thirty-five Oat Crescent."

The messenger quirked a brow at the odd request, since the princess rarely summoned ponies who did not already reside in the castle. Still, despite the confusion, an order was an order and with another bow, he replied, "It will be done, your majesty." With that, he too turned tail and left the throne room.

With all of her appointments finished for the day, the Princess retired to her office for the night. Along the way, an advisor trotted along-side, and slightly behind her, briefing her on the latest news from Parliament. She played nice and pretended to care what he had to say, but in reality her mind was elsewhere. It wasn't long before she and her small entourage came to her study. "If you'll excuse me, I wish to be alone for now," she spoke to the advisor. He gave a quick bow and trotted off, hoof steps echoing as he went.

She opened the wooden double doors with her magic and stepped inside her office. The room, on first entry, proved uncharacteristically dark, red velvet curtains drawn across three massive windows on the opposite wall. As she stepped beyond the threshold of door, the curtains sprung open, bathing the room in the afternoon light of the sun. In front of the windows sat the focal point of the room; a large, darkly stained desk made of a long-extinct wood. Carved into the legs on the sides were figures of all the different kinds of ponies, and anything related to the sun.

Celestia rounded the desk, one of the few things in this world older than her, and sat behind it, examining the room in a passing glance. A marble fireplace sat to her left in the middle of the room, not as intricate as the desk, but still rather impressive in the designs on the face. On top of it sat many pictures in gilded frames, some of them rather horrid in quality, but she loved them all the same. Of every student she ever had, the princess would select the best drawing they made and mount it so that she could always see it and remember them.

Along the walls of the office sat portraits of family members; her mother and father, and all the previous Regents of the Sun. Missing from the collection was a picture of her dear sister, but having her in here would distract her from her work. Along the sides of the room sat countless drawers for paperwork and other various tools she needed for her trade. The walls themselves were a bright, yet bearable yellow and the floor

carpeted in royal blue.

On top of the ancient desk, Celestia liked to keep it relatively clean. Most of the space was dedicated to papers in her "to-do" pile and others in her "finished" pile. Other than papers, the only thing she kept on her desk lay a bottle of ink and a quill. The desk was for business, the rest of the room could have personal flare to it. In front of the desk sat a small coffee table the princess kept mainly for visitors to place drinks or various other items they brought with them. Today, however, a vase with a single sunflower in it sat on the small table.

All too soon, a rapping came upon her door, she could gather a guess, but etiquette demanded she at least ask. "Yes, what is it?" Celestia spoke to the oak doors.

"Mrs Shimmer Tail and Mr Night Wind to see you, your highness," the guard replied.

"Show them in," the princess finished, straightening the piles of papers and laying down her quill hastily. The two unicorns showed themselves inside and bowed to her. The female of the pair had a white coat, although not as bright as hers, with baby blue eyes and a two-tone mane of white and purple. Her flank bore the mark of three purple stars while her husband bore the mark of two crescent moons, the smaller inside the larger. The stallion sported amber eyes, a deep blue coat that reminded her somewhat of her sister, and a deeper blue mane.

The pair looked, quite frankly, confused by her summon and rightly so. As soon as the door shut, the princess closed the curtains, activating a spell that would trap all sound inside the room, the fireplace springing to life. The two looked a little startled by the sudden bursts of magic, but sat in front of the desk, flanking the coffee table. "I'm so glad you could both come on such short notice," Princess Celestia started. "I'm sorry if I startled you, but this is a sensitive matter. It must not leave this room and, in fact, cannot even be discussed between the two of you once you leave. Understood?"

The mare and the colt looked stunned for a second, but quickly nodded their heads in understanding. "So, why did you call us here, Princess?" The colt of the pair asked.

"I will make a long story short," the princess started. "A couple of nights ago, I tried something I shouldn't have. I created life through magical means for an important purpose. However, things didn't go quite as planned. I planned to make a grown mare, but instead I obtained a newborn foal. I know you and Shimmer here are trustworthy, so I'm hoping you'd take this foal in and raise her like your own."

The mare looked wide-eyed when the princess finished her spiel and looked at her husband, considering. Although no words passed between the two, Celestia could tell they debated in silence and she kept it for them. Before long, Shimmer Tail spoke. "We're not sure if we're ready, or able to raise a foal, Princess. I mean, we're flattered you thought of us, but we're not sure if we can do it."

"I have faith in you both. Besides, sooner or later, I expect this foal to discover and become very interested in magic. When she starts to show this potential, try to enroll her at the academy and you won't have to worry about her anymore," the Regent of the Sun replied.

"Well..." the mare spoke. "I suppose we could grow to love her." She cast a nervous glance at her husband who nodded in confirmation.

"Excellent," the princess nodded. Her eyes closed as her horn dazzled for a brief moment. "When you get home, you'll find the filly asleep in a cradle. I turned your spare room into her room, if you don't mind. Please, it's important that you take good care of her."

"We will, your majesty," the colt voiced and nodded. Together, the two backed out of her study, the curtains still drawn.

"Remember, you can't discuss this. Not even between yourselves once you leave this room. Understand?" She smiled as the two unicorns nodded in reply. Celestia's horn glowed once more as the curtains opened and the door unlocked, the new adoptive parents off to say hello to their new daughter. At last, the princess breathed a sigh of relief. She'd be free of worrying about that little mass in the darkest basement of the castle.

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Days and weeks quickly turned into months and years for the ancient

alicorn as she continued down her slow river of life. It only seemed like yesterday that she became re-united with the small unicorn she created, given the name 'Twilight Sparkle' by her adoptive parents. Now that she had her under her watchful gaze, the princess glowed when she realized how good a student she was and how hard she aimed to please her.

Celestia sat in the bathtub, enjoying a good bubble bath, and a trashy novel. Call it a guilty little pleasure, but she had grown fond of those stories, just like how she had grown fond of her gol... of her student. The warm water released the tension in her muscles, allowing her to feel more relaxed than she had in ages. She deserved a little time to herself, especially since the next day would be the eve of the one thousandth Summer Sun Celebration.

Feeling extremely relaxed, the princess closed her eyes and let herself sink further into the tub, muzzle barely above the surface of the bubbly water. Suddenly, a wisp of green smoke nosily entered her bathroom and appeared before her in the form of a letter. The princess managed to catch the scroll before it landed in the water with her magic, emerging from the pleasantly warm water with a sigh.

Twilight was a wonderful student, but sometimes she could simply be too nosey for her own good. Unfurling the letter, the princess wondered what in this world simply couldn't wait.

My dearest teacher, the letter started.

My continuing studies of pony magic have lead me to discover that... something really bad is about to happen. For you see, the mythical Mare in the Moon is, in fact, Nightmare Moon, and she's about to return to Equestria and bring with her eternal night. Something must be done to make sure this terrible prophecy does not come true! I await your quick response.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle.

Celestia attributed the first sentence to Spike's lack of vocabulary, as something more like 'threshold' or 'precipice' suited her student more. Still,

it made her beam at just how easily she managed to connect the dots about the story of the Elements of Harmony and the Mare in the Moon. Never mind how she figured out just how close her release was. Normally, she'd let something like this stew, at least until her bath finished, but this time, she summoned a new scroll, quill and ink and sent her a hasty reply to stop nosing in those dusty old books.

It was about time that Twilight joined the other bearers of the Elements of Harmony in Ponyville. She tried to relax again, but the princess found she couldn't stop her mind from buzzing. Her bath utterly ruined, Celestia jumped out of the draining tub and dried off with a sigh. How could she send her early without rousing suspicion? The cogs turned again as she entered her bedroom, she could always appoint her the overseer for the preparations... yes, that would do nicely.

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If she was one to brag, Celestia would boast to any pony she knew about the simple elegance of her final plan. How foolish she had been when she first created that golem... when she first made Twilight. But she couldn't scold herself too much over that, as the young unicorn reminded the princess of herself when she was a few millennia younger. The princess had it all arranged so that most of the bearers would have a job to do for the celebration, and that she would have to meet them all before the day was out... except, of course for the Element of Laughter, as she would probably find Twilight on her own.

Standing in the midst of the Ponyville Mayor's Office, the princess awaited the big event. Many would think of this as raising the sun for the small congregation, but no pony really knew her real anxiety, save one. The office was a modest little room for a modest little town, dimly lit by the moonlight. The princess of the sun could see the usual filing cabinets, calendars, papers, quills and the like scattered in their various spots of the room, this mayor obviously one for protocol and tidiness.

Looking out the large window behind the desk, the princess watched helplessly as the four stars began to draw closer to the moon with increasing haste, eager to revive their felled mistress. For the first time in centuries, Celestia allowed a frown to cross her regal face, her head lowered in shame as she remembered her failure those many years ago.

However, unseen by the mourning princess, the stars had finally converged, the moon flashing quickly, erasing the Mare in the Moon from existence.

Celestia didn't need to look: she could feel the new presence in the room with her. It seeped whispers of cold midnight, enveloping her. "It's been a long time, hasn't it, Celestia," came a low and harsh voice echoing controlled rage. She didn't look... she couldn't look at the mare her beloved little sister had become, for she wasn't her darling Luna then. "No witty reprise? No sneak attack? I daresay the years have made you weaker then I imagined."

"I do have something to say to you, Nightmare Moon," the princess started with great control, still not turning to her to save face. If she could see the tears dripping off her muzzle, she'd never live it down. "Do not underestimate the purple unicorn."

The next thing she knew, Celestia heard a chorus of insane laughter, and a flash of bright light. What struck her first about her new surroundings was the sudden heat. A curt smile appeared on her lips, as she laughed at the irony; so much like her beloved little sister. She stood on a platform made of magic, standing above a sea of roaring energy and below a curtain of stars. The only thing stopping her from bursting into flames from the sheer heat of the sun was her divinity and immortality.

So she stood for hours and hours, not moving a single inch. Below her, the sun roared in all its mighty glory, though no pony back home could see it due to Nightmare Moon. Although she only stood there for a couple of hours, they felt like eons to the princess. She could never imagine how much worse it had been for Luna; not only the time, but how close home was. From here, the world was but a blue dot, to Luna, it would have been a massive blue sphere, taunting her mercilessly.

At long last, Celestia felt the oppressive magic finally lift, but she stood still, allowing a few minutes for her to recompose herself, wiping new tears off her muzzle. She tuned her ears to where she knew the final battle took place, looking for a good point to make a theatrical entrance. The princess let a light smile replace her frown as she heard the young foals comment each other on the new adornments they had acquired.

"Gee, Twilight," spoke the Element of Honesty. "I thought you were just spoutin' a lot of hooey, but I reckon we really do represent the Elements of Friendship!"

That was her cue, using her magic; she sent her omnipotent voice screaming through space and towards the young fillies. *"Indeed, you do."* Like Nightmare Moon before her, the princess concentrated with all her might, raising the sun to peek over the horizon of Equestria and appeared before the young ponies in a ball of brilliant sunlight that briefly overshadowed the sun itself, literally beaming with pride at the student.

As she emerged from the sphere of magic, she flared her wings, the other ponies bowing to her as Twilight ran over to her and embraced her. Although she couldn't say so, Celestia had never felt such pride before in her life. It took all her strength to stop tears of joy from leaving her eyes yet; she would save those for her sweet sister. Twilight had worked so hard that she decided to answer her question truthfully, telling her how she saw Nightmare Moon's return and how she had to make some friends and allow true friendship into her heart to stop her.

"... now if only another will, as well," Celestia spoke sadly, drifting from her spiel. "Princess Luna." Over on the other side of the room, the familiar blue alicorn opened her eyes with a gasp at the voice of her older sister. Her eyes narrowed in sick anticipation of what her sister would do to her for being such a fool... for letting such darkness take hold over her heart and twist her so.

"It has been a thousand years since I have seen you like this. It's time to put our differences behind us." The princess of the sun got down and laid in front of Luna, to show her how sorry she was without making her crane her head up to see the tears forming in her purple eyes. "We were meant to rule together, little sister." The ponies behind them exclaimed softly at this revelation. It only served to remind them of exactly how much time had passed; that their relationship had been smudged by time's hoof.

"Will you accept my friendship?" Celestia begged, standing to her full height once more, ignoring the others. Right here, right now, only the two alicorns existed, everything else in another universe entirely.

After what felt like another millennium, Luna finally looked her in the eyes,

tears slipping down her midnight cheeks. "I'm so sorry!" The princess of the moon exclaimed, jumping up to meet her, embracing her lovingly. "I missed you so much, big sister!" It was the straw that broke the pony's back; a cascade of tears slipped down Celestia's alabaster face, the happiest she had been in over one thousand years.

"I've missed you too." More sincere words were never spoken before, or since.

At last, they were together. At last, she could finally be happy. At last, they were a family again, and she could look to the future in all its glory.

Or so she thought.

Chapter 2

Twilight

Twisted laughter and scared ponies filled her sight and sound. The laughter wasn't her own, yet it echoed forth from her muzzle. Her wings flapped lazily as she was kept aloft, drinking in the fear of the crowd like a pony who hadn't had any water in a week. Inside, she begged them to run, but her face defiantly twisted into a wicked grin as an unearthly white pony flew up to her. It was happening again.

When I was a little filly and the sun was going down...

Everything changed before her teal eyes, the cowering mass and enraged white mare blurred and spun, turning around before coming to a stop. In front of her rested the body of a large alicorn, slumped on the bed, eyes closed as a final breath passed her yellowed lips. She could not help but let a tide of tears slip as she realised that the pony was gone... that her suffering was over.

The darkness and the shadows, they would always make me frown...

It shifted again, the dead pony stretching out and turning everything a sickening shade of grey. Before her stood massive pillars of grey rock, under a veil of stars. She was so lonely here, a fact made worse by the sickening blue marble dangling in front of her. Oh how it teased her so, reminding her how much of how no pony needed her. In their insolent eyes, she was less then worthless to them.

I'd hide under my pillow, at what I thought I saw, but Granny Pie said that wasn't the way to deal with fears at all...

The blue marble suddenly became impossibly bright, the colour deluding and spreading across her field of vision. A familiar shape rested in the middle of the oppressive glare, wings flared in triumph before it slipped from the sky. She was awed beyond all compare, and overjoyed that, one day she too would be able to pull off such a feat, if only in her own unique way.

She said "Pinkie, you gotta stand up tall; learn to face your fears. You'll see that they can't hurt you, just laugh to make them disappear..."

A final scene danced across her vision. Two young foals, one white with a pink mane and the other, blue with a lighter blue mane frolicked in the grass and flowers of an ancient, yet homely castle, their adoring parents watching over them as they took a break from the routine. The smaller pony tried to jump onto the older foal's back, but missed and face planted into the dirt. Emerging from the bed of flowers, the little pony smiled and laughed at how silly she looked.

So, giggle at the ghostie, guffaw at the grossly, crack up at the creepy, woof it up with the weepy, chortle at the kooky, snortle at the spooky...

The rest of the ethereal music faded into the blackness as she found herself coming to from a long, restful night's sleep. Her Royal Highness, Princess Luna of Equestria, Regent of the Moon yawned as she stretched out her forehooves, the light of her sister's sun dancing across her new chambers. She frowned a little to herself, having obviously been too tired to wake up and lower the moon with her.

It had been nearly a year since her return to Equestria, and still visions of her time as Nightmare Moon haunted her dreams. Thankfully, the pink pony's song would come to her mind at the right moment and spare her from the nightmare. Getting out of bed, Luna walked into the bathroom to begin her new daily ritual. So much had changed in such a brief time that the younger princess found it all almost completely overwhelming.

A new capital, the creation of Parliament, and indoor plumbing topped up her list of the most radical changes to the country during her interment in the moon. Since the days of the creator, the capital for all the nation had been a modest little town and castle named Equira, now only known as 'The Ancient Castle of the Pony Sisters'. Canterlot, however, was much larger and far more grand than their ancient home.

Luna emerged from her room feeling refreshed and ready to tackle a new day. Celestia had insisted that she change her sleeping habits to better integrate herself into modern society. In some ways, the younger princess missed her night, but became relieved when she saw the ponies no longer

lived by the old 'sunrise to sunset' standard. Now, ponies stayed up until all manners of time in the night, and this made her feel a little more appreciated.

"Good morning, your highness," chirped a friendly voice as the princess of the moon made her way down to a late breakfast. It was a small, wine-red unicorn mare with a darker red mane and rosy red eyes, wearing a maid's uniform, like many others in the castle.

"Ah, good morning, Sable," Luna nodded to her bow. Sable was one of the few ponies who actively tried to socialize with her. Sometimes she thought her sister had put her up to it, at first anyway. Over time, the princess had to admit they had grown as close as a servant and royalty could, and in some ways, more. The unicorn was one of her only friends.

"I trust you slept well, princess?" She smiled when Luna nodded in a reply. "Excellent, I'm glad to hear that. Princess Celestia sent me to get you, since she received a new letter from her student. If you feel like reading it with her, of course." A good morning suddenly became great to the midnight princess as she trotted down the halls, changing course to her sister's chambers. Any time to spend with Celestia was golden time to her, even if she found Twilight's letters a little on the boring side.

As they walked, the princess glanced through a doorway, felled columns and worker ponies inside, attempting repairs. Luna chuckled as she continued on her way at the memories of her sister recalling the night to her just last week. Her small smile spread into a full grin, remembering how she told her sister that a boring event like that needed some way to liven it up. Just as the memory finished playing out, the princess of the moon found herself at her sister's chamber door.

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It was a glorious and sunny spring afternoon in Ponyville. Birds chirped happily in the trees, and critters ran across the ground, searching for shelter from the lingering cold nights. Unfortunately for the resident tailor, this also meant a tide of vermin swarming into her boutique, threatening her schedules as well as her dresses... and her sanity to boot. Rarity was at the end of her rope as she walked the cobbled streets of town towards the library. She needed help and who better than the town's librarian?

Twilight had to have some sort of book on getting rid of the vermin who recently decided to take up residence in her business. She didn't care so much as to the how, so much as the results. Of course, she couldn't tell Fluttershy if the only course would be to... exterminate them. Walking into the library, the white unicorn saw what could only be defined as simply ghastly!

Books were strewn about the floor, not exactly unusual considering the librarian, but what did shock her was the thick coat of dust on some of the piles. Obviously, the purple unicorn never heard the words 'spring cleaning' in her life. In fact, Rarity wouldn't have been surprised if she found out Twilight had a vermin problem as well, under all that mess.

"Twilight!" the unicorn exclaimed. "You simply must do some cleaning around here! This is a library, not a book depository!" A trapdoor down to the basement opened suddenly in front of her, the back end of the purple unicorn emerging from the blackness, coated in an equally thick layer of dust.

"Sorry, Rarity," the mare replied, another stack of books floating lazily behind her. "I woke up this morning and noted the change of pitch when my hoof hit this spot. I was reading a book about musical tones, you see, so I didn't notice it before. Anyway, I found this trapdoor and the hundreds of books under it! Some of these are ancient, see?" Twilight trotted over to a dusty pile and withdrew a black and tattered tome after placing the new pile safely on the floor.

"This is the diary of Ponyville's first mayor! It tells so much about the early history of the town before it was incorporated and how the settler ponies came from across the forest! I've only had time to skim it so far, but I'm sure it will be utterly fastening! Oh, and, before I forg-

"Twilight, I'm here on business!" Rarity spoke with some annoyance. Sometimes her fellow unicorn could blather on for ages and ages without seemingly taking a pause to breathe when something excited her. So, she asked her friends to simply nudge her when she began to talk too much. "I'm having a vermin problem at my shop and need a spell to get rid of the pests. I already have Rainbow and Pinkie helping me clean up."

"Oh!" Twilight replied happily. "I know plenty of spells to remove household pests. Thankfully, most of them do it without injuring them! I'd be happy to come over and help. I'm in a cleaning mood today." She smiled at her friend, elated by a hard night's study followed by a peaceful night's rest and good breakfast. As much as Rarity protested, saying she only needed the spell, the purple unicorn insisted on helping her, partially as payback for her beautiful Gala dress.

The two unicorns walked back in silence... well, as silent as you could get when Twilight Sparkle was on a roll with something, at any rate. Rarity did her best to try and stop it, but in the end, she figured it would be better to grin and bear it, allowing her newest obsession to fade away on its own. Soon enough the two unicorns met with their friends at the boutique, the cleaning effort already well underway as they cleared out piles of old boxes and tossed away unusable tools.

"Ha!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed when her friend Rarity returned. "I bet you five bits I can get this entire shop cleared out i-"

"Ten seconds flat," Twilight finished. "We know, Rainbow." The sky blue Pegasus landed on the ground in a huff, pouting at being denied using her favourite phrase. Rarity shot her a dark glance as well.

"Honestly, Rainbow, these aren't clouds. It's delicate equipment," the white unicorn started. "I don't want you to whip them out quite that fast, darling. You could break something important." Rainbow scowled again as she was led inside, following a bouncing Pinkie Pie who decided to make a game of it.

The rules were simple, different items of importance were worth different points. Finding a needle was only one point, while finding a critter and taking it outside was worth one thousand points. The pony with the most points at the end would have a small party thrown in their honour. Naturally, none of the other ponies really wanted to play, but they decided to at least feign interest.

To put it simply, the boutique had two faces to it. On one side of the bit, you had the clean and proper store front that was kept in impeccable condition year-round. On the other side of the bit, however, the backrooms and storage were an utter nightmare, even to a pony like Twilight who was at

least open about her messes. "... And you called the library dirty." The purple unicorn spoke sarcastically as she cast an acidic glance at the white mare.

"Well, it's no wonder you've got pests," Rainbow added, rolling her eyes.

"Yes, quite," Rarity observed, trying to move on from the subject. "Come on, between the four of us, we should be finished by supper time. Let's get going everypony!"

True to her word, with the help of the others, the work to clear out the back rooms of Carousel Boutique took relatively little time for the quartet. During the titanic effort, they managed to find some of the vermin and shoo them outside into their natural habitat. It wasn't until late into the afternoon that they opened the door to the final closet in the store.

Like the others, it was dark and caked in a thin veil of dust, untouched behind a stack of boxes for years. Together, the friends slowly cleared out all the used needles and rotten thread, showing old issues of the Canterlot Courier and the Ponyville Express. Looking over the issues, Twilight noted how old even the latest issue was, some ten years older than her. Using her magic, she levitated the papers out of the closet.

"Rarity," Twilight spoke. "Do you mind if I keep these old newspapers? There might be some historical tidbit in them somewhere." The fussy unicorn rolled her eyes and nodded her head, knowing she would simply take the tattered old papers anyway. After Rarity fixed them all dinner, upon her insistence, Twilight took her new-found papers home with her, levitating them lazily behind her.

She would get to them first thing in the morning, as her muscles screamed at her for all the work she did that day to assist her friend. It was both mentally and physically taxing on the unicorn, but nothing worse than anything she experienced before. After a quick bath to shed off the layers of dirt, Twilight Sparkle returned to her quarters and settled into her bed, reaching to her side to continue reading the Mayor's Journal. It wouldn't be until the moon hung high in the night sky that she decided to go to sleep, bidding her pet owl, her junior assistant, a good night as she turned out the lamp on her bedside.

The next morning found the purple unicorn finishing off the journal over a bowl of cereal, discovering facts about the town she had never dreamed before, such as her library being the first building and the original town hall. Closing the book with a content sigh, Twilight decided to read through the newspapers she collected yesterday. Placing her old tome on top of a pile, the unicorn brought over the stack of news reports and began to skim through them one by one.

At first, the curious student figured the papers were arranged by date, but as she dug into the pile, she found they were in as chaotic a state as the closet she found them in. In the pages of one paper, she would find the pages of another, and sometimes even the front page of one. She let out an aggravated sigh, when it dawned upon her how much work it would take to straighten them out.

Frustrated, the purple pony sent some of the papers flying. At least, this way they would be more organized than they used to be! Now, call it fate, or call it chance, but a particular paper decided to float down right in front of her. It was the front page of a Canterlot Courier from about eight years before she was born. On the front was a picture of the princess, nothing unusual. However, just as she was about to brush it aside, Twilight noticed something in the background.

Her eyes widened and her heart raced in disbelief at what the paper told her. It had to be a misprint, it just had to be! Utterly dumbfounded by this turn of event, the filly found she spoke aloud instead of thinking. "What... are my parents doing... beside the Princess!?" Flanking Princess Celestia, on either side, stood two unicorns in black suits, a mare and a stallion. Although the photo was in black and white, Twilight could almost see their colours on the page.

Twilight's parents had never told her they worked for the princess before, never mind as bodyguards! In fact, they had always told her that they worked in a magic shop! What else had they lied to her about!? She had to know, for sure.

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One thing was for certain; if Twilight Sparkle wanted to find something, you could bet your house that she would. Over the last couple of days, the

unicorn had sunk her teeth into every facet of her life that she could find, eager to find more holes in her life story, just waiting to be found. Recently, she sent a request to the register's office in Canterlot, to inquire about some of the details on her records.

Spike, naturally, watched over the unicorn with some concern as she threatened to pace herself literally though the floor of the library. "Twilight," he spoke, rolling his eyes. "It'll get here when it gets here. Didn't you learn your lesson from the whole 'family tree' thing?" He tapped his claws impatiently on the wooden shelf beside the seat.

"This is important, Spike!" The unicorn retorted with indignation, the stress beginning to become visible.

The baby dragon sighed, knowing a stressed Twilight could be a real pain in the scales. "Whatever," he stood, heading to the door. "When you flip your lid and start thinking the walls are talking to you, I'll be at the Shake's." Years of being her 'assistant' had steeled the young dragon from Twilight's brand of insanity. For the unicorn, she would start hearing things and formulate elaborate and impossible plans in order to relieve the source of the stress.

He'd long since learned to not pay it any mind and just go with the flow. Sure, hearing voices concerned him a little bit, but so far they'd never tried to give her advice. Still, he urged her to talk to him about it if they came back. The most recent case being during the whole Parasprite Incident when she insisted every pony create an exact replica of the town in under a minute.

Twilight resumed her incessant pacing until the door knocked to a familiar tune. Elated, she jumped to the door and hastily took the mail from Derpy, leaving the blonde pegasus stupefied and wall-eyed at the door. She simply didn't have time for her friend today, as much as that might have hurt her. The information continued in this yellow envelope was just too important to the unicorn to be ignored.

Using her magic, she hastily opened the large parcel and produced a number of papers. Wasting no time, Twilight dug into the contents, ignoring a small note for the Head Register. The Register's Office in Canterlot was charged with processing all certificates in the land of Equestria. Be it death,

birth, marriage, divorce, or any papers involving the courts, the Register's Office processed and stored them all for a maximum of one hundred and fifty years.

After seeing all the copies of her various papers, Twilight simply could not find any more holes to prod in. Her ears drooped in disappointment, frustrated that she made a big deal over, literally, nothing. Her parents probably didn't tell her so that she didn't think that the princess owed her anything. The unicorn sighed as she tucked the papers away, only spying the small note then.

"What's this about?" Twilight spoke in surprise. Hungry for information, she tore through the note in no time at all. It was about an oddity on her birth certificate. The listed doctor present, quite simply, never existed. Yet somehow it got pushed through regardless and put into storage. Any attempt at an investigation was quelled by the previous Head Register. The unicorn's eyes narrowed upon the name, speaking aloud, "Dr Whooves!?"

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If there was ever an unassuming pony in town, it would have to be the brown stallion with the hourglass mark on his flank. His very appearance screamed 'uninteresting' and his mark was one of the most common in pony history. The fact of the matter was that he didn't want to generate any interest. With interest came too many questions, specifically what he was a doctor of. Only Celestia herself knew, and she wanted it kept between the two of them.

Going about his usual day, the good doctor picked up his groceries and was on his way home, saddle bag filled with produce when a familiar, purple unicorn stopped him in his way. "Oh, uh... good morning, miss...?" He'd never talked to the filly before, but the colt knew her as the princess's prized student.

"Twilight Sparkle," the filly replied. "I need to talk to you, Dr Hooves... or should I call you... 'Head Register' Hooves?" His eyes narrowed in shock. He had no idea how she knew, but he had a suspicion as to the why. It was a day the princess told him to plan for, should it ever occur. He just wished it didn't happen so soon, or that he was in such a position to not refuse.

"Follow me," the doctor voiced, leading her back home. He began to sweat visibly, trying to recall the story that the princess told him to repeat to her in this event. The weight of his bags began to dig into his back, granted he didn't know the entire story, but he knew enough to possibly be on the receiving end of a magical temper tantrum. The idea made him shiver, especially as he recalled the Ursa Incident with stunning clarity.

Eventually the duo arrived at his unassuming house, the mare wasting no time. "Spill it," she spoke indignantly. "Why are you obscuring the existence of this doctor!?" Using her telekinetic magic, she shoved the copy of the certificate in front of his face, irritated.

The doctor sighed, unable to remember the story the princess told him. He needed to answer her, and to answer her now, before she became violent. "This goes much deeper than you think. I'm not sure how exactly, but here's how it was explained to me," the good doctor started. "As far as you or the courts are to know, you were born to your parents. However..." he took a deep breath before continuing. "All the princess told me is that your parents... adopted you. I tried to get her to go into more detail, but all she told me was that it was my duty to prevent any investigations into it. I'm sorry for my part in this deception."

Adopted? Did she just hear him right? She was adopted and the princess knew about it!? The unicorn desperately asked him... no, demanded he tell her where she came from, but the colt either had formidable acting skill, or he simply didn't know. Either way, the mare stormed out of the room, leaving the colt shaking in a corner whilst she muttered darkly under her breath.

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"I know this is upsetting you, Twi," Spike spoke as the unicorn fumed with a book levitating in front of her. "But does it really matter? From what you've told me, it sounds like your parents both loved you very much."

"Normally, I'd agree with you, Spike," Twilight started, not looking over the lip of the book. "But I wrote Princess Celestia a week ago and I haven't heard a thing since!" It was true that the princess never took this long to write back, but Spikes urges fell on deaf ears. He kept insisting that the only reason for the lack of reply could only be that she was simply too busy

at the moment.

Spike knew better then to bring the idea up again, but a tickle in his throat and a narrowing of his eyes told him he didn't have to worry anymore. A belch of green smoke filled that air in front of the dragon, a scroll bearing the royal seal appearing in front of him. Twilight looked up at him, giddy with excitement. He sure hoped it was good news.

"Dear Twilight Sparkle," Spike started.

"If you haven't guessed by the hoofwriting, this is not Princess Celestia writing to you, but Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna?" Twilight repeated, somewhat dumbfounded. Why hadn't Celestia written to her? Not that the lunar princess wasn't good enough for her, but still. Spike nodded his head and continued to recite the letter.

"I just wanted to let you know that we both received your last letter, and we're both rather concerned at the tone of it. I tried to ask my sister what exactly is going on, but she either doesn't have the time, or the will to tell me. You see, we are in Northern Equestria right now, presiding over a border dispute with our neighbour. Frankly, Celestia has been too busy and she said she wanted to write to you herself. I know for a fact that she has, at least, started the letter.

"While it is a startling revelation, Twilight, I urge you not to take it to heart. I'm sure your parents, adopted or not, love you as though you were their own, or else they would not have taken you in. However, I can confirm for you that they did indeed serve my sister as personal bodyguards during an assassination scare.

"On an unrelated note, I never really got the chance to express my gratitude to you, or your friends for freeing me from my inner darkness. If any of you ever need a favour, I will do all in my power to aid you.

"Sincerely,

"HRH, Princess Luna of Equestria."

Although it answered a question; about what her parents were doing in the

picture with the princess, it still left many open to her. Princess Celestia had never been too busy to write to her before, even if she was swamped with work, she would never take longer than a couple of days to reply, never mind an entire week. Twilight appreciated the letter from Princess Luna, but it wasn't enough for her.

"I'm going out for a walk, Spike." The purple unicorn muttered as she stood up. Her hooves carried her to the door of the library, her mind overwhelmed, shutting the door behind her in an angry slam, quite inadvertently. What had she done to be distrusted so much? Surely, she could have penned out a letter while taking notes on the dispute, or before going to bed. Why hadn't the princess written herself?

Before she even knew it, Twilight found herself at the edge of town, her friend Fluttershy's cottage right in front of her. The unicorn never planned to see any of her friends today, but she decided she needed some pony to talk to. She quietly approached the door and knocked lightly, knowing how timid the yellow Pegasus was. "Come in," came a light voice from inside.

"Oh, howdy, Twi," came the voice of her good friend Applejack. The two ponies looked at her, briefly with joy, but it quickly turned into worry. "You okay, sugarcube? Seems ta me, like you've got somethin' on yer mind."

"Oh!" The purple mare spoke in surprise, not expecting Fluttershy to already have company. "I can come back another time if you've already got visitors."

"No, no, come on in, Twilight," the yellow pony replied softly. "You're no bother to any of us. In fact, we were just talking about you. We're all concerned about you." She'd already told her friends what Dr Whooves told her, and they all supported her and gave her advice much like Spike did. Still, it simply wasn't enough for her. The unicorn needed to know why Celestia knew and never told her.

Twilight dived into the details of her day, upon her friends' insistence. When she would slip into a rant on how she felt the princess didn't trust her, the two of them would gently bring her down and back to her senses. After a cup of tea, and getting those feelings off her back, the unicorn already felt much better about the circumstances. Until, however, after hearing a funny joke from the farmer she paused in mid-laugh and suddenly went wide-

eyed, a look of shock on her face.

"W...where am I?" Twilight spoke with some fear in her voice. "Last thing I remember... Spike was reading a letter to me from Princess Luna."

Fluttershy and Applejack looked at each other with concern etched upon their faces. "Well, lucky ya told us all about it, Twi.' The orange pony started.

"Yeah," the pink maned pony continued. "You told us how Spike read you the letter from the princess, and then you wondered off for a walk and came here. You then told us about how you felt that the princess doesn't trust you and we comforted you about it."

"Oh, right," the unicorn responded. "Well, look at the time. I'd better get going home." Seeing the look on her earth pony friend's face, she added in, "No, don't worry. I'll be just fine, Applejack." Without another word to either pony, Twilight turned tail and left, slowly walking back to the library, the sun just beginning to set beyond the horizon. How could she suddenly forget almost four hours like that?

This wasn't a new occurrence to her, as she had lost some time before. It happened especially when studying for important tests, or when she found a very interesting book... but never had she lost more then a couple of minutes before. It disturbed her a little bit, but she felt like there was no pony she could talk to about it, not if the princess didn't trust her. Not if she didn't have the time to even write to her.

Sure, she knew she sounded selfish, but she never asked much of her teacher. In fact, this was probably the biggest thing she ever asked of her. Before she even knew it, the purple unicorn had arrived back home to find the library dark. Opening the door quietly, the young mare slowly worked her way upstairs and into her bedroom. Inside, nestled in his bed on the opposite side of the room, lay Spike, fast asleep already. Twilight rolled her eyes and sighed, following suit. The whole day had left her emotionally drained.

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Over the next few days, Twilight became progressively worse in terms of

mood. Spike warned her friends about how she would get this way. Symptoms of 'Test Stress', as Spike called it, often included short-term memory loss and irritability. However, the events of the previous day had pushed her over the edge, prompting great worry from her five friends when she went ballistic at them over petty little things.

Twilight Sparkle started the day as usual, dragging herself out of bed a little before ten in the morning and into the bathroom to take care of her usual chores. Afterwards, she dragged herself down to breakfast, the cheerful morning light a stark contrast to her mood. Spike had woken up uncharacteristically early for some unknown reason. Nothing short of Rarity could get him up at this time of day, which had the surly unicorn pondering his chipper mood.

"Morning, Twilight," he spoke as he passed her some wheat pancakes and syrup. "I was wondering if you'd come with me to Sugarcube Corner this afternoon. Pinkie said she had something she wanted to show everyone! She sounded pretty excited too, which really has me wondering."

"Uh-huh," the purple unicorn replied, absent minded. It was still too early for her to process just exactly what he said, but she heard 'afternoon' and 'Sugarcube Corner'. It could only be some sort of party with some weird new game she wanted to show them all. She decided to humour her pink friend, at the very least, as she needed a distraction from the anxiety of awaiting the princess' letter.

In the meantime, the student took to doing what she did best: study and research. Today, she would browse through some of the books she brought out of the cellar a few days ago. There had to be a book in there with interesting, unknown spells in it somewhere. Perhaps the next time they met, she could show them off to the princess? She always loved to hear and see her progress on pony magic and the magic of friendship.

Spike decided to stick around, just to make sure she had everything she needed, but that was only part of the reason. As much as he hated being around Twilight when she was like this, her friends asked him to keep her in sight at all times so that she didn't miss the appointment that afternoon. They wouldn't tell him what it was; just the time and place she needed to be.

"Come on, Twi! I wanna see what it is!" Spike whined a few hours later as the duo slowly walked to the shop, the baby dragon riding on the unicorn's back. The mare rolled her eyes, unsurprised at the little dragon's enthusiasm, but not really in the mood to humour him today. She groaned to herself as she approached the bakery, having wanted to stay in her library all day, but her assistant wouldn't have any of it.

"Surprise!" Came a cry from all of her friends the very instant she walked inside. Twilight was a little taken aback by the streamers and balloons. It quickly became apparent to her just what exactly they planned to do.

"Let me guess," the purple mare spoke sarcastically. "You're all throwing me a surprise party to help cheer me up." She had to admit that Pinkie Pie really went all-out this time. The entire shop was caked in a thin layer of confetti, streamers dripping from the ceiling like broken spider webs. On a long table sat a bowl of purple punch, a three-layer cake and an assortment of party snacks. Looking on one of the walls, she could even see a game of 'pin the tail on the pony.'

"Yep!" Pinkie chirped as she bounced out from behind the cake, many more ponies emerging from the woodwork. "We've all been so worried about you, especially after what happened yesterday when you yelled at every pony, and I know you're not exactly a party pony, but how could you not enjoy yourself here with your friends and a whole bunch of other ponies who only care for your well-being? I mean, come on, every pony in town has been talking and I figured if you were surrounded by friends, you'd feel better!"

In one corner of the room stood a familiar grey Pegasus who nodded her head when pinkie finished her spiel. "Crabs chirp at dawn, Twilight!" Derpy spoke, somewhat surprised she managed to say her friends name on command. She smiled at her in a broad grin, telling the purple mare that even a pony as brainy as the mailmare could enjoy a good party every now and then.

"Fine," Twilight replied, defeated in logic by the pink party pony and her other friends.

Overall, once she got over the initial awkwardness, the purple unicorn really began to enjoy herself at the party. She drank some punch, ate some

cake, and even watched a weird game called 'spin the bottle' where a pony would spin a bottle lying on the ground. Then, the pony would have to kiss whatever pony it pointed to who sat in the circle. Twilight couldn't help but laugh when Pinkie spun it and it landed on Rarity, whom she swept off her hooves and planted a quick one on the mare.

Celestia's day quickly turned into Luna's night, and before long, ponies began to leave the festivities for a night of rest. Derpy was one of the first to go, since she had to wake up at dawn to collect mail, which caused Twilight to tense up a little more without her intellectual superior. Before long though, she found Spike passed out on the table, just inches from the large cake. She smiled to herself, feeling a lot better as the din of the party died down.

"I'm going to have to go now, Pinkie," Twilight smiled to her friend. "Poor Spike's fast asleep, and it's not fair to keep him from his bed."

"Aww," Pinkie whined. "Well... as long as you had fun, I guess that's okay!"

"I did, Pinkie.... Thank you," the purple mare spoke sincerely. "I feel a lot better already!" With a smile, she picked up the unconscious dragon and put him on her back before leaving the shop. The stars in the sky twinkled beautifully as a streak whipped across the sky. Ever since the Nightmare Moon Incident, Twilight always tried to show appreciation for the night sky whenever she could. Princess Luna deserved every bit of respect that her sister got.

Before long, the two returned to the library, the pony shutting the door behind her before carrying her friend up the stairs and into their bedroom. Tucking the sleeping dragon into his bed, the unicorn let a smile slip across her face as he slept peacefully. However, that image was quickly shattered as he belched loudly, a wisp of green smoke coming from his mouth, forming into a letter. "The Princess?!" Twilight asked softly as she levitated the letter over to her desk to read it by candle light.

"*My Faithful Student,*" the letter opened.

"I beg you to please forgive the lateness of my reply. I trust my dear sister Luna told you I've simply been too busy to respond until now, but I wish that wasn't the case. I know how much you worry when things don't happen

like they should, it is a trait I am humble enough to say that we share. That said; the tone of your missive surprised me and my sister greatly. I understand you must feel betrayed; that I don't trust you enough with the truth. This is not the case.

"Yes, it is true that your parents adopted you and that they served me some years ago as my personal bodyguards. However, when it comes to your story, here is all I know. One night, some pony abandoned you at the gates of the castle. Alas, Canterlot Castle simply doesn't have the resources to deal with a newborn foal, so I was forced to give you away. Naturally, I chose your parents because I knew that they would take you in and raise you like their own.

"As for falsifying your birth certificate, I am afraid the whole thing was my idea. I didn't want you to face such a truth at such an early age. I planned on telling you one day, especially when you came under my tutelage, but I am afraid I became complacent with the lie. I should have told you a long time ago, instead of letting you find out like this. Please, Twilight, forgive this old mare for not being honest with you.

"Yours truthfully,

"Princess Celestia."

Twilight smiled at the letter her dear teacher had written. She didn't think the princess would be so open with her, or admit how wrong she was and how sorry it made her to lie like that. The unicorn suddenly felt as if the weight of the world had suddenly lifted off her haunches. Taking a deep breath, the student sighed and climbed into her bed, quickly dozing off to sleep. Once more, all was right with the world... for now.

Chapter 3

Moonrise

Life quickly returned to normal in the small town of Ponyville... well, as normal as things could get. Over the course of the past four weeks, the town had experienced a fire and another baking mishap that somehow made the Baked Bads Incident seem like a mild case of the flu in comparison. In fact, the town still held the lingering smell from the... unpleasantness. It made the orange pony breathe a sigh of relief that she didn't live in the town proper, or that her stubborn pride hadn't caused the worst case of food poisoning in town history anymore.

Applejack trotted down the cobbled streets of town alone that day, still a little early to be selling apples to the townsfolk. It wouldn't be long until the first batch of ripe apples would be ready for delivery though. With that thought in mind, the orange earth pony picked up her pace, imagining all her precious apple trees dead. The sombre idea motivated the farmer to press forward and swallow her stubborn pride once more.

Nearing the library, she still wondered if going to her was the best option. Sure, ever since receiving that letter, Twilight had been her normal self again, but sometimes Applejack had flashbacks to her last little episode. She shuddered at the memory of the agitated unicorn, but steeled herself against it. The farmer needed the pony power, as well as knowledge about what, exactly, she was dealing with.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door to the library, stepping inside the old building. If she didn't know any better, she would have sworn no pony was around. There were no books piled upon the floor, no papers lying around like a tornado had blown through the place. The unicorn librarian had obviously gotten around to her own spring cleaning, and the difference was startling. "Twilight?" Applejack called into the hollowed-out tree.

"I'm in my room!" sounded a voice from upstairs. "I'll be right down!"

In the meantime, the farmer pony looked around at the wares, thinking

she could find what she needed on her own. Several older books lined the shelves, obviously a part of the heap the librarian pulled out of the small crawlspace under her very hooves. Some of the books, quite frankly, scared the superstitious farmer, as some of them claimed to tell the future, or how to do things that were simply not natural, although they were the minority.

Before she knew it, the purple unicorn descended the stairs with a smile for her friend. "Hey, Applejack," she chirped happily, "What can I do for you today?"

"Oh, uh..." the farmer started, "Well, I woke up today, to inspect the crops, you see? An' as I was goin' about, I noticed this weird fungus on one of the trees, an' I was just wonderin' if you could tell me what it is, is all." Reaching into her saddlebag, the farmer produced a sample of tree bark, a purple splotch embedded into the wood.

"I know just the book," the scholar nodded as her copy of *Super Naturals* flew down before her. Ever since the whole fiasco with Zecora and the Poison Joke, the unicorn had opened herself up to looking in unconventional places for knowledge. Eventually, she found the entry, staring her in the face, a sudden grim look in her eyes.

"Well, good news, bad news, AJ," Twilight started. "It's a fungus called Bilious Bulges, and it has a cure... but that's where the good news ends."

"Then what, might I ask, is the bad news?" the farmer asked with great concern.

"Well, according to the book, it's fatal for the tree and highly contagious. It can wipe out a sizable chunk of forest in a matter of weeks. The only way to cure it is to chop down the infected tree before the bulbs burst and spread the pathogen. In the meantime, it cannot come into contact with another tree, or it will spread that way."

Applejack's eyes widened in terror; it was her worst-case scenario... but if it meant a tree or her livelihood, the poor thing would have to come down. She looked at the floor soberly, fighting back some tears at the idea of chopping down one of her beloved tress. "Will you..." she said quietly, "Will you help me... cure it? I don't think I could do it on my own."

"Of course, Applejack," her friend comforted.

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Although the purple pony wanted to wait to do the deed until next morning, her orange friend insisted that they get it over and done with as soon as possible. After having a small lunch, the two walked out to the farm and collected a cart and a couple of axes before walking down the winding path to the tree. Applejack remained quiet through the whole ordeal: as though she were told she had to shoot her dog dead because it was rabid and dangerous.

Twilight kept the silence for her, knowing her friend could not be consoled right then. Instead, she distracted herself from her friend's melancholy by looking at the apple trees, some of them bearing big and slightly red fruit, ready for picking within the week. The birds chirped happily in the trees above as summer was but a few weeks away. The distinct smell of rain still hung in the air from the shower that took place just last night, every smell coming in clearer than ever through the moist air.

Eventually, the winding path went down a steep hill and through a small intersection in the grove of apple trees, a babbling brook echoing through the dense canopy. Twilight knew she and Applejack were now on the edge of Sweet Apple Acres, the side furthest from town and closest to the forest beyond. She tensed up a little bit as a result, since the Everfree Forest was not something to be messed with. Her last venture into the cursed wood had left her petrified by a Cockatrice. If it weren't for Fluttershy and her Stare, she would have been stuck like that for months while they waited on the cure.

Before she could elaborate on such thoughts, they came to the tree in question, a chunk of bark missing off of it. It was a sickly old thing, all the leaves brown and decaying with the trunk covered in the splotches of sick purple disease. The tree's roots went right over the edge of the small fifty foot high cliff and down to the ravine, the ground sloping at a shallow angle into the gap. "This is it," Applejack spoke, breaking the silence. "It was one o' the first trees I ever planted."

"It looks so sad, Applejack," Twilight tried to comfort. "Think of it as putting

the poor thing out of its misery."

The farmer nodded sadly. "Let's get this over with." True to her word, the Element of Honesty walked back to the cart she hauled from the barn, pulling out the pair of axes with her teeth. A purple glow surrounded one of them as it flew out of her mouth and over to the unicorn. "You just follow my lead, Twi."

With the unicorn's magic, and the earth pony's knowledge of trees, the diseased plant was quickly felled by the two axes. They angled the cut so the tree fell towards the path, for the wood had to be burned in a stove to prevent the infection from spreading to the neighbouring trees, so they couldn't just dump it into the ravine. Together, they chopped the tree into smaller parts and loaded them into the cart.

"Aw, hayseed!" Applejack exclaimed as she saw the full cart and the pile of logs still on the ground. "Looks like we'll have ta make a second trip." A look of worry came over her face, looking at her friend before continuing. "My little sister an' her friends are over yonder in their base. I'd hate for them to find the logs and try an' burn 'em or sumthin' with the disease an' all. Do you mind staying behind an' watchin' them while I mosey on back to the barn?"

Twilight smiled and nodded at her good friend. "Sure, I'll keep watch."

Sitting on the side of the dirt road, the scholar watched the workhorse pull the cart full of wood up the steep slope. She could have pulled a cart as well, but Applejack refused to let her, since she worried that the weight would be too much, and she'd end up dead in the ravine. Using her magic, the unicorn neatly stacked the wood beside the path and away from the other trees. Turning around, she looked at the sad little stump in the forest floor, a grim reminder of the plant that once stood there.

Out of the corner of her eye, the unicorn though she saw a purple splotch that they had missed and levitated one of the axes over with her, just in case. Standing close to the edge of the ravine, Twilight inspected the stump intently for any signs of infection from the disease. Thankfully, there was none to be had; it must have been a figment of her overactive imagination.

Sadly, the sinking sensation she felt wasn't a part of the deal. Looking under hoof, she saw the soil begin to slip away from beneath her, over-saturated from last night's rain. Shock set in, not allowing the unicorn the obvious action of jumping away. Her heart raced as she felt gravity kick in, cruelly pulling her and the dirt down into the ravine. The only thing she could do was yelp in vain as she slipped on the wet earth.

"Applejack!" she screamed, losing all concentration on her magic.

Her body screamed down the rocky side of the ravine, smacking into every possible rock on the way down. Twilight couldn't think: the rush of adrenaline overpowered her judgement. She could only cry out as she bounced from side to side, her face occasionally puckering up to the side of the cliff. Finally, an eternity later, she landed on the soft bed of the stream, on her side and in a great deal of pain.

The unicorn moaned slightly, trying to push herself up, only to find two of her legs broken in the fall. Realizing how much trouble she was in, she called forward for aid, hoping her friend would return soon to help her out. However, before she could even get one word out, a glint of steel flashed before her eyes and a new wave of pain swept over her. Twilight screamed louder than she ever had before at the sight before her eyes.

No longer held by her magic, the axe she had carried with her fell on its own accord, landing blade first onto one of her broken limbs. She pulled the wrecked leg away to see the damage done to her by the fallen steel. The lower half of her leg dangled sickly in front of her face, eyes wide in horror and pain. Not more than two tendons kept it attached to the rest of her body, bone clearly visible through the blood leaking onto the muddy riverbed.

The last thing she could remember, her face rushed up towards the soft earth in a sick mixture of the sight of her injury, and the intense pain that came with it.

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Pleasant warmth swept over the battered unicorn as she regained consciousness. A soft moan escaped her lips, wondering how she could still be alive after experiencing such pain. Suddenly, a loud voice boomed

out from somewhere nearby, her eyes fluttering open. "Sis, come quick! She's wakin' up!" Loud hoofsteps on wood met the unicorn's ears as her eyes finally opened; everything was a mess of colour.

"Twilight!" sounded the familiar voice of her friend, Applejack.

Another soft moan escaped from the unicorn, more from the pain than the volume of her voice. "Where am I?" she asked. "Did you take me to the hospital?"

"No, Twi. You're in my house. We didn't want to move you far, if you had a broken back or somethin'. Thankfully, you don't, though."

"What do you mean?" Twilight voiced indignantly. "What about my leg! It was nearly chopped clean off!" Applejack and the smaller pony she identified as her little sister Applebloom looked at each other for a brief moment before the younger replied.

"Yer leg's just fine, Twilight. You're lucky ya didn't break anythin'. That axe missed you by a mile!"

Pushing down the warm blankets, the unicorn could see all sorts of bandages on her body, but looking at the leg in question; it was as if nothing had ever happened. "But I..." she stammered before shaking her head. She hadn't imagined it, she knew as much, but she didn't want to worry her friends about how this could have possibly happened. Frankly speaking, the whole thing spooked her.

"... But you what, Twi?" Applejack asked.

"No, it's nothing," the purple pony replied, shaking her head, "Can I get something to eat? How long have I been out?"

"'Course you can, sugar cube," the farmer chirped. "You've been out for about a day now. We were gettin' mighty worried 'bout you. We thought you mighta hit your head sumthin' fierce." After helping her out of bed, the orange earth pony walked her battered friend downstairs to get her some apple pie that had been cooling on the window.

"Did you tell the others yet?" Twilight asked as she blew on her slice of

pie.

"I hadn't run into any o' them yet, but if you didn't wake up in another hour or so, I reckon I would have. I'm just happy you weren't hurt so bad! You mighta been killed if you didn't have such luck on your side!"

After some pressing, Twilight learned the details about her time unconscious. Apparently, Applebloom and her other friends heard her screams and came to investigate. After seeing her at the bottom of the ravine, they rushed off to find Applejack who fetched some rope from the barn. With great haste, they returned to where they found her and lowered a rope. Applejack then jumped down, tied her friend in a makeshift harness and pulled her up once she climbed back to the road.

Eventually, the sun began its long descent below the horizon of Equestria. Although her friend urged her to stay, Twilight used her dragon assistant's youth as an excuse to leave. The air of the twilight hour surrounded her, the coming chill of the night air washing over her, numbing the pain that still screamed in her body. After another night's rest, she should be back to one hundred percent... or close enough. The image of her dangling limb teased her waking mind, like a carrot in front of her muzzle, begging to be nibbled.

"Hey, Twilight, welcome ho... w-what happened to you!?" Spike asked as his boss came through the door, bandaged from head to hoof. He rushed over to make sure she was okay, worried about her.

"I had a little slip," the purple unicorn answered. "I fell down a hill and scuffed myself up a little. Applejack thought I hit my head, so she insisted I stay the night and well into today. I'm sorry if I worried you, Spike."

"I wasn't worried," the baby dragon lied, earning him a look from his dear friend. "Well... maybe a little."

Once the initial awkwardness passed, the mare had to show great restraint to not dive into her books immediately and try to explain the mystery right then and there. Upon the dragon's insistence, she made them a sizable dinner and calmed herself down a little with one of her favourite books, on loan from Derpy as the library didn't have it yet. After losing herself in a tale of deep-earth exploration for some hours, the unicorn placed the book beside her and fell into a peaceful sleep.

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True to her word, the unicorn began digging through every book she could find in the library to try and explain just what happened to her that day on Applejack's farm. She didn't recall using any magic to try and reattach the limb, never mind mending all the broken bones she felt in her after the descent. It just wasn't natural to do uncommanded magic like that... if she even did it at all.

From sunrise to sunset, Twilight kept her vigil going as she scanned every text in her possession, skipping the works of fiction entirely. She only paused to eat and sleep a few hours every night, avoiding her friends by telling them she still felt sore from her little mishap the other day. The mare didn't like brushing her friends off like that again, considering the events a few weeks ago, but her mind kept buzzing at the memory: how was this possible!?

The cycle carried on for over four days: every morning, afternoon, and evening, a friend would come over to check on her and make sure the unicorn didn't dive off the deep end again. She appreciated the support, but the seemingly constant interruptions taxed her patience. Hundreds of books lay scattered around the library floor, none of the usual volumes containing any information. Eventually, the mare worked her way into the vault of books stored just under the floor.

Spike cautiously approached the unicorn on the morning of the fifth day, knowing just how irritable she had become at not finding what she needed yet. "Twilight," he voiced cautiously. "It's time for breakfast."

"Argh!" the unicorn shouted in frustration, tossing the latest book into the air. "Spike! I'm a little busy right now! Can't breakfast wait until I finish skimming this book!?" Her coat and mane lay askew on her body, eyes bloodshot with bags under them from little sleep. Twilight was fully into 'Test Stress' territory again and the baby dragon knew it. He jumped at her outburst and backed into the wall, startled.

"Okay, but please have something to eat?" he begged, knowing the unicorn would sometimes neglect herself. She nodded her head at him, honestly planning to eat just as soon as she finished with the book in

question. "Alright, I'm taking that as a promise," the dragon continued. "I'm going out to buy our groceries. I should be back in an hour or two. I'll see you later, Twi." With some bits and one of Twilight's bags slung over his shoulder, the baby dragon went out on his errands, finally leaving the scholar to work in peace.

After ditching the previous book, and hastily digesting her breakfast, the purple unicorn sat down on the floor of the library once more, and pulled up another tome to skim. It wasn't a particularly heavy book, but just looking at the title, *Magical Automations*, told the unicorn that this book wouldn't hold any answers. Still, she ploughed into the book all the same, just in case. Inside, she found the most weird creatures and ideas she had ever set eyes on. There were spells to make cleaning supplies move on their own, and various depictions of improbable machines.

Just as she was about to cast the book aside, a passage caught her eye. It said something about automatic healing of serious wounds. It could be the very passage she was looking for this whole time! Finally, days of searching could be coming to an end at long last! Twilight flipped back to the beginning of the article.

~Golem~

The Golem is, by far, the most complicated artificially created creature in all history. It can come in any shape, size, or appearance and is nigh indestructible with careful construction. At the same time, they can perfectly mimic equine emotions, language and expressions simply by exposure to them. If it weren't for their distinct appearance, a pony could easily mistake a Golem for a living, perfectly natural creature.

In order to engineer this marvel of pony magic, the creator must simply possess the spell in order to animate it, which is contained in this volume. However, in addition to this, a pony must possess the necessary crafting skills to create a realistic sculpture. If created haphazardly, the Golem will suffer in terms of mobility and dexterity which will greatly affect its usefulness in a variety of applications.

If all this effort is required, then why use Golems? Why not hire an extra hoof to help around the domain? To put it simply, Golems do not require food, water, sleep, payment, air, or any other factors that define life. Even if

injured, the spell that animates a Golem allows it to heal automatically in order to carry on its duties. Major wounds and broken limbs will heal seamlessly, but nicks, scratches and other minor damages will need to be repaired manually.

As with everything, there is a downside to Golems. For one, they cannot function under great stress, often becoming emotionally unstable and experiencing auditory or visual hallucinations. This effect is magnified if the creator is the source of the stress, even if inadvertently. If stressed for too long, or become suddenly overwhelmed by stress, Golems can become violent and irrational, often turning on and killing their creators in the process.

~Advanced Golems~

First and foremost, advanced Golems are considered illegal in every state in this world. This book will not give you directions on how to manufacture them, as their creation has been deemed a crime punishable by death or exile, depending on the severity. So, what makes this sub-category of Golem so illegal and carry such harsh punishments? This is because a pony that makes an advanced Golem is, essentially, creating life.

"How does an advanced Golem differ from a normal one?" you may ask. Unlike a normal Golem, the advanced breed is not easily distinguishable from any other creature, as they are designed to be as life-like as possible. As such, they do not carry a hardened clay appearance typical of the normal variety. Furthermore, and arguably the determining factor, the advanced breed can feel pain. In addition, they can form and feel their own emotions, opinions, and execute them. Essentially, an advanced Golem is completely autonomous and does not mimic their creator.

Advanced Golems can be detected based on their emotional response to their creator. Often, they will have a familiar bond to them and feel dedication and even love for them. However, they carry the same drawbacks as a normal Golem, just manifested in different ways. As with Golems, if they experience too much stress, their cognitive functions shut down and they begin to hallucinate. In addition, they also possess the rapid healing abilities of the normal variety.

The tome fell unceremoniously to the floor as the magic keeping it aloft

vanished from existence. She couldn't bear to read another word of the book... or any other book. Her mind reeled with the implications those simple paragraphs held. On one hoof, it explained a lot about what happened over her entire life, not just the fall at the farm. Yet, on the other hoof it was just too impossible to believe. How could she possibly think that she was a product of magic and not a natural pony?

"No... no, it just can't be true," she tried in vain to reason. The unicorn stood up and paced around the library, her mind buzzing too horribly to stop herself from walking on the books. It all had to be some drastic error on her part; a fluke that she would find something similar, but utterly impossible.

Or is it? A sudden creak filled her ears, as if the tree around her began to breathe. Twilight felt the hairs on her body stand on-edge. She was beginning to hear voices again; reminding herself that it was one of the symptoms listed in the book.

"No, no, no, no, no, no! It's impossible!" she shouted into the rafters of the building.

"How do you figure that?" breathed the tree. "If you think about it, everything makes sense. When you're stressed, you become irritable and irrational... and you start to hear voices... like you are now. How can you possibly refuse to accept that you, Twilight Sparkle, are a Golem?"

"I'm a pony!" Twilight called out to the disembodied voice. "I bleed, I cry, I feel pain and emotions! Golems don't; Golems-"

"Oh?" the tree interrupted. "Do you not recall the passage on the advanced type? If you think about it; really think, you'll see what I am about to say makes perfect sense. Who is the one pony on this earth you trust unconditionally? I'll answer for you: Princess Celestia. Who has the power and skill required to make a Golem like that? Princess Celestia. Don't forget her letter either. Dr. Whooves said that she wouldn't tell him your origin, yet in the letter she said she found you at the castle gates. Why not tell him... if that was the truth?"

"P-princess Celestia made me?" the unicorn replied, her eyes wide in a sick mixture of pain and horror. "B-but why?"

"Again, if you think about it, it makes sense. You bear the Element of Magic; you helped free Nightmare Moon from her prison and save Equestria from eternal night. She made you to save her sister... why else has she stopped really talking with you? Twilight, you already fulfilled your purpose in life."

"H-how do you know all of this?" she asked, backing into a corner as the words it spoke made sense to her.

"I only know what you know, Twilight. After all, I am but a figment of your imagination, and am limited by your knowledge and ability to process information."

The unicorn swallowed hard, knowing now the voice in her head was her own, rationally putting the pieces together and forming a picture. Only now did she realize how stuffy the air in the library was. She needed to get out, to feel the grass on her hooves, to talk to her friends. Once she calmed down, she would write to the Princess. *But she would just lie again if this is the truth*, the voice sounded.

The walk to Sweet Apple Acres seemed to take an eternity longer to the purple unicorn today. Her mind still reeled from what the tree had said to her... or rather what she thought. She had to admit, it was right; putting it all together like that seemed to explain everything nicely. Perhaps this also explained her adeptness to magic, as the book also said that a Golem shares some of its magical power with its creator.

Celestia, being a goddess in charge of the sun, could easily explain how she could banish an Ursa Minor with relative ease, or even give a unicorn wings. Sure, normal ponies could do them too, but usually only with years of hard practice or study where she could do them with little difficulty at all. Sure, banishing Nightmare Moon could serve as a reason... but why make a pony instead of finding another to bear the Element of Magic? Why her?

Everything she ever thought she knew spun in front of Twilight as she passed through the gate into the farm. Eventually, her mind came up with one single sentence that sent shivers down her spine again. *My entire life is a lie.*

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Finally, the first apples of the season could be harvested and taken to market. An early start could mean the difference between a profitable year and a year in debt to the farmer. The bright red apple glistened on the trees as the late morning sun shined on them, shaking slightly from her bucking. The orange filly went from tree to tree, gathering the apples for market.

All of a sudden, the familiar sight of a purple unicorn came over the crest of the next hill. "Howdy, Twi!" she chirped, happy to see her friend out and about.

"Hi, Applejack," Twilight responded, coming closer to the tree. She didn't quite know how to voice her unease, or even where to start with her discovery. Instead, she opted to start off conversation, and let it flow there. "What are you doing?" she asked, looking at the apples on the tree.

"Buckin' apples, o' course," the farmed replied diligently. The unicorn looked in the baskets resting beside the tree and jumped with a start. Inside, the apples were green and polka-dotted with holes in them, occasionally a worm or two emerging from one and slinking into the other. She looked at the earth pony with mild confusion on her face. "First ripe crop of the season," she added. "I'm gonna take 'em over to market tomorrow!"

"*These* apples, AJ?" she gestured to the bushels in surprise. Her mouth fell open as the earth pony nodded vigorously. A look of disgust came over the purple pony's face; surely her friend was better than this? She clenched her eyes shut and shook her head. It had to be a hallucination... but she had never had a visual one before.

"You okay, Twi?" Applejack asked in concern.

"Yeah, I just need to clear my head a bit," Twilight responded, a hint of panic in her voice. "I'll see you later!" With that, she turned tail and trotted off, leaving her friend to consider the exchange for a brief moment before returning to her bucking.

"You're just imagining things, Twilight," the unicorn spoke to herself. "Those apples were ripe and red and you were just hallucinating because

of the stress. Th-theres nothing wrong with being stressed when... when your entire life is a lie... right?"

The mare continued to mutter comforting thoughts to herself as her hooves mindlessly carried her on to her next destination. Surely, if any pony knew how to cheer her up, it would be her dear friend Fluttershy, right? She took a deep breath as she soon found herself on her doorstep, slowly raising a hoof to knock on it.

"Oh, Twilight!" sounded a voice from behind her, belonging to the yellow Pegasus. "What are you doing here? I thought you were studying and recovering from your fall?" She had an unreadable expression on her face, somewhere between concern and boredom. At least, that was how it appeared to the impaired unicorn.

"I... decided that I needed some fresh air, is all," the unicorn replied. Before she could react, the yellow mare grabbed her raised hoof and dragged her along into her garden where a waiting tea set lay.

"I was about to come over to your place and ask if you wanted some tea," she explained. "I'm so glad you came on your own." Twilight simply couldn't say no to her good friend and quietly took a seat opposite from her at the stump of a table. All around, the cute little animals frolicked and played in the meadow surrounding them. The sweet scent of the honey-laced tea wafted to her muzzle, relaxing her a little.

She took a deep breath to inhale it deeply, lifting the cup to her lips with her magic. Her friend smiled and followed in kind, using her teeth instead, gently sipping her own down. The two mares quickly began to talk, the unicorn trying to direct the conversation to discuss her discovery, but the Pegasus had no interest in it. Twilight tried to persevere, but sooner rather than later, the tea began to wear off, tension coming back ten-fold.

A squirrel mounted on the fence beside her quickly drew the purple mare's attention from her friend as they chatted. There was a rather large bird beside him, grooming himself before taking flight once more. However, before it could do anything, the squirrel suddenly leaped on the bird, swallowing it in a single, horrifying bite. Noticing the lack of privacy, the demonic critter looked Twilight in the eye, its own burning a bright, blood red.

Frightened, the unicorn snapped her head back to her friend, critters behind her all staring with those same blood red eyes. "What's the matter, Twilight?" Fluttershy spoke with a measure of malice in her voice. "It looks like you've seen a ghost." Twilight felt her body begin to quake in fear, stumbling off the stump, her eyes wide in terror. She needed to get out of here... to leave these demonic creatures and their mistress behind.

All she could do was squeak before letting out a full scream, turning her back on the little monsters and making flight to the nearest safe haven she knew. Meanwhile, she left her friend behind, dumbfounded at her sudden outburst, her teapot tipped over by the purple mare's explosive exit. Something was wrong with Twilight, and she needed to find out what. Spreading her wings, she went to find her nearest friend, Applejack.

The purple mare ran into town at a full gallop, panic having gripped her heart, only now beginning to release her from its bind. All her friends were acting weird today, for some reason... "No!" she shouted to nopony, "It was probably just another hallucination... it just had to be!" She took a deep breath to still her pounding heart as she approached a familiar building; Carousel Boutique.

Twilight entered the building boldly; she needed to get this off her back, and who better than her fellow unicorn? Inside, however, she found a sight that made the demon critters in the meadow seem tame in comparison. Hanging on all the walls and forms on the shop was material as black as the night itself. All the dresses in the shop looked like they belonged more at an undertaker's than a place as fashionable as the tailor's shop. "R-rarity?" she voiced quietly as she entered.

"Just a minute," sounded the familiar voice of the white unicorn from the depths of the shop. "Oh, hello, Twilight! What can I do for you today?" The purple pony simply stared at her, and then back to the sombre black dresses all around the shop.

"Rarity... what is all of this?" she asked, forgetting her desire to talk about her revelation.

"Oh, why it's wedding season, darling," Rarity replied. "Ever since our... er... splash at the gala, I've simply been swamped by requests! I may have

to hire an extra hoof just to keep up!"

"Weddings?" the purple mare asked, aghast. "You made these... these *things* for *weddings*!? What is wrong with you, Rarity!? I thought you, of all ponies had some sense around here! They'd look more at home in a graveyard than a chapel!"

The white mare hadn't been so dumbfounded since Fluttershy had described, in intricate detail, why she hadn't liked her Gala dress. Her alabaster wedding gowns positively glistened in the noon-time sun... how could she say they looked fit for funerals instead? Rarity shut her eyes behind her glasses and shook her head. "Oh, Twilight, darling," she started. "I know you don't know much about fashion, but I assure you, these are, indeed, for weddings."

Twilight found herself speechless at the unicorn's retort. How could rarity defend these onyx horrors? Who placed the orders, an entire village of Goth ponies? No, it had to be another hallucination... it just had to be. She walked over to one of the dresses and put her hoof to it, the fabric tickling her as it touched. It simply couldn't be an illusion; her mind racing about what was going on. Had the revelation that her life was a lie broken some sort of spell on her?

Rarity looked on in confusion as Twilight moved her hoof through the air, as if inspecting something of great interest. She blinked quickly as she figured all the studying had finally gotten to her head. "Twilight, do you need to lie down?" she asked in concern. Apparently, she asked the wrong thing as the unicorn jumped, looking at her as if she'd suggested something lewd.

"No... no... I'm not that kind of pony... g-get away from me!" the student replied, slowly backing out of the shop. It finally happened; the purple mare had finally studied herself into some sort of mental breakdown. The white unicorn approached her to try and get her to calm down, but the purple mare cried out and ran out of her shop in a panic. She could feel her jaw drop to the floor; she needed to get the others and help them with their friend.

Twilight ran from the store at a full gallop; how could her friend suggest something in such a way? When Rarity asked her to lie down, there was

blatant lust in her eyes and a sultry tone to her voice. She could even see a shadow of a wink, as if beckoning her to follow. All thoughts of it being simply a hallucination had fled her mind, now no longer in any rational state and deteriorating quickly.

The panicked unicorn galloped at full tilt, making her way through the outskirts of town blindly. She didn't care where she went, so long as she put as much distance between herself and the other unicorn as possible. She really couldn't afford another encounter like that, especially after all that happened earlier and the revelation that her entire life was a lie.

"Wow, that was amazing," chirped an orange Pegasus filly. "Thank you so much for teaching me how to fly, Rainbow Dash!" Her eyes were positively sparkling as she walked beside her idol. Although she just started to train under her, Scootaloo could not contain her excitement.

"Don't worry about it," Rainbow replied, poking the small filly with a hoof lightly. "Besides, it's never too soon to start learning how to be as awesome as I am. Oh, hey there, Twilight. What's up?"

The purple unicorn had a look about her that the blue Pegasus had never seen before. It was like a mixture of betrayal, disgust, confusion and fear that she had never seen before. Her mane was unkempt and sticking out at weird angles, bags under her eyes robbing her of any attractiveness she had ...not that the blue mare liked fillies, of course. "Are... are you okay?" the rainbow Pegasus asked.

Twilight's eyes widened in absolute horror at the pair, causing them to exchange a glance between the two of them before looking back at her quizzically. The unicorn's eyes narrowed dangerously as a look of indignation swept over her. It was almost as if that tale Pinkie told of her suddenly bursting into flame over the Hydra episode could actually be true!

Her mouth began to move, lips twitching in absolute rage. "Y-you... you... PERVERT!" the student shouted at the athletic Pegasus. Before she could react, a purple hoof came into contact with her jaw, punched with more force than she ever dared dream of from the filly. "STAY THE HELL AWAY FROM SCOOTALOO!!!"

"What the hay is your problem, Twilight!" Rainbow spoke defensively,

holding her pounding jaw with a hoof. Before she even knew what happened, her world became a lavender blur as the unicorn tackled her, pinning her to the ground without using her magic. The Pegasus had no time to react to the flurry of hooves that came upon her face, taken aback by Twilight's sudden burst of violence.

"HOW COULD YOU, RAINBOW!?" the unicorn screamed in between punches. "SHE'S ONLY SEVEN YEARS OLD, YOU SICK, DISGUSTING BEAST!!!" Meanwhile, the orange filly sat, stunned by her idol's friend assaulting her like that.

"S-she was just teaching me how to fly, Twilight!" Scootaloo tried to explain. "There's nothing wrong with that!"

"Don't. Make. Excuses. For. Her!" the purple pony yelled, each word accented by another punch to the stunned Pegasus. Rainbow's face quickly became black and blue, missing a couple of teeth and adorned with two of the blackest eyes that Equestria ever saw. The rosy eyes narrowed before the Pegasus used all her strength, bucking the unicorn off of her and launching her some distance.

"WHAT THE SORREL HELL WAS THAT ALL ABOUT, TWILIGHT!?" Rainbow shouted in fury. "That wasn't cool in any way at all! What gives you the right to randomly attack a pony like that, huh!? You're lucky you're my friend or I would kick the s*** out of you instead of going to the police!"

Before she could get up for round two, the Pegasus took to the air, sweeping up the smaller orange one as she zoomed past, leaving the purple unicorn dazed on the ground. All of her friends... every one of them was insane. It was no wonder Celestia had to engineer friends for her. Just how bad could her last friend really be? She got to her hooves with sick anticipation as she moved into town, on her way to Sugarcube Corner to see how far off the deep end Pinkie could be.

Her answer came soon enough as she approached the building. The sweet shop always looked a little like a gingerbread house, but now she could almost smell the substance seeping off the walls. Ponies watched her walk through the square, possibly gossiping about how she heroically called out Rainbow on her sick game. But she couldn't help but notice their frowns turning into wicked smiles as she drew closer to the local landmark.

A tiny bell rung above the door as the unicorn entered the shop for the first time in a week. Thankfully, now that her eyes were open to the 'real' world, she became relieved to see that everything was more-or-less the same... save for the large grate over a pit of fire where the couch used to be. She paid it no mind as she walked up to the pink party pony who hopped over to meet her.

"Hi there, Twilight," the pink pony chirped before her attitude suddenly changed. "You don't look well. Is something the matter?" She tilted her head to the side, showing genuine concern for her purple friend. "Oh well," she continued before the unicorn could respond. "I know what will make everything better! Have a cupcake!"

A wide, disturbing grin spread across the pink mare's face, chilling her to the bone with no explanation why. She reached a hoof out to grab the tantalizing blue cupcake, not one to refuse a generous offer like that. Until, that is, realization hit. Gingerbread house... er... store, a grill over a working fire pit and cupcakes? CUPCAKES!? It was all out of the story she read as a filly; the one about the two young foals who happened upon a wicked witch's house in the woods and were eaten!

Twilight's hoof fell to the floor, horrified that her friend Pinkie, who used to be the most benign of the group, turned out to be the most insane and disturbing of the lot. She was actually planning to eat her, now of all times! Her jaw dropped, the pink pony looking at her with a hint of disappointment behind that wicked, murderous smile. "What's the matter?" she asked as she saw her expression. "Don't you like my cupcakes? Everypony likes my cupcakes."

"No," Twilight squeaked in horror. "No... I DON'T WANT ANY OF YOUR CUPCAKES!" With all the speed she could muster, the unicorn took flight in panic from the shop. Her hooves slipped a little on the freshly mopped floor, not allowing her the acceleration she wanted. The pink mare tried to reach out to stop her flight and ensure her doom, but she got just enough traction to slip away by an inch.

The door to the bakery flew open as a flurry of purple erupted forward, screaming the entire way. Everything around her twisted and warped, becoming more horrible to her than it actually was. She welded her eyes

shut and ran blind, hot tears slipping out from her eyelids. All she wanted to do was to run, to hide, and to get as far away from this asylum of a town as possible.

Suddenly, the unicorn felt winded as she naturally ran into someone. Below her, flat on his back, was the familiar shape of her dragon assistant. "Ow," he moaned. "Anyone get the number of that cart?" The unicorn pushed herself back up, standing over him with a wild look in her eyes. "Oh, it's you, Twilight," he continued as he stood up as well. "I guess you finally decided to get out and get some fresh air, h-"

"I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP TO!" she yelled in his ear, spying the vegetables scattered around them. "You're going to join Pinkie and make some Twilight Stew, huh? Well, I got some news for you, Buster!" She suddenly lunged forward and grabbed the baby dragon's arm, staring daggers at the startled young creature. His arm was in an awkward position, being held by both hooves of his boss. "I'M NOT GOING WITHOUT A FIGHT!"

A sickening crack filled the air, followed by the sudden scream from the pained dragon. His arm was bent at a weird angle, broken by the sudden motion from his friend. He fell back onto the ground, crying his heart out and yelling with a pain he had never experienced before. Why had Twilight done this to him?

Before he could cry out for help, the addled unicorn continued her blind flight away from the crazy town known as Ponyville. She didn't notice the cart pull out suddenly in front of her, leaving her no time to stop, slamming into the side, flipping end over end and into the cargo it carried. A shrill shriek filled the square as more eyes came to rest upon the scene. The purple unicorn screamed and babbled incoherently; she had rammed into a cart carrying live snakes, or so she thought.

"HELP! HELP!" she cried to no pony in particular. She squirmed on the cobblestone street, trying to get away from the legless horrors. "THEY'RE GOING TO KILL ME! HELP!!!" Sobs quickly replaced the screams as she realized her situation was hopeless; no pony here cared about her, and if they did, they would be killed too by her insane friends.

"Hold on, sugar cube," sounded a familiar voice. "I got you!" It was

Applejack, flanked by Rarity and Fluttershy. The purple pony promptly returned to screaming at the sight of them, forgetting about the snakes that wiggled around her body. They looked at each other in an unreadable look before the farmer started again. "You do know you're in a pile o' hay, right?"

The unicorn sobbed and screamed, lost somewhere between terror and sorrow over her situation. When the trio approached, she lashed out violently, fighting for her very life. The white unicorn and the yellow Pegasus flanked her, trying to distract her. "No!" Twilight screamed. "They're going to eat me! Somepony, please... save me!"

"Nothing's going to eat you, Twilight," Fluttershy spoke with great care and nurturing. Sadly, her purple friend would have none of it, screaming even louder. The pair looked to Applejack and nodded, putting their backup plan into motion. Reaching into her saddle bag, she withdrew a lasso and tossed it at the purple mare.

Twilight suddenly felt her limbs pulled together snugly by something oddly smooth. When she looked, she saw that they had bound her legs using a long, vicious-looking snake, causing her to scream even louder. How could they do something like this to her? Weren't they her friends!? She wriggled and screamed in vain, the farmer pony approaching her menacingly before shoving one of those horrid, green, worm-ridden apples deep into her muzzle, stifling her.

Grabbing her tail in her teeth, the orange farmer soberly pulled her squirming purple friend through the streets of town, getting weird looks from the different ponies as the rumour mills worked overtime. In the course of an hour and a half, the unicorn had managed to hospitalize two of her friends and traumatize a filly into silence. It hurt her to bind her friend up like this, but right now she was a danger to herself and every pony around her. She just thanked her lucky stars that she hadn't used magic in any of the attacks yet.

The white unicorn and the yellow Pegasus followed behind the pair, making sure the addled unicorn didn't break free of her binds and go on a rampage. Fluttershy had to fight to suppress her tears at the sight of her friend acting like this, pleading fear etched on the unicorn's face. Rarity felt much the same way, worried more that her fellow unicorn would suddenly

have the presence of mind to wield her powerful magic against them. If she could subdue an Ursa... she shuddered at the idea of an enraged and dangerous Twilight. They would need to write to the princess immediately.

First, however, they needed to get her out of the public eye. As they neared Sugarcube Corner, Applejack could feel the struggles of the unicorn increase exponentially the closer they got. If only Rainbow could help them out too... it was just lucky they found her before she ran off to the police and told her that Twilight wasn't herself today. Pinkie Pie opened the door for them, a rare frown flashing across her muzzle as she watched the sobbing unicorn being dragged inside.

A fresh wave of fear rolled over the unicorn as the farmer dragged her towards the grill. If they were going to eat her, at least they would have the decency to knock her out before putting her on that, right? She sobbed again as the orange earth pony and the white unicorn lifted her up and tossed her roughly onto the grill. A wave of pain rolled over her as she felt the flames lick at her back, the smell of singed hair reaching her nostrils.

Off in the distance, she could occasionally hear words waft over in between her stifled screams of pain. They were discussing something, but she couldn't tell what. She wanted to roll onto her side to hear them better, but it would offer more skin for the flame to cook. "...she has to know," Fluttershy started. "If any pony knows what is going on, or how to help, it will be the Princess. We can't leave her lying on the couch forever."

"I agree with her, Applejack," Rarity concurred. "Hopefully she'll also have some way for us to suppress her magic. I'd hate to see the damage caused by an enraged Twilight."

Her magic... how could she have forgotten something so obvious!? With her magic, she could easily save herself and punish those dastardly ponies for trying something this evil in the first place. She dove deep into herself, horn alight in a purple aura as the snake binding her, dead from the heat, vanished in a flash.

"Rairy!" Applejack shouted. "Why'd you have to open yer big mouth!?"

Twilight reached a hoof to her mouth and withdrew the apple that stifled her, firing it magically with great force at the orange pony, smacking her in

the head. She fell to the ground and twitched slightly, the other three gasping in horror that their plan had been foiled. "YOU'RE ALL GOING TO REGRET THE DAY YOU MESSED WITH ME!!!" the enraged unicorn shouted, feeling her magic flood through her.

They all screamed, and rightly so as sparks of magical energy lept forward from her body. She stared at them in anger, causing them to panic; even the annoying pink one. Her body began to glow as she gathered as much magic as she could. The unicorn would leave this sinful little town behind, and destroy those who dared to end her in one fell swoop.

A massive explosion rocked the town to its core, half of Sugarcube Corner vaporizing in a blast of magical energy, the other half erupting in cleansing fire. A brilliant streak of purple shot across the sky from the heart of the blast and rocketed into the Everfree Forest beyond. Three scared ponies ran out of the wreckage while the fourth had to be dragged, cut up and bleeding from shrapnel of the many splinters of flaming wood.

What could have driven such a reserved and kind pony to do such a horrible thing?

Chapter 4

Eclipse

Deep in the heart of the Everfree Forest, maybe less than half a mile from the rotting castle at its heart, sat a large pond that sparkled in the noon-time sun. Creatures of all sizes and shapes idled by the cool water that day, the oppressive heat at its height.

A low roar sounded from above the pond, compelling the creatures to look towards the sky at the incoming threat. Birds took flight as the animals on the ground ran away, almost as if they could sense the torrent of distress coming their way. The roar became steadily louder, a purple point on the horizon growing in size and ferocity. Any creature that had not fled by then sealed its fate.

In an instant, the once placid pond erupted with a bang, a huge jet of water piercing into the sky as the lavender streak struck into the heart of the body. Large waves crested out from the source as if the edges of the trapped liquid were the mighty ocean itself. Those animals that did not flee were swept away by the inland tidal wave, back out into the forest and away from the epicentre of the blast.

Soon, the mighty column of water fell back into the basin of the pond, the shattered remains of a once grand fountain strewn about as debris from the blast. The once sapphire blue water turned a sickly brown as it lapped at its new banks, about half the size it originally was before the unexpected entry. Any animals that were swept up by the tsunami quickly took flight deeper into the woods, sensing the presence that caused the disturbance.

A purple shape slowly emerged from the brown water, walking up to the banks of the pond before collapsing onto it. She didn't know where she was, or how she got there. In fact, she couldn't remember anything since she read that book... the book! The passage must have stressed her to the point of memory loss, which begged the question of what exactly happened. Twilight Sparkle stood on shaky legs, unsure why she felt this way, or why she smelled of singed wood and hay.

"Ugh," the unicorn moaned in pain. "My head feels like a train ran over it." She winced as she held a hoof to her head, trying to numb the pounding pain she felt to no avail. Images flashed across her mind's eye, replaying the scenes her purple ones once beheld. A black and blue Rainbow, a crying and pained Spike... and her four other friends, terror frozen on their faces: it all drifted in front of her.

She shuddered and held her head again, refusing to believe that she had done all of that. Yet, as much as the purple mare wished to deny it, she simply could not turn a blind eye to it, causing shivers to run down her spine. The mountainous pile of evidence in front of her simply could not be ignored, or explained away. It just fit all too well. Her lungs filled as she took a deep breath and sighed; she needed answers, and only one pony in this world could give them.

Looking behind her, the unicorn could see smoke rising from beyond the forest wall, tickling the azure sky. If she really did all of that, hurt them like the flashes told, then her friends would want nothing more to do with her, maybe even have her killed, and rightly so. Dry sobs slipped past her muzzle as she realized she had just lost the first friends she ever had. Not even Spike would want anything more to do with her: not after she attacked him like that without any provocation.

If only the princess were here right now, she would know just what to say to cheer her up. "Wait a minute," Twilight spoke into the pond, ceasing her sobs. "The princess... maybe if I told her just what happened, and get my answers, then she could try and explain it to them!" Her mind raced as she imagined her own worst-case scenario: the princess becoming infuriated with her over what she did in town, and that she stumbled upon a secret that she never wanted her to know.

"She's going to banish me," she continued, imagination racing. "Or throw me in prison... or banish me and then throw me in prison in the place she banished me to!" Then she quickly remembered a very important detail she had somehow forgotten. "But how can I get to Canterlot without a chariot!?"

A feeling of warmth suddenly came from her back as the coolness from the impromptu bath washed away. Turning to see the source of it, the unicorn's jaw dropped at the pair of lavender wings on her sides. They looked like Pegasus wings, but they simply couldn't be. Unlike the ones she gave

Rarity, she could easily see through them... as if they were made of pure magic.

The unicorn tried to explain this, at first, but she quickly decided that she simply didn't have the time, or the curiosity right then. All that came to mind was talking to the princess, demanding answers, and doing so as quickly as possible. She flared her wings, and in a single, powerful stroke, darted into the air. The wind rushed past her mane and into her ears, tickling the insides, but not in an unpleasant way. As she flew to the castle in the distance, Twilight could not help but notice she had no feelings about being able to fly without a carriage... it must have been the more pressing matters numbing her urge to wax poetic.

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Now she understood why Pegasus ponies loved to fly about as often as they could; from their lofty and ever changing perch, they could see the world in a way that unicorns or earth ponies could not. Granted, the fastest route to the castle was via Pegasus-driven chariot, but it just was not the same. She had enough time to realize this, but nothing more as she touched down outside the drawbridge, the magical pair of wings conveniently vanishing from existence.

The castle of Canterlot was a near perfect palace perched high upon the slope of Mount Notia; named after Her Royal Highness Queen Notia of Equestria... she was Celestia and Luna's mother, according to the history books. The city proper rested on the gently sloping hills on the other side of the mountain. A picturesque road filled with tunnels and cliff-hanging corners linked the two together like the thread on a necklace.

Twilight cautiously trotted across the drawbridge: the natural runoff from the mountain created a dangerous moat around the castle. The massive double doors that lay beyond, leading into the entrance hall, stood open before her to welcome royal visitors. She took a deep breath as she passed under them, hoping the guards wouldn't ask too many questions about how she arrived, or even if she were expected.

As usual, the entrance hall sparkled as ponies washed the floors and polished the solid oak banisters leading up the sweeping front stairs. Some heads turned as they took in the sight of the familiar purple unicorn, but

thankfully no more than usual. She slowly made her way up the front stairs, recalling the night of the Gala with some embarrassment. Her mind did not dwell on it long, however, as the obviously more pressing business needed addressing.

Sitting at the top of the stairs, another pair of large double doors sat open, leading into the waiting room for ponies who wished an audience with the princess. Twilight walked up to the familiar desk, noting that today the princess had a light load of only maybe ten ponies waiting for her. A guard stood at attention behind the desk, his brown coat and white mane neatly groomed to be presentable in front of her highness when he announced the next petitioner.

"Twilight Sparkle?" he asked as she approached the bench. "I didn't know you were visiting Canterlot today. I must have missed the memo." What was the colt's name again? The purple mare considered this for a brief moment, before deciding that she would figure it out later. She pressed forward, ignoring him and the protesting ponies who sat as she neared the door. The other guards didn't make a move against her, as this sort of aloof behaviour was typical of the princess's protégé. Besides, Celestia told them explicitly that she could enter any time she wished, so despite not liking it, they couldn't stop her.

Meanwhile, Princess Celestia sat upon her throne, listening to the ramblings of the pony before her. His request was a simple one: a new bridge across the Altros River to Hoofington in order to reduce travel time for merchants. However, he droned on for the last half hour, explaining every single little detail in painstaking accuracy. Sometimes she wished she could have a break from ruling the kingdom, even if only for a little while.

So she instantly perked up when the familiar purple unicorn mare silently opened the door to the throne room and stepped off to the side. The Regent of the Sun confessed herself a little surprised to see Twilight drop in unannounced like that, which caused worry to flash across her mind. Her student's purple eyes spoke volumes of urgency with subtle hints of fear and sorrow. Whatever happened, she needed her right that instant.

"Excuse me," the princess spoke, holding out her hoof to silence the petitioner, "I believe your proposed project is more than satisfactorily

detailed. Please, speak to the royal engineers and I will put it into action as soon as possible."

"T-thank you, your highness," the peppermint colt replied, taking a deep bow before gathering up his materials.

"Twilight Sparkle, my most faithful student," the princess addressed the purple mare behind him. "What has brought you to Canterlot unannounced like this?"

The student cast her gaze down to the ground, unable to meet her eyes as she recounted what little she could remember. "I... I need some help," she said. "I'm not... totally together anymore? I... think I did some things. BAD things. But I'm sorry!" She lowered herself to the floor, visibly shaking before her. Out of the corner of the princess's eye, she could see some of the guards exchanging worried looks.

"Twilight, what are y-"

"So yes, yes, we're all sorry, and... that is the TRUTH." The purple mare's strange combination of rambling and mumbling made the mover of the sun strain her ears to listen. "Truth is so important, yes? Honesty... you're... you're being honest with me, yes?"

Celestia sat upon her throne, dumbfounded by this strange turn her student had taken. Something had obviously disturbed the poor foal, resulting in her incoherent babbling. She blinked in surprise once her inane outburst stopped. "Are you alright, Twilight?" she asked.

"Yes... no! No... I might not be. I... I did BAD THINGS... but I'm so sorry! So, so sorry," the filly began to break down and sob openly before the court. The princess found herself slightly disturbed by her student's sudden lack of confidence. Deep inside, she could feel her heart ache that her precious student was hurt so, privately wishing the creator have mercy on the pony who did this to her.

"Guards," Celestia addressed the court. "Please leave us. I will call should I need you." They obeyed, silently passing the sobbing unicorn to retreat outside and lend them some privacy. Twilight kept her face to the ground, tears staining the marble floors. "Please, Twilight, tell me what is on your

mind," she begged.

"Honesty... honesty is an Element of Harmony," the purple mare continued. She lifted her head, her purple and bloodshot eyes gazing into Celestia's. "You used them all once. You... you have all of them in you, don't you?" The Regent of the Sun found herself slowly becoming more worried with each passing second.

"Not all of them, I must confess," she admitted. "I lack the Element of Laughter these days, although I was quite the prankster in my youth. Hence why I could not purify Luna as you and your friends did, my faithful student." The princess had no idea where this was going, but a nagging thought in the back of her mind had her on guard, just in case.

"You wouldn't... lie to m-ME, would you?" Twilight replied with a hint of desperation, her voice and eyes, still dripping crystal tears down her muzzle and onto the ivory marble. She stood to her full height once more, desperate.

The princess took a deep breath before continuing. "As you are aware, sometimes it might be in the best interests of a pony to not tell the whole truth. In your case, I am completely honest with you." Something told her that she had said the wrong thing almost immediately. The unicorn in front of her tensed up visibly, a look of rage slowly beginning to form on her muzzle.

Twilight looked at her with a piercing gaze, as if x-raying the deity before her with great scrutiny. She could feel her body beginning to twitch as the blatant lie continued to ripple over her. The mare had no clue how, but she could tell that her teacher just lied to her... again. Her heart raced as the hurt embedded itself deep inside. "You... YOU LIAR!"

Celestia winced slightly, hearing such rage come from her precious student. "Twilight, talk to me," she pleaded. "Did something happen between you and your friends? Did you... read something troubling in a history book? I will admit; I wasn't always as benevolent as I am now." A sad look swept over her face as she remembered a darker time in her life... a time filled with hurt and sadness... before she sent her dear sister to the moon.

Sudden electricity began to fill the air as Twilight approached the throne, stopping just short of the steps. Her eyes never broke contact with the princess, locked in a disturbing stare. The mare's outline became blurred and distorted as her expression became maniacal. "YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!" she shouted out.

Quite suddenly, the ever-present smile on the face of Equestria's princess vanished from existence. "Oh no," she spoke in little more than a whisper. "... Please tell me you didn't..."

Silence met her ears, the unicorn's expression unreadable. However, all too soon a curt smile spread upon her lips before it vanished from existence. Laughter, like a dozen perversely beautiful bells rung forward into the depth of the room, vibrating off the walls and columns, echoing the unicorn's terrible laughter. It was weak and unsure at first, but quickly built into a crescendo. Fresh tears began to stream down her face and into her cheeks.

Celestia sighed, and shook a little as she nodded her head. It was a day she hoped to never see, but one she planned for nonetheless. "If you will calm down, Twilight," she explained. "I will answer any question you have. I swear upon my name, the ponies of Equestria, and the sun itself that I will only answer with the truth."

The filly blinked, her eyes glazing over in magical energy, hiding their wonderful amethyst colour from view. There was no emotion visible on her face, which scared the alicorn more than the previous flash of anger. Her tears evaporated into nothing from the pure magic covering her eyes. "WHAT. AM. I?"

"You are an advanced breed of Golem," she answered.

"WHY DID YOU LIE?" She wasn't angry and there wasn't any hint of it... she just needed her answers.

"I didn't want to hurt you, Twilight," the princess of the sun spoke, choosing her words very carefully. "I feared you would take it the wrong way...the way you are now."

The magic faded from the lavender pony's eyes and her muscles relaxed a

little. She stood here, calm and dead silent for minutes until the most important question she would ever ask passed her lips. "Why was I created?"

Celestia shut her eyes and bowed her head in silence, a hoof rising to rest her head in. To any pony watching, she suddenly looked much older than they ever would have dreamed. It was the one question she hoped she would never have to answer, since she was genuinely afraid what would happen after she gave it. "I made you to house my sister's soul... at least, according to the original plan. Things didn't go the way I wanted, so I, FORTUNATELY, had to change it around until it came to the events of the last Summer Sun Celebration"

Her reaction to the news was exactly what the princess feared; a look of great betrayal and hurt dawning on the filly's face before more tears slipped from her watery eyes. "I'm... I'm a mistake?"

"You are a beautiful, smart and wonderful one, yes, like how that one pony invented penicillin. When I made you, I wanted a fully-grown mare who could handle her fate. Instead, I got you as a newborn. I wanted to keep you around, but we just don't have the facilities to handle foals here, so I sent you to live with your parents."

"You... you've never cared about me," Twilight replied in shock. "YOU'VE NEVER GIVEN A SINGLE HORSEAPPLE ABOUT ME!!!"

"No, Twilight. I do care about you," the princess of the sun tried to sooth. "I care about you more than any pony could know. When you came to me, I slowly realized how wrong I had been to try and create a pony without a spirit... a pony whose sole purpose was to die so her body could become Luna's." Her eyes suddenly went wide in terror, swiftly inserting a hoof into her mouth, tasting the gold of her shoes. She never meant to say that last part... ever.

A sickly silence fell over the room once more before the fantasy finally crashed down, the mare's voice suddenly becoming sharp and harsh, like the breeze on a cold winter morning. "MONSTER," she shouted into the stone rafters. The entirety of Canterlot began to quake as a rush of magic filled her, tears evaporating once more as laughter began to overtake her. "I'M A MONSTER... MADE BY A MONSTER," she called out, not quite

yelling. Her laughter quickly became dark and wicked, chilling the alicorn to her divine bones.

"Twilight," the ancient mare spoke in an authoritative tone. It took great control to not let her deeper pain come through her words. Hearing her own creation call herself... and her maker, a monster stung more than anything she ever felt before in her long life. "Calm down and we will discuss this matter further in my chambers. Please."

"SILENCE!" Twilight screamed in rage. The entire castle shook, causing the pillars in the throne room to quake visibly, ancient dust and cobwebs dangling down from the high ceiling. The glass windows and massive skylight quivered in fear at the enraged unicorn. Her body twitched and glowed as raw magic seeped from her pores, her anger unlocking something deep within herself that lay hidden for her entire life. She could feel a power unlike anything she ever felt before; as if the very sun itself lay at her beck and call. Was this how Celestia felt all the time?

Celestia narrowed her eyes dangerously at the unicorn in front of her, seeing that the mare was now enraged and stressed beyond the point of all rational thought. The doors behind the purple pony flew open as guards poured in at hearing the outburst, yet unnoticed by the filly. "You do not order ME around, Twilight Sparkle," she said with great control to hide her own anger. "Now, either calm down, or I will MAKE you calm down."

Magical lightning arced off the mare into the floor of the room, causing it to crack under the sheer power she exuded. The princess knew in that moment that Twilight possessed magical power equal to, or perhaps greater than her own. She stared at the princess, her eyes glazed over by a veil of pure magic, much like they had been when they were reunited those many years ago. "NO," she said, "YOU TRIED TO STOP THIS BEFORE, BUT I AM STRONGER NOW!"

"You leave me no choice. Now, SLEEP!" The princess didn't like to use this technique unless she had to, but it was a skill much akin to Fluttershy's Stare. However, unlike the Pegasus, the alicorn's eyes glowed with magic as it tried to influence the filly's mind into feeling waves of sleep.

However, after many seconds of trying the spell on her student, she felt no change in the purple mare. She began to cackle, the guards surrounding

her looking to their monarch for orders. A shield of purple energy came to life, surrounding the unicorn, sparing her from the spell. "I CAN SEE THE MAGIC NOW," she cackled at her teacher's shocked expression, "I SEE IT IN YOUR MIND!"

It pained her to do what she was about to do, but Twilight's rage and impossible magic left her with no other choice. "Then, it would seem I must subdue you by FORCE!" She stood to her full, impressive height, ready for a fight with her beloved student. Taking that as their cue, the guards circling the purple filly sprung into action, little realizing the princess was about to tell them to evacuate the castle instead.

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Princess Luna sat in her chambers that day, reading a book on modern Equestrian history, surrounded by piles of other tomes on the same subject. In just a few short days, she felt she would finally know enough about the country to fully resume her responsibilities over the night. Although she would never admit it, despite all the new technology and social upheavals, she found the starkest contrast in her older sister.

When she turned to Nightmare, Celestia had ruled the day with an iron hoof hidden behind an insincere smile and shallow flattery. She loved power back then and reveled in it, partly why she refused to pay attention to the midnight princess and mandated a strict sunset curfew. If any pony dared cross her, or fail her on multiple occasions, they soon faced the hangmare's noose, or even the pike. Luna shuddered in fear as she remembered the sight of impaled ponies lining the front of their castle.

Thankfully, the years had been far kinder to the elder than the younger. She had to deal with her own sense of isolation and loneliness, turning her from a bloodthirsty tyrant back into the kind yet quirky mare she grew up with. The Regent of the Moon sighed and put her books away. She simply couldn't get over how much her sister had changed, and how much she herself stayed the same. Sure, she was sorry about the whole saga with Nightmare Moon, but she wasn't about to beg for forgiveness and feel sorry for herself over something that was beyond her control.

Suddenly, the room around her began to quake as a soft "Silence!" filled the air of her room. Of course, she knew better than to think this came from

any pony other than her dear sister. Whatever happened, it was enough to make her shout louder than Luna dared remember. She quickly got to her hooves and opened her door, galloping past her guards and down the halls. Celestia had not lost her temper yet in the year she had been back, and she pitied the poor pony on the receiving end of it.

Shouts and the sound of breaking glass met her ears as she ran at full speed down the winding and labyrinth-like halls of Canterlot. Eventually, her hooves found themselves before the throne room, a terrible sight meeting her eyes. All the ponies waiting for an appointment with her sister had fled, and rightly so. The inner doors were blown off their hinges, lying on the marble floor like felled trees.

Guards lay in all directions: some slumped against pillars while others hung limply from the frames of shattered stained glass windows or chandeliers on the ceiling. Most of them were either unconscious, or wishing so; all of them bled heavily onto the cold floor. The large throne itself lay on the ground, shattered into a million pieces while scorch marks shadowed the outline it once had against the wall. However, the sight that caught her most off-guard was that of her sister and her student, who stood on opposite sides of the room, enveloped by auras of magic while staring each other down.

"T-twilight! Sister! W-what is going on here!?" Luna asked in shock and awe, jaw dropping at the sight.

"Stay back!" warned Celestia, "Twilight's having a temper tantrum right now and I don't want to see you hurt." A spell hit her shield as she explained this to Luna, the purple mare far more aggressive than the lunar princess remembered.

"She's a MONSTER!" the smaller screeched. "She engineered me as a Golem and manipulated the ponies who WERE my friends JUST TO SAVE YOU! SHE MADE ME TO DIE!" She skilfully dodged a brilliant streak of gold erupting from the solar sister's horn as she spoke, firing off a few of her own blasts in the meantime.

Luna sat on the sidelines, dumbfounded about how this could have happened. Surely Celestia knew better than to create a magical creature like that... and for such a reason. "Sister... is this true!?" she begged. The

large oak doors leading to the entrance hall shut to isolate the throne room for the rest of the castle. In the back of her mind, Luna already signalled the alarm for the ponies to flee the castle, or else suffer the guards' fate.

"Sadly, it's true, Luna," the elder sister replied with lament etched upon her face. A ring of pink flame surrounded the purple unicorn, slowly drawing in as if burning invisible oils. However, the lavender unicorn was no slouch as she teleported outside the ring of flame and behind her teacher. The alicorn wheeled around, expecting this and fired a blast at her student, sending her careening into a wall.

Her raw anger and power dulled the pain as she slammed into the stone wall. It cracked and formed a shallow imprint, but she swiftly got to her hooves and fired another volley at the snow-white monster standing before her. Predictably, the evil alicorn protected herself with a shield charm, but it was enough of a diversion to gain a better position against her.

The midnight pony found herself on the edge of a battle she couldn't escape. On one hoof, she had her sister, whom she loved more than anything else in this world. Yet, on the other, she had the unicorn that helped free her from her foolish inner darkness... to which she owed everything. However, they both committed very serious crimes: Celestia having created artificial life, and that artificial life trying to kill royalty.

Twilight charged, but the ancient mare stood ready for her protégé. Her horn dazzled, ancient roots from trees felled during the construction of the castle burst through the stone floor, ensnaring the charging pony. It slowed her down, but the white pony knew it would not subdue her enough. She quickly conjured a mist around her student, hoping the gas would put her to sleep, or at least impair her enough so she could have the edge.

The purple filly could feel the roots slowly sucking the magic out of her very body and into the earth. She needed to act, and to act fast, or else lose and be killed by the tyrant. Internalizing all the magic she could, she let loose a massive blast of magic, managing to catch the cocky princess off-guard. Her advisory cried out in surprise as the pressure wave hit her head-on, flinging her across her chambers and into one of the pillars a couple of her guards lay under.

Not a sound escaped their muzzles as their ruler landed on their bodies,

her full weight suddenly placed on the pair of unconscious Pegasus ponies. The sudden attack caused her to lose concentration in the spell, the roots bursting into flame around her purple student. She quickly got to her hooves and focused; a pillar of rock rose from the floor, causing her former pupil to smack into it head-on.

Luna winced slightly as Twilight ran right into the stone slab, her battle with her dear sister as Nightmare Moon springing instantly to mind. She, or rather the twisted mare, had fallen for that exact same trap and nearly snapped her horn off. Things were quickly becoming violent, and if she did not step in soon, she feared that one of the ponies would not survive to see another sunrise.

Meanwhile, the unicorn charged her horn with magic and rammed it through the solid slab of granite as if it were naught but paper. The solid mass shattered into a million pieces; however, the princess was quick on the uptake, turning those chunks of granite into bubbles that surrounded her target. Each bubble merged with another, and then another until the purple pony lay encapsulated in a single giant bubble.

She rolled her eyes at this pathetic attempt to ensnare her, and promptly put her horn to the bubble's surface. Electricity ran into her body and down her spine, causing her to cry out in pain. Switching tactics, she tried to force her way out with her magic, but that too proved to be a dead end. "It's useless, Twilight," Celestia panted as she spoke. "There is no way out of that bubble from the inside; it exists in a shifted dimension, so you cannot interact with the outside world."

A smile spread across the unicorn's face. All at once, she vanished from the bubble. Worried, the princess dispelled it and called out for her student. Where had she gone? The princess never wanted to hurt her; that was why she was holding back... what was Twilight planning? Suddenly, a massive explosion ripped through the entire room, her world becoming a black torrent of pain and agony. It felt like thousands of knives stabbing and twisting over every square inch of her body all at the same time.

The next thing she knew, she lay on her side on the remaining steps leading up to the shattered throne. A massive hole marked the place she once stood, the purple mare at the epicentre of the blast. Any remaining windows were shattered, the pillar erased from existence and the glass

skylight missing completely. Celestia looked herself over and calmly noted glass embedded into her coat, sparkling in her sun like jewels. She was dirty and covered in thin trails of blood.

Luna's mouth dropped at the spectacle of magic before her. The little pony was a very fast study, as she almost immediately found the work-around and utilized it to terrible effect. Dust still hung in the air from the torrent of marble and stone. Only then did the midnight princess notice that all of the guards' bodies were gone, evaporated or blown away from the force of the blast.

They had both crossed a very serious line.

Focusing as much energy into her horn as she could, the Regent of the Moon fired a volley of magic, hitting the unsuspecting Twilight Sparkle in the back. Another small cloud of dust exploded in the hall as the magic connected, dissipating to reveal a dusty and visibly enraged unicorn shooting death glares at her as she lay on the floor. "Sister!" Celestia exclaimed. "I thought I told you to stay out of this!"

"I don't care," she replied. "You've both taken innocent lives today due to your carelessness. I will do all I can... to stop you both." Another blast of unicorn power blasted out of her horn, missing her sister only because of her quick wits and motor skills. "I will show neither of you any quarter."

A purple energy began to form in front of the midnight alicorn. It hurt her to have to do this to her dear sister and one of her saviours, but she had to do so for the common good. The swirling energy quickly took shape, glistening in the afternoon sun before shifting into a large sword. Its blade sparkled black with the power of the stars, the fuchsia grip shimmering softly. Luna clenched her teeth around the weapon's grip, taking stance against the charging Twilight.

Suddenly, mid-charge the purple unicorn became ensnared by a thin beam of golden magic, quickly snapping back around her body and launching her in the opposite direction. The mare twisted herself in the air as she felt the rope of magic disappear and vanished in a wink of light, teleporting immediately behind the newcomer to the battle. However, the dark alicorn expected this, jumping in the air to avoid the attack and smacked her with a hoof.

She careened out of control from the smack as it had thrown her dive off-balance. Unable to stop herself, the mare rammed head-first into one of the remaining pillars. Before Celestia could even comprehend what had just happened, an indigo blur obscured her vision as her sister teleported in front of her, swinging her Midnight Blade. A dazzle of light flashed in front of the feuding alicorns as the Regent of the Sun summoned her own sword to block the incoming attack with naught but a second to spare.

The two exchanged a quick flurry of swipes, neither landing a blow on the other as the smallest combatant saw her opportunity. Luna was an aid in her attempt to end the reign of the monstrous tyrant, but she had also attacked her, and such a deed could not go unpunished. Her own horn dazzled as it built up energy, trying to channel the awesome power she felt into her next attack. Twilight hoped the deadly dance between the two sisters would distract them long enough, as she let loose her righteous fury in the form of a massive blast of golden fire.

Caught in the middle of a lock, the sisters sensed the build up and release of massive energy just in time to avoid a direct hit. The ball of fire impacted the spot where they had stood seconds before, shrapnel from the explosion flying in all directions, causing them to shut their eyes to prevent chunks from blinding them. Naturally, the princess of the sun took advantage of the chaos, charging a shot of magic in her sword.

She took to the air and swung it in a wide arc, gathering as much sunlight as possible. In short order, the gold and silver blade sparkled in the power of the sun. Celestia wasted no time in using it, pointing the tip of the blade directly at her sister before letting loose a torrent of light. The magic mimicked the sound of cannon fire as it screamed across the room, large disks of multi-coloured magic forming from dust caught in its path.

Pain crackled through her body as the Light Cannon attack struck her body. An explosion at the point of contact threw the midnight mare into the air. She flew helplessly, slamming into the wall just beside one of the felled oak doors. Her neck snapped back, the wind knocked out of her as the wall shattered under the force of her hit, seeing stars. Luna's body fell to the ground in a soft thud, the gentle rattle of her sword skidding to a stop just a few precious feet from her muzzle.

Using this distraction, the small unicorn teleported under her former teacher, hoping to gore her exposed belly with her horn and secure victory against the two goddesses. However, she flew just beyond her physical reach, taunting her inadvertently with her skill and experience. A smile crept across the disturbed mare's face as her horn shimmered beyond the aura of magic that shrouded her. Large cracks began to develop on the ceiling directly overhead.

The princess had no time to react to the sudden attack, chunks of heavy ceiling landing on her back, driving the dagger-like shards of glass deeper into her body. She cried out in pain as she felt one of the chunks bend her wing the wrong way, causing her to crash-land onto the ruined steps leading up to the throne. With a stamp of the princess's hoof, Twilight observed a cage of rock jetting out of the floor around her, a weak attempt to try and stop her from finishing off the monster.

Unbeknownst to the purple filly, the dome of rock was not meant for the sole purpose of containing her. A bright light immediately filled the entirety of the prison, causing her to weld her eyes shut or be blinded by the intense glare. Even then, light managed to shine through her eyelids, the world going from black to a shade of brilliant red. But annoying light wasn't the only part of the package; the temperature had suddenly skyrocketed to levels she never dare dream of before.

Luna couldn't believe what she was seeing; that her sister would use such an attack on her prized student, of all ponies! No longer winded from the surprise attack just moments earlier, she slowly got to her hooves and primed an attack of her own. Her sister tried to stop her, but before she could, the rocket of indigo magic shot forward and into the stone dome. Another explosion shook the hall, obliterating the rocky prison that held the purple filly. In addition to freeing her, the attack launched her into the wall, face to the floor with her stomach pressed against the solid slab of stone, wounding her. "How dare you!" Luna shouted. "She might be angry right now, but she's still your student! How dare you try to kill her like that!"

Celestia tried to explain that she reduced the heat to about one thousandth of the sun's usual strength. Sadly, before she could get the words out of her mouth, the midnight princess grabbed her sword and shot another volley of magic at her. Things were getting desperate: Celestia could feel her strength slowly leave her with each spell she cast. One way or the

other, this battle could not last much longer.

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A dark cloud hung over the village of Ponyville that afternoon, metaphorically and literally speaking. When Sugarcube Corner exploded, fire quickly spread to several of the neighbouring buildings. On the mayor's orders, the weather squad rushed into action, pulling every cloud they could to form a large thunderhead over the town. It was their hope that by dampening it, they could slow the spread of the flames while the fire ponies tackled them.

Meanwhile, Nurse Headheart had quite the busy spell in her clinic. Along with her fellow nurse, the two mares tended to those wounded: a baby dragon with a broken arm, a black and blue Pegasus, a traumatized filly, a slightly concussed farmer and three shaking mares. None of them would talk when the two medical ponies walked into the ward, but as soon as they left, they all began chatting. It was a most curious phenomenon.

Pinkie Pie, usually the one pony who, no matter what, always put on a smile couldn't find one that day. In one moment, she lost her home, her job, and all of that candy! Meanwhile, Applejack massaged her head for the fortieth time since waking up, each time a little more of the massive migraine leaving her. Spike, however, laid quietly in his bed, arm in a thick plaster cast, staring into the ceiling blankly.

As soon as the two nurses left the room, Rarity decided it was time they finally break the ice. "So..." she started for the tenth time that day. However, she simply couldn't bring herself to say anymore, looking to the floor sadly again. No, this needed to be said! "So what do you think happened to drive Twilight utterly insane like that?"

No pony responded to her question, looking at each other blankly. The uncomfortable silence carried on for minutes, until finally the silence was broken by the most unlikely creature there. "I bet you something she read made her flip out like that," Spike spoke against the painkillers. "She was hitting those books harder then I remember."

"That's still no excuse," sounded the indignant voice of Rainbow Dash. One of her front teeth was knocked out in the assault, resulting in a small whistle

with every utterance of the letter s. "I'd never flip my lid like that over something I read in some dusty old book!"

"Maybe one of 'em had a spell on it," reasoned Applejack. "Maybe readin' it drove her mad... like in that one colt's books... what was his name again?"

"That would be Horrid Craft, darling," the ivory unicorn replied. "But I sincerely doubt it. What about that... what did you call it, Spike... 'Test Stress'? I'm sure that might explain it."

"Well..." the baby dragon drifted as he sat up. "It might, but it would have to be something like... well... I'm not sure... uh... Like Dash hearing that the Wonderbolts disbanded."

"WHAT!?" the rainbow-maned Pegasus exclaimed, not really listening to the conversation. "How could they do that!? No, no, no, no, no, no, no!" She then proceeded over to the wall and began banging her head against the wall, crying and screaming in a mixture of pain and anger. After about a dozen hits, the Pegasus was tackled by an orange blur.

"Dang it, Rainbow!" she spoke, muzzled barely an inch from hers. "Stop it! Spike didn't mean nothin' by it; he was just usin' it as an example!"

"Exactly!" Pinkie Pie chirped. "It was for the benefit of the reader: to show something suitable to illustrate what Spike meant." Everyone in the room gave her that typical blank stare when she started on a topic they could never understand. "So maybe we should go to the Library and find out what happened?"

"I agree with Pinkie," voiced the quiet murmurings of Fluttershy who, until that moment, lived up to her name, "At least... the looking in the library part, I mean." She immediately squeaked and moved back into the corner of the room to avoid the limelight, still shaken up over what happened just an hour ago. As much as they didn't like the idea of going out into the rain, they had to admit that going to the library would be the best idea.

Eventually, the two nurses came back to check up on the seven patients. This time, they were surprised to hear that most of them wanted to be released. Poor Scootaloo, however, continued to sit in one of the corners soundlessly. Nurse Redheart silently mused that they would send for a

psychologist from Canterlot for her first thing in the morning. Despite their objections, the two medical mares let them go as their injuries were minor, at worst.

The rain hammered the cobblestone streets of town as the six walked over to the Library. An occasional shout would ring through the streets as ponies continued to fight the fires caused by the addled unicorn. It was a sobering reminder of how much raw power Twilight had at her disposal, causing them to wonder where she had gone. Did she go into the forest to bide her time and destroy the town in the middle of the night?

"Wow," Spike voiced when they passed through the threshold of the door. The normally neat piles of books had collapsed all over the place, leaving only a small circle in the center where the purple pony once sat. "I've never seen this place so messy. I don't remember it being this way this morning." Wasting no time, they spread out to dig through the books; however, it took no time at all to find it.

"I think I found it," Rainbow spoke with some measure of pride. Suddenly, the tome took flight across the room and over to Rarity who flipped a page back. The mare read the passage aloud to her friends, pausing in some places where she found something that connected rather well to their friend. When all was said and done, they stood in the messy library in awe. Everything the book said fit her to a tee; it wasn't hard to imagine her being stressed at learning she wasn't even a pony.

Their minds reeled as they pondered how their friend could have possibly felt when she learned this terrible truth. All of a sudden, it wasn't that much of a stretch to see her turning paranoid, violent, and losing all touch with reality. Every pony stood around quietly, shuffling their hooves awkwardly as some of them tried to figure out where she might have possibly gone. Until, that is, one of them remembered a part of the passage... a disturbing part.

"Oh wow," Pinkie spoke. "So, is it just me, or is anypony else suddenly worried about Princess Celestia?"

"Spike?" the farmer asked, looking to the baby dragon.

"Way ahead of you," he replied, quill already in his good hand as he

scribbled out a quick note, leaning on a table to write.

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Princess Celestia of Equestria flew through the air with great speed and control. Every so often, she and her sister would fly close and exchange a quick blow or two with their swords, hoping to knock the other off balance and end the dogfight. In the meantime, Twilight Sparkle had managed to conjure a massive tornado of purple energy in the centre of the room, hoping to swallow both of the celestial sisters whole.

After several close calls, and breaking her Sword of Light, the mover of the sun summoned a bolt of light that blasted the ground underneath in holy lightning. It pained her to have to hurt her student so, but her magic was incredible and her rage boundless. She needed to end the confrontation soon, or else the filly's body would be destroyed by the overwhelming power. This led to the present moment: the three mares stared each other down in a triangle of destruction.

Twilight made the first move as, much like the two alicorns before her; she summoned a sword crafted out of magic. If the alabaster princess was not busy fighting for her life, she would be proud of her filly for being so quick to learn new spells. The purple pony charged, head low and purple blade out as she charged her monster of a mentor. Princess Luna soon followed suit, taking aim at the charging pony.

Casting out two more lines of magical rope, Celestia ensnared her sister and student, flinging their bodies together in a dull thud before casting them to opposite sides of the destroyed throne room, entangling the purple student in a thick system of roots. *So much destruction for such a meaningless cause*, she mused. She stepped forward, advancing on her student, wings flared in a primeval display to make herself as intimidating as possible. Magic crackled off her body as the glow faded from her sockets, revealing her purple, slightly bloodshot eyes to the filly.

"You can't win against me, Twilight," she said. "No mortal pony could ever hope to conquer a goddess like me or Luna. Please, give up now and let us discuss this like gr-" Before she could finish her sentence, a wisp of green smoke floated before her eyes, opening to show a hastily written note. Normally, she wouldn't bother with such a thing in the middle of a battle,

but with her opponent finally subdued and her sister's wish granted, she had little to fear.

Princess Celestia,

Twilight has gone crazy after reading something about Golems in a book, and we fear she might come to Canterlot in order to attack you. She has already set fire to half of Ponyville and hospitalized a good number of her friends. Please, don't be too hard on her if she comes... she'll suffer enough when she snaps out of...

A sudden flash of steel sparkled in front of the princess, allowing her to move her head just before she was decapitated. However, she soon wished she hadn't moved as she saw Luna before her, sword gripped tightly in her teeth... half of her large, ivory horn at her hooves. "LUNA!" Celestia spoke indignantly. Taking a unicorn's horn was a very, very serious offence; she counted herself lucky that her divinity would have it grow back. "HOW DARE YOU!" With a sudden flash of magic, a series of golden ropes erupted from her stump of a horn, tying her sister up tight and launching her into a stump of a pillar, the gilded strands securing it to the chunk of marble. "This whole thing was going to be finally over before you did that! Now you may have doomed all of Equestria!"

It was true that she could still cast magic, but with only half her horn it meant she could only wield half the power. Thankfully, the healing process had already begun on her damaged appendage. Celestia walked over to her sister, anger now fully on display, obvious. A look of pure horror suddenly came upon Luna's face, causing her expression to soften. "Sister!" Luna cried. "Behind you!"

The white alicorn let out a cry of pain as something sharp impacted against her side, cutting through her wing. Now flightless, she turned her head to find Twilight Sparkle, free of the binding spell, in her side. She fell to the floor as her student stood tall, royal blood seeping down her horn and over her face, a menacing grin over her face. "Now who's sitting in the saddle, Celestia?" she smirked.

Celestia yelped in surprise as she felt her student's magic pick her up and bash her into the walls of the room, twirling her around like a puppet on a string. She tried to use her magic to fight back, but the excruciating pain in

her side, coupled with the near constant impacts made it nigh impossible for her to concentrate. With a final flourish, Twilight spun her teacher like Applejack would swing a lasso before letting her go careening into the last remaining pillar in the room.

Everything began to shake as the final support in the room crumbled. Luna lay tied against the pillar, wide eyed and stunned into silence. Only now did she realize she made a big mistake by chopping off her horn then, and feared that the rest of Equestria would have to pay for her misdeed... again. She cried out in terror as pieces of the ceiling began to fall around them, noticing how calmly the purple mare walked to her target... like a Griffon about to kill its prey.

The princess moaned as her world collapsed around her. Sure, she had done some wicked things in the past, but could this all be the universe getting her back for it? Celestia could barely move from the waves of pain washing over her, or the gathering coldness from the deep wound in her side. Twilight approached, that same wicked grin in her eyes, chilling the monarch further. For the first time in over three thousand years, she let a genuine look of terror show on her face, tears beginning to well up as she saw her student, her little filly, walk down the path to self-destruction.

"Please, Twilight," she pleaded, tears streaming from her face. "You're better than this... please don't."

Mad laughter escaped from her mouth, making the princess wince as she stepped onto her battered body. The sadistic mare jammed her hoof into her wound, causing her to cry out in pain as her tormentor smiled on. "You're so cute... when you're begging for your LIFE, YOU MONSTER!" Without pause, the unicorn laid a flurry of hooves down on her face, having completely forgotten about her dropped sword. She cackled in delight as the once regal alicorn lay under hoof, bloodied and beaten almost beyond recognition.

"Now, Celestia," she grinned. "It's time to wipe away your MONSTROUS REIGN OF TERROR and let a new age of peace and prosperity sweep over Equestria."

Her eyes went wide as they streamed crystal tears down her bloodied face. With every passing second, she could feel her heart breaking a little more

as she realized just what her student was going to do to her. It was now or never to tell her, or else be doomed to her fate. "Twilight, please," she started. "I lo-"

"SILENCE!" the purple mare shouted in her face. Her horn began to glow an eerie white to match the veil of magic over her eyes. A sickening look of delight spread across her beautiful lavender face as a beam of energy passed from the tip of her horn into the stump of the other. From their horns, the mass of light spread over their entire beings, warming them where the light touched.

Luna watched with horror from her vantage point. She had no idea where Twilight had picked up that particular spell, but it did not bode well for her, or for the rest of Equestria. Eventually, the light surrounded both the ponies, shimmering as the illuminated silhouette of the one on top grew while the other shrank. If their country were to survive, she'd have to use her special, private spell that she'd never had the need to use on another pony. The light faded, revealing a sight she had not seen in over six thousand years.

On the ground lay a white alicorn pony, her mane a vivid pink with a more simple design of the sun resting on her flank. She panted while lying in a pool of her own blood, the wound in her side still leaking her royal blood onto the cold marble floor. Luna noticed a fear in her purple eyes, the likes of which she hadn't seen since she accidentally broke their father's crown one day so very long ago.

She felt a power unlike anything she ever experienced coursing through her veins. Her purple coat sparkled in the light of the sun. Her mane shaded from darkest starry night through the colours of sunset to the azure blue that now hung above her. A golden crown rested on her head while a golden necklace sat around her neck, each sparkling with many lavender jewels. The new wings that flanked her body flared open in triumph over what she accomplished as the pink-maned mare squirmed under her gilded hooves. *How pathetic*, the new Regent of the Sun mused as she grinned at her now mortal predecessor.

"Twilight," the former princess spoke in barely more than a whisper. Her voice was much higher than she remembered. "No, don't do this. I.."

"My name," she replied, her voice booming and commanding to all who should hear it. "Is Eos now. 'Her Royal Highness, Princess Eos of Equestria, Regent of the Sun.' Do not forget that, CELESTIA."

"Don't kill me, Twi- I mean, Eos. I know I did some horrible things, but PLEASE, don't destroy the pony that I've grown to respect so much!"

"Oh, I'm not going to kill you," Eos replied. "I'm simply going to banish you to what you have misused for so long. Enjoy an ETERNITY on the sun!" Her royal horn dazzled in light as she finished her sentence, quickly wrapping the bleeding mare under her in a blanket of light.

"No! Twilight! Don't! I love..." However, before Celestia could utter that last word, she vanished from the face of Equestria. Eos cackled in triumph as she kicked at the pooled blood under her hoof; at last, the world was free of that dastardly and evil pony who dared defy the universe. Now, all that remained was that pesky Regent of the Moon.

Luna shivered as the now immortal Twilight walked slowly up to her, eyes steeled in murderous determination. It was then that she noticed her stare. She looked back into those purple pools, working her magic. "Please! Twilight! Come back to your senses! You're better than this! Remember who you were... remember who you've hurt today. Yes, you're a Golem, but that's no excuse to hurt, traumatize and kill others! Please!"

Those green eyes... they quickly put her under their spell. Waves of serene calm crashed over her weary body, taking with them the anger, the hurt, and the hate. Suddenly, the events of the day flooded back to her, but not the way she remembered. Bright apples, cute critters, alabaster dresses, a filly learning how to fly, a concerned friend, and a started baby dragon. Finally, the straw that broke her back: a crying and hurt princess resting under her hooves, heartbroken and scared.

Twilight looked around the tattered room, her eyes beginning to shimmer and glisten. Not with magic this time, but with tears as startling realization crept upon her waking mind. Sure, Celestia did a horrible thing, but the real monster that day wasn't named after the princess... but Twilight Sparkle instead. Her mouth dropped in horror as she slumped onto her haunches, the water flowing freely from her eyes as her voice broke.

"Oh, my god! W-what have I DONE!?"

Epilogue

Redemption

Someday, in the distant future, the events of that day would have two different names, depending on who you asked, or what book you read. To most of Equestria, it would be known as 'The Battle at Canterlot', while in the small town of Ponyville, it would be known as 'The Reckoning.' Neither of the names chosen for the whole fiasco were wrong, but neither did they get across how seriously it impacted history. For the first time, a commoner was put into a position of absolute authority over the country.

A couple of days after that pivotal event found the new princess cooped up in her old dorm room, hidden as best as she could under the covers. The sudden increase in size, and lack of new blankets left the goddess exposed to the bitterly warm glow of the sun... her sun. She fought the temptation to just turn it off and stop that tantalizingly warm orb from haunting her with the memories of that day: a day she would never forget.

Why had she done that? Was this punishment for rising against her and hurting her so? Maybe she just wanted to see her squirm under the pressure and come crying back to her? If she didn't think she would kill her on-sight, Eos would have been more than happy to grovel before her and beg for forgiveness. Alas, she simply did not have the nerve to face Celestia... or Sol, now.

Shortly after she regained her senses, Eos became relieved to hear that her mentor could still be saved. Lingering remnants of divinity in Celestia's body gave her a window of time, not more than a minute, before the heat of the sun would roast her, and the vacuum of space steal her breath. She wasted no time in returning her from the sun: if she hesitated for a moment longer, she would have simply retrieved a corpse. Celestia's body was burned to a crisp, her once ivory coat charcoaled into onyx. The doctor was summoned and he whisked her away before the new goddess could apologize, never mind give back her power.

From there, guards escorted her back to her old dorm and locked her inside. She did not object and spent the better part of the afternoon and

well into the night sobbing into her pillow over what she did. To her surprise, Princess Luna knocked on her door very late that night and told her something that shook her to the core. Celestia wanted her to rule in her stead while she recovered. The next day was spent with the Regent of the Moon in a magical room at the heart of Canterlot. In there, Luna taught her how to raise the sun, and some other spells she might need.

A knock sounded on her door, snapping her out of her daydreams. There could be only one pony in all the land standing on the other end. "Twilight," said Princess Luna. "It's time for the public address. I'll do all the talking, but you need to at least be there. It's your duty. Dry your eyes and come out." Twilight moaned and rolled onto her other side, tears still dripping off her muzzle. She stayed like that for several minutes until she heard the door open with a quiet click, soft hoofsteps telling her Luna entered the room.

"Now, Eos," she added with a gentle, yet commanding tone uncommon for the indigo alicorn.

"Fine," she responded, her voice cracking from lack of use and all the crying she had done. She slowly got to her hooves, standing tall over the princess of the moon, but walked behind her like the submissive traitor she was. Eos could feel the burning eyes of everypony upon her as they walked to the entrance hall. Luna and Sol jointly wrote off the whole event as Nightmare possessing Twilight in order to destroy the solar princess. In fact, the purpose of this press conference was to publicly state so, and that Eos would look after things while the rightful Regent of the Sun recovered.

Eos could tell that no pony who worked in the castle bought the story. She kept her head lowered in shame, doing her best not to start crying again as they somberly walked down the halls and into the room. Members of the press took a myriad of photos of the temporary princess as she followed silently behind Luna, each burning her like a bolt of lightning. Time seemed to slow as their judging eyes bore into her soulless body like a dentist's drill into a tooth.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts of the press," Luna spoke into the microphone. Twilight shuffled awkwardly behind her, trying to remain hidden and failing. "Two days ago, Canterlot was attacked by the evil spirit known to us as 'Nightmare.' In order to do so, he possessed the body of my sister's

personal student, Twilight Sparkle. However, at the last minute, the evil spirit was conquered... but not before severely wounding sixteen valiant guards, and sending three others into critical condition by his hooves."

Eos felt her attention slip as Luna rambled on, still playing the events of the day over in her mind. She couldn't help herself, or her newfound self-hating attitude. Why did the princess not order her execution? It would be a far more kind punishment then letting her live with the unbearable guilt that haunted her so. Just have her killed and make everypony happy... it was not like she had any friends.

"...And so," Luna continued as Eos regained her attention. "Princess Celestia has mandated that her student, Twilight Sparkle, take over her duties of Regent of the Sun until she is fully healed from the encounter. Until my sister has recovered, Twilight shall assume the royal title of 'Princess Eos.' Please, show her the same respect and consideration as you would my sister. Thank you."

A choirs of voices surrounded them as the inquisitive ponies shouted questions, each screaming for recognition. However, the two princesses quickly turned away from them, leaving a representative to try and satisfy their hunger for answers. The two quickly trotted back to Twilight's old room, now flanked by guards. Luna shut the door swiftly behind her. "All right," she sighed. "I know you're melancholy, but you've got to talk about it, or else you'll destroy yourself by keeping it bottled up."

"Oh, Luna!" she cried, wrapping the princess in her hooves, sobbing into her neck. "I'm so sorry! Why did I do all those terrible things? Why did I have to hurt my friends and you and... and your sister like that!?" The midnight alicorn brought herself closer to the sobbing Twilight, gently stroking her back in comfort. "She must hate me! She's probably going to have me executed when she's feeling better!"

"Shh," Luna whispered. "It's all right. My sister would never do such a thing to you. Not in a million years."

"Well, she should!" Eos replied hysterically, breaking off the hug. "I attacked her and nearly killed her! I... I'm... my life is worthless. I'm a monster who shouldn't be alive right now. I deserve to die. The world would be a better place without me in it! I WISH I WAS DEAD!!!"

Slap! Her face stung and her mind reeled from the sudden force of the strike, twisting her head around to face her window. Ponyville lay beyond it, bathed in the afternoon light. She brought a hoof to her cheek to try and soothe the stinging sensation where Luna back-hoofed her.

"TWILIGHT SPARKLE! DON'T YOU EVER *DARE* SAY THAT AGAIN!" Luna shouted, not caring if anypony heard. In her normally warm and cheerful eyes, Eos saw flashes of Nightmare Moon as they burned in indignation. "If you were supposed to be dead, you would have died already! What would your friends say if they could see you now? What about Spike? Or Celestia? What about your MOTHER, Twilight, or your SISTER?"

"T-Trixie?" Twilight murmured, stymied. "How did you...?"

"That's not important right now, Twilight," Luna pressed. "What is important is that you let this go. Sure, you did a terrible thing, but that's just something else you and my sister now have in common. She's done FAR worse than you ever will, but does she wish herself dead? NO! She heeds the lessons of the past and uses them to make a better future!"

Eos felt like an utter foal before the princess of the moon. Just as she was about to let loose another cascade of tears, she felt a gentle nuzzle against her face. Those soft, minty eyes gazed back into her lavender ones, calming her down once more. The two ponies embraced each other again, a silent pact forming between them to keep what was just said between them forevermore.

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Although she did not see Celestia all week, Twilight (or rather Eos) slowly got herself into the rhythm of a ruling princess of Equestria. Mornings were early, as she needed to be up, literally, for the sunrise. For the most part, Luna helped her by lending her own experience and power to aid in waking and putting the stubborn sun to bed. That morning, however, Eos would be completely alone. She pulled her blankets aside and walked over to a window facing the morning horizon.

The temporary Regent of the Sun stepped out onto the balcony, opening

the door with her teeth. One thing she was not expecting when she turned into this new form was to lose the ability to perform more delicate tasks with her magic. At the moment, if she tried to open the window, she would probably rip it off its hinges and shatter all the glass. Luna said that it was normal for this to happen, and with practice she would be able to do those magics again. In the meantime, she focused her energies on the horizon before her.

Her horn dazzled as she shut her eyes, picturing the immortal sun cresting the horizon in her mind's eye. She reached out with an ethereal force to the sleeping giant, warmth cascading as the bottom of her ghostly hoof made contact. Eos screwed up her face, having not concentrated so hard since the Ursa Incident. Sweat ran down her face as she grunted in effort, feeling the fiery titan slowly begin to lose its grip. After what seemed like an eternity, the sun finally peeked over the horizon of Equestria, bathing its new mistress in the red glow of dawn.

Eos opened her eyes and beheld her own work: she had raised the sun, and all by herself! She panted heavily and let the first smile in over a week break across her muzzle. Reaching up with a hoof, she swiped the sweat off her brow and slowly made her way down to breakfast, stomach grumbling angrily at the great exertion she put herself through. Raising the sun felt like she just lifted over one hundred Ursa Minors, all at the same time.

Despite her earlier protests, Princess Celestia, through her sister, maintained that Twilight eat her meals in the Royal Dining Room. It was an honour reserved only for the two sisters, and their guests. Even with her status as Celestia's personal protégé, she would have never been allowed inside in all her life. At first, she tried to argue about it, but it soon became apparent that neither of them would take 'no' as an acceptable answer from her.

The purple alicorn approached the gilded ash doors, a pair of unicorn guards opening them for her using their magic. Inside, she still could not believe the sight that met her eyes. The floors of the room sparkled in high-polish that tinted the marble a fascinating green. Elaborate designs done in tiny rivers of gold were embedded into the strange marble. Oak panels on the wall reflected scenes from time immortal, telling stories through pictures, recalling a time when most ponies didn't know how to read.

A large fireplace of pink granite sat against the longest wall of the rectangular room, the opposite leading into the dedicated kitchen beyond a pair of swinging doors. In the hearth roared a fire, illuminating the room in a warm glow as it offered no windows to the outside world. A long table sat in the middle, countless floral decorations resting on the white-clothed, rectangular, mahogany table. At either end sat two elaborate high-backed chairs with an emblem of either sun or moon on top. Each had luxurious purple velvet padding filled with solidified clouds.

Twilight simply could not bring herself to sit in Celestia's chair, opting for one of the less luxurious guest chairs that sat on the sides. As soon as her flank made contact, a vividly red servant unicorn appeared at her side. Luna had once addressed her as 'Sable,' so she would do the same. After politely placing her order for breakfast, the midnight alicorn herself walked into the room and greeted her with a smile. "Good Morning, Eos. You did an excellent job of raising the sun this morning. Celestia told me to tell you that she is proud of you."

"Mmm," the lavender mare replied, looking into her bowl of cereal. As if her teacher could ever be proud of anything she ever did ever again.

"We've got a big day ahead of us," Luna continued. "They finished fixing the throne room last night, so you can start to hold court." Eos suddenly looked at her with great fear in her eyes. "I'll be with you the entire time for support and advice, if you need it." The sight of the smiling princess wiped a little of the fear from the lavender pony's mind as she finished her breakfast.

Holding court proved to be everything she had ever expected: it was dull and ultimately pointless. Granted, there were few ponies coming to see her, so they got some of the servants to come in with requests or problems of their own. With the princess of the moon at her side, Eos felt a confidence boost she desperately needed. It did not hurt that Luna refused to hold her hoof through the whole ordeal either. But, there was a theme to those two weeks: everypony was gearing up for the thousand and first Summer Sun Celebration.

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Eos paced nervously in the tent that morning, weary from having slept so little. Nerves, combined with an early start, conspired to keep her from the gentle wisps of dreamland. Not that she felt she deserved a peaceful night's sleep anyway. For the first time in nearly three weeks, she would have to face a crowd of ponies. A sigh escaped her lips, quite alone in the tent to prepare herself for the Summer Sun Celebration.

"How are you holding up, Eos?" Luna said as she slowly pushed the flap of the tent aside.

"Don't call me that, please," she replied. "I don't deserve any other name or title. I'm Twilight Sparkle: a mare who hurt those closest to her." Unseen by the moping pony, the princess of the moon rolled her eyes and walked over to her.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. Everypony makes mistakes. I am no different, nor is Celestia."

"I get it, I get it!" Twilight shouted. "You keep saying the same thing over and over! Stop treating me like a little foal! I don't need you going on like a broken record!"

"All right, I'm sorry," the princess apologized. "Remember those breathing exercises and calm down. I know you're feeling a little stressed right now."

"A LITTLE!?" she huffed. Twilight closed her eyes and started taking deep breaths, feeling the stress lift off her back a little with each breath. "I'm sorry. I know you're only trying to help me, and I appreciate it."

"Oh, it's my pleasure. You helped me be rid of my inner darkness, so helping you control yours is the LEAST I could do," the midnight mare smiled. The two ponies stood in there for the longest time, listening to the clamour of others approaching the stage behind them. Morning birds chirped into the pre-dawn sky, the smell of dew building on the grass reaching their nostrils.

"So, what did you want, Princess Luna?" Twilight asked politely.

"Oh!" Luna realized. "I just wanted to tell you that my sister is feeling well enough to watch in the audience! She should be up to having her power

restored tomorrow, after you get a good night's sleep!" The colour from Eos's face drained as the news washed over her. The princess was in the audience? Did she come to watch her fail, or to make sure her stress did not make her snap again? A part of her mind told her to put herself together: Celestia wasn't like that.

The warning horn sounded, startling the purple alicorn from her thoughts. "Oh," she said. "I guess it's time, right? Um... do I have to do that silly 'fly-up-and-flare-yourself' thing she usually does?" Twilight sighted when she saw the midnight mare nod her head.

"It's a little silly, I know," she soothed. "But it would be boring for everypony if you just stood there and lit your horn up, you know?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," the purple mare smiled, recalling the first time she saw the princess raise the sun.

Luna stepped gracefully off to the side as they approached the rear steps to the platform. The entire routine had been embedded into Twilight's head by both her own memories and through explanation via papers from Celestia. Although she was still new to raising the sun, the princess could feel it bend to her will a little more easily with every time she made it crest Equestria's horizon.

She only had a quick moment to scan the crowd in front of her as she stepped onto the large stage, a dozen guards blowing that familiar tune into their Trumpets. However, near the front, she spotted a pony with a coat as white as the snow, and a mane of dazzling, yet simple pink. Twilight bit her lower lip slightly in trepidation, her own mane wafting gently in the solar breeze.

The powerful pair of wings flanking her side spread to their full flare, her long horn dazzling in soft purple light as she took to the air in a powerful stroke. Already, she could feel the warmth and power of the sun cascade into her as her ethereal will made contact with the giant. She could feel her teacher's stare bore into her, wondering in the back of her mind what she was feeling at the sight.

Sure enough, the whole event went off without a hitch. Although, Eos looked far more tired than Celestia ever did. She wiped the sweat off her

brow and grabbed a quick nap in the tent behind the stage before facing the music and going out to mingle with the ponies. Most of the common ponies did not really mind the temporary shift in power as many of them were too thrilled with the fact that she was a commoner to care. Noble ponies, on the other hoof... well, it was not like Twilight ever really cared what they thought anyway. Sadly, she did not see her teacher again for the whole day.

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Upon the day after the Celebration, Twilight walked up to Celestia's chambers. Only on one occasion had she been this terrified to approach these doors. She was but a little filly, new to the castle and its ways that day so many years ago. Eos tensed up as she stopped dead before those white pieces of wood, guards in golden armour flanking it as usual. She swallowed hard and approached the dual portals, knocking softly in case the mare beyond could not handle loud noises. "Enter," spoke a soft voice from beyond.

She gently placed a hoof on the long, golden handle and pushed down, opening the doors with a click. Light flooded into the room from the doors, curtains drawn over the windows to cast it into darkness. As soon as she passed across the threshold, the doors shut automatically. A large fireplace sat before her in the circular room, a white form resting upon a pile of pillows in front of it. Eos bowed her head low as she approached.

"So, do you want to take care of business first, or would you rather chat for a while before?" Sol asked, her purple eyes gazing into the lavender alicorn. Her face was unreadable in the silhouette of the fireplace.

"If you mean giving back what's rightfully yours, then I'd like to do that first, Princess," Eos responded, head still in a deep bow. The flower scent she remembered from the princess's chambers ignited memories of happier days in her mind... days where her only friend was her dragon assistant.

"All right," she replied. A beam of white light shot forward from her stump of a horn, connecting with her student's. A wave of warmth swept over the two mares as the light embraced their entire beings. Unlike last time, the warmth carried something else, something elusive to the purple pony, but quite present. After a few moments, the warmth faded. The student opened

her eyes to see the world once more from her familiar vantage point, the goddess before her flaring her wings.

Twilight shut her eyes, allowing warm tears to pass as she pressed herself into the floor, awaiting any punishment the divine teacher felt worthy of her treachery. Her body rocked with spasms and shook in fear as light overtook the room, unable to see the princess had merely opened the curtains. "Twilight Sparkle," she addressed. "Please, do not be afraid of me. I'm not angry at you for what you did, but I will confess myself... disappointed."

She began to openly sob in front of her mentor, somehow that idea being far worse to her than outright anger. Celestia let out a sigh as she approached the filly, her horn already rebuilding itself. "I understand why you did what you did, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry that I deceived you for so long. I wanted to tell you for a long time, but I grew uneasy about the possible outcomes, and became complacent in the lie. This is entirely my fault."

"N-no, Princess Celestia," the student replied. "This is my fault; I failed to listen to reason and let my emotions and stress get the best of me, instead of stepping back and evaluating the situation dispassionately."

"Twilight, I appreciate the sentiment, but that would have been too much to expect from you in light of the circumstances." A frown flashed across her royal face as she laid down beside her student, much like for her sister a little more than a year previous. "All I ask is that you walk away from this having learned two important lessons... and a few smaller ones as well."

The purple pony blinked in surprise, no longer sobbing, yet tears still streamed down her eyes, looking into the lavender pools of her teachers. "The first lesson: Learn from the mistakes of the past, be it your own or your ancestors. It is as simple as it sounds, my faithful student, and I know you've shown me your understanding of it well. But the next might be a little harder to grasp. A part of growing up is learning that the idols you've gilded with gold are nothing but granite underneath. Can you tell me what that means?"

She racked her brain for a few seconds, pondering the teacher's words carefully. "It means..." she trailed. "That a part of growing up is learning

that... that your mentors... your parents, teachers, and elders... aren't perfect. That they're flawed and are able to make the same mistakes and possess the same prejudices that a young pony can?"

Celestia beamed back at her precious student... her little filly. "That's exactly right, Twilight. So you see, we're both in the wrong here, and I'm deeply sorry for it. I'm sure we can agree that getting beaten and nearly killed by my student is punishment enough for me. As for you, I'd say living with these memories will suffice nicely for one with a gentle heart like yours. However, I must warn you, Twilight... if you ever go berserk again, I have entrusted the mayor of Ponyville with a device that will block your magic. At least until you've calmed down."

"That... that's less than I deserve, princess," the filly sighed. "I don't think I should be your student anymore. I don't deserve to be in the same kingdom as you, never mind the same room! Why are you always so nice to me, no matter what I do? I'm a spiritless monster: an abomination to the universe!"

The mover of the sun shook her head, a dead serious look the likes of which the student had never seen before on her face. "Twilight, right now, I am speaking to you mare-to-mare, not goddess-to-subject or teacher-to-student. Until we leave this room, consider me an equal in your eyes." With that, the princess stood to her full height, an explosion of golden flames erupting around her.

The student cried out in shock and horror, quickly getting to her hooves and backing into the wall. It was rather difficult to see the mighty goddess as anypony's equal at that moment. As the flames quickly died, a sight she never expected manifested. That same pure-white pony with the pink mane stood before her, lacking wings: a unicorn like herself, right down to their height. "You might find this amusing, but you do have a spirit, Twilight."

"How can I?" she asked, almost shouting, "I'm not a pony! I wasn't even born! Give me a single good explanation!"

"I can give you three," Sol calmly replied. "First, with some encouragement from my dear sister, you snapped back to reality and instantly regretted what you did. A soulless monster would never care enough to experience regret and they would be immune to her spell."

"Well, um..."

"Second reason: you have a cutie mark. As everypony knows, a cutie mark only appears when a pony has learned their special talent. What nopony else knows, however, is that a cutie mark can only form when that pony has a complete, if not fully developed, spirit. You see, I was ignorant of something critical all those years ago. Ponies are not born with spirits, but rather they are forged from the fires of our lives. As we live and grow, they develop and change over time."

"I guess that sort of makes sen-"

"Final reason," she interrupted. "If you didn't have a spirit, you never would have been able to steal my divinity. Every pony with a spirit has a god or goddess inside them, lacking only the spark to awaken them. It's a contingency plan the creators put in place in case the royal bloodline should ever die. Eos is as much a part of you as your magic or your hoof, and is not something to be feared. I'm not sure what will happen now that she has been awakened, but I will make time to investigate this matter."

Twilight did not notice the unicorn burst into gilded flames again as she pondered her words. They made a lot of sense to her, now that she thought about it. Maybe she was not quite the soulless monster she thought she was, but she still felt like it. A new sense of shame overwhelmed her as she lowered her head to the floor again. She had flown off the handle for no reason, now that she thought about it. The revelation didn't change anything, except maybe caution her to watch her stress levels... but that was something she knew already.

"How could I be so foalish? I... this makes complete sense to me, pr- I mean, Celestia. But... why are you so nice to me? I'm sure anypony else that I almost... murdered... would want me executed for my crimes. Why are you letting me off so easy?"

"Come here, Twilight," Celestia motioned with a hoof. She smiled as her student obeyed her request, and climbed onto the pile of pillows in front of her. The princess's horn continued to shimmer, almost restored to its full length. Once on the pile, the Regent of the Sun joined her, resting alongside her. "I'm not exactly sure how to say this, and I'm not sure how you'll react, but I've wanted to tell you this for years."

"Tell me what, princess?"

"Remember our fight? How I kept trying to say something to you at the end of it?"

"Yes," she nodded, looking sadly into a pillow.

"Well... I was... um... trying to tell you that I... well... wow, this is harder to do when your life isn't on the line, isn't it?" she laughed at the situation, sounding like dozens of beautiful church bells. "I'm sorry. I was trying to tell you... I love you, Twilight. At first, I wasn't sure of it, but as time passed on, and I watched you grow, I became certain. I love you, like how a mother loves her filly. I always have, and... and with every accomplishment you achieve, I find myself more proud of you than I could ever say."

The purple mare lay there in silence for what felt like an eternity. Did... did the most powerful being in all of Equestria just say that she loved HER, Twilight Sparkle, even after all she did to her? Yet... as impossible as it sounded, the filly knew, deep down, that she had always seen the princess as a motherly figure. Those cold nights where she tucked her in, tea with her in the private gardens, stopping everything in her busy schedule to calm her when she was upset: everything fit.

"But..." she voiced uneasily, "The book said that... well, Golems have a familiar relationship with their makers. I feel like I love you too... but that could just be the spell that animates me."

"Not a chance," Celestia smiled warmly, "When I made you, I cast two spells on you. The first was to ensure you stayed alive and asleep while I figured out what to do with you. The second spell, however, broke that clause you spoke of. I didn't want you to feel anything for me that was against your free will."

New tears welled up in the filly's eyes then. Unlike any other time during this whole episode, they were not tears of pain, anger, or sorrow, but of unbridled joy. Quite suddenly, the princess felt something warm pressing against her. Looking to her side, she saw the tearful filly nuzzling tightly into her. "I... I love you too... Mom." It was a simple sentence, but one that the princess longed to hear for over twenty years. She draped a wing over the

filly... her filly... and wrapped her neck around her, eyes glistening with tears.

The pair stayed like that for well over an hour, neither moving or speaking, simply embracing each other as mother and foal for the first time, neither wanting to spoil the moment. However, the princess noticed the sun beginning to arch towards the horizon and broke the silence. "Now, remember, Twilight... Shimmer Tail is as much your mom as I am, and Trixie is still your sister. Do not forget about them simply on my account."

Twilight looked into her eyes, wide in shock once more. "H-how did you know she's my..."

"Oh, my precious pony," the princess smiled, "Your mother's been my good friend for years! How could she not tell me? It... it hurt me when I heard that they didn't accept her into the academy with you. I tried to pull some strings, but they all broke. So, I gave your mom the idea to make those dolls for you two so that, in some small way, you would always be together."

"Th-thank you," the purple pony sniffed.

"Not at all, dear. Now, unless I am mistaken, your chariot should be ready to take you home to Ponyville by now."

"Oh. Right." Twilight crawled out from under her wing and over to the door, somewhat hesitant to return home. By then, news had spread about the fire that swept over twenty percent of the town, injuring several ponies in the process. Just as she was about to open the door with her magic, she heard a soft, deliberate cough behind her. Turning around, she saw the princess standing at full height.

"One last thing, Twilight," she said. "Please, keep what was just said to yourself. There are ponies out there who might try to hurt you to get at me. I would rather die than have that happen to you. Oh, and I left a note for you in the chariot. Open it when you get into the air. I'm afraid I can't see you off."

The purple mare started to the door once more, just about to open it with her magic, since she could feel her power was back to its normal levels.

However, a thought crossed her mind: one that had been bugging her for the past fortnight. "Um, Princess Celestia?" she paused, turning to her mentor.

"Yes, Twilight?" she replied, curious as to what her student wished to add.

"Um... why did you let me rule Equestria these past three weeks? I know Luna can raise the sun as well as the moon... I mean, you did both for a thousand years. So, why have me do it?"

"There are two reasons, Twilight. Firstly, I wanted you to better experience what life is like for me, and what better way than by walking a mile in my hoofsteps? Secondly, I figured you might appreciate the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, since I know how much you love to study pony magic. Even if you didn't like most of my duties, I could tell from your face yesterday that you liked bringing the dawn, as it utilizes ancient magic once used by the creators themselves."

"Well, I suppose it did feel kind of nice," she replied with a blush on her cheeks.

The princess smiled back at her little filly. "Yes, I know. Although you can't touch the sun anymore, I allow you the right to use any other spells you might have learned from Luna. You have earned them and I doubt you will misuse them."

"All right, see you later, Princess," the filly chirped as the door opened behind her. "And... thank you. For everything." The door shut in front of her face with a gentle click, mother and foal looking into each other's eyes until the very end.

Later, on the chariot, she found the letter in an envelope addressed to her in the princess' hoofwriting bearing her name on it. It was tucked into a small slot for visitors to keep their papers during the longer flights, like when foreign dignitaries arrived at Port Noble from lands across the sea. Carefully opening it with her magic, the mare read the contents to herself.

My Dear Twilight,

I apologize for not talking to you about the incident until right before you

left, but I felt the need for you to have some time to yourself to cool down and reflect on the situation. If I have told you of this note's existence, then our little chat went very well indeed. However, on the off chance you are snooping around in a bored stupor, I urge you, but don't expect you, to stop reading here and have a safe flight.

With every day and every letter, you remind me more and more of myself at your (relatively speaking) tender young age. I cannot tell you how proud I am of you, even when we were fighting I felt that same pride swell in my heart. Even if you had killed me outright, I feel you would have made an excellent ruler of Equestria. You see, when I took power, I strove to be the best, most powerful princess in all history. That urge and lust for power only worsened when my mother, Queen Notia, fell ill with a terrible disease that robbed her of her mental faculties. At the time, I thought she forgot me and my sister intentionally.

For the longest time I was angry at her, and the world. This led me to do unspeakable horrors and kill many innocent ponies. In fact, the bitterness that overtook Luna and turned her into Nightmare Moon was entirely my own fault, and I didn't realize it until about two hundred years after the fact. I still haven't forgiven myself for doing all those horrible things, but the trick is learning how to live with it.

I apologize again as I seem to be rambling: another trait we have in common, my beloved daughter. Do not worry about your friends. I am sure if they are really all you say in your letters, they will welcome you home in earnest. That said, please continue to send me your reports on the magic of friendship. Luna and I don't get to spend a lot of time together, and your letters are one of those few occasions we can share.

I would also ask that if you tell any ponies about our relationship, please ensure it is kept to your inner circle: namely Spike, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Applejack and Pinkie Pie. Also, please have no worries about blowing up at them again: just remember Aunt Luna's breathing exercises and you will be fine. You have grown into a smart and beautiful mare, Twilight. I have no doubts that everything will work out in the end.

Looking forward to your next report,

Celestia.

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A couple of minutes passed, but it felt more like a couple of seconds to the unicorn as the chariot began to fly low overhead the town of Ponyville. Several buildings were blackened, and more tents than she remembered occupied the town square. The magnitude of her little... episode did not really sink in until she saw those buildings lying in ruins. She shrunk into the chariot as she thought she saw a streak of rainbow out of the corner of her eye.

"Ms. Sparkle? We're here," spoke one of the Pegasus ponies pulling the golden chariot. They had been on the ground for a minute or two before he spoke, as the purple mare thought that by hiding, they would think she disembarked and take her back to Canterlot.

Alas, they were not easily fooled as they refused to budge. "Okay, thank you, sirs," she replied in barely more than a whisper. Reluctantly, she stepped off the transport, cringing as she heard it roll away almost instantly. In a second, she felt dozens of eyes fall on her, gazing into her as if willing her to die right then and there. She bit her lower lip, the sweat already beginning to run down her face.

With all the courage she could find, the lavender mare began walking through the streets of the town. Not once did Twilight lift her head, too ashamed to face any of the innocent ponies she may have hurt during her rampage. She could hear nasty whispers between ponies behind her, spreading rumours though the town's celebrated network of gossips.

Along the way back to the library, the mare saw the fruits of her destructive labours. Sugarcube Corner had been reduced to a pile of black rubble... what little had not been blasted away, at any rate. Countless other businesses and homes sat around, burned to cinders or otherwise uninhabitable. Ponies still rummaged through the ruins, trying to salvage any valuables that may have survived the wave of fire.

The former princess shuddered as she walked past a window, thinking that she saw Eos reflect in it for a brief second. Did her counterpart feel as sorry as she did for the destruction that they... she caused? Twilight took a deep breath to calm herself and continued along her way, the buildings

becoming less burned the closer she got to her home. All she had to do was make it into the library without incident and she could duck in there for as long as she needed.

Thankfully, no pony vandalized or burnt her library down in revenge against her atrocities. She took a deep breath and sighed as she approached the door, all the windows as black as night. Did Spike refuse to come back, or did he simply run away, much like when he thought she replaced him with her owl? Using her magic, the lavender pony quietly opened the door and slipped into the comforting blackness inside.

"SURPRISE!!!"

Twilight jumped and gave a loud shout at the sudden noise and light shining in her eyes. A quick shake of her head dislodged the ringing from her ears, opening her eyes to drink in the sight before her. Six figures, five pony mares and a baby dragon, all stood in front of her under a purple, star-struck banner which said, 'Welcome home, Twilight!' Before she could even get a word out, they all ponypiled on her in a massive group hug, telling them how much they all missed her.

"You... you all... forgive me?" she stuttered after they all climbed off her.

"Well, of course we do, darling," Rarity chirped, "We read that book that set you off, and we came to realize that snapping like that simply wasn't your idea."

"Yeah," interjected Rainbow Dash, "And I probably would have done worse if I thought any of you were... you know... touching foals."

"Or how you thought I was getting stuff for Pinkie to make you into a stew with," added Spike with a nod.

"Wait," the purple pony silenced. "How did you know...?"

"Oh, that's easy!" Pinkie Pie cheered, jumping up suddenly in front of her, "The princess wrote us all letters about how you were sorry and that you never would have done any of that in your right mind and also how you saw us in horrible, horrible ways, like Rarity running a funeral parlour or Fluttershy with demonic bunnies and all that! How could you think I would

want to make you into cupcakes, Twilight? I mean, HELLO, ponies would taste awful! Not to mention how hard it would be for me to disguise the meat since we're all herbivores, and I doubt hot sauce would do the trick, unless you had a WHOLE TUB for each cupcake but that would be a hot sauce tub with frosting recipe..."

"So... yeah," Applejack spoke over the rambling pink party pony, "The princess sent us all letters, an' explained everythin' to us, includin' what you though you saw. Princess Luna told her all about what you two spoke of, an' all that. So, we know you didn't mean anythin' by any of that, sugarcube."

"Um..." the yellow Pegasus mumbled, "We really, really missed you, Twilight. So... um... can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Fluttershy, of course you can," the lavender mare replied.

"Um... what was it like... you know... to raise the sun and sit in Princess Celestia's spot while she... you know... recovered. Not! Not that you have to answer... if you don't want to...never mind. Just... forget I said anything."

"I don't mind. It was weird and awkward, not to mention the overwhelming guilt I felt for all the things I did that day. Make no mistake," Twilight started to address every pony present, "I'm happy beyond my wildest dreams that you've all found the heart to forgive me. Yet, I don't think I could ever forgive myself for what I did, and I wouldn't blame everypony else if they never forgave me either."

"Come on, Twilight!" Spike suddenly shouted, "Give them time, and they'll forgive you too! Now, this wouldn't be much of a party if we didn't have some fun!" He gave her a big hug with his newly healed arm. It stung a little bit, but it did not matter to him one bit. Twilight was back, so his family was whole again.

And so, after some persuasion, the party kicked off in earnest. For a few precious hours, the purple unicorn forgot about all the hurt and suffering she caused. Over the following days and weeks, the Element of Magic would learn to live with what she had done, and learn from her mistakes. In time, things would return to normal for the town of Ponyville, and all who inhabited it.

Yet, life would never be the same for its librarian. For one who had tasted the poison of murderous fury, the ambrosia of divine power, and the pure joie de vivre of knowing she had a soul that was loved intimately by its creator, life could never be normal again. Then again, being normal was never an option Twilight considered.

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## *The End of Sunset*

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Clash of the Heavenly Titans

Canterlot: the crown jewel of Equestria. To most ponies, it stood as a monument to the achievements of generations past, and to others it represented the regal beauty of the monarchs it housed. Yet, only two ponies knew the real reason it existed: it was a new start, away from the bitterness of the past. Of course, none of that mattered in the present day, for most of the old wrongs had long since been righted.

Mornings were always early at the castle, since many of the staff had to be awake before dawn to cater to the pony that raised the very sun itself. However, for the past year and a half, the task became two-fold. Her Royal Highness, Princess Luna of Equestria, Regent of the Moon hummed happily to herself as she trotted down the gilded alabaster halls of the castle, carrying a large sack behind her with her magic. It was a tune she found herself leery of humming around her older sister, as it was one their mother would sing to them. They... did not part on the best of terms.

Today was not a day to wallow in the past, however, as it marked the first day of Foals' Week. Luna smirked to herself as a million plans bubbled in her brain, all formed from years past. Sure, Celestia had banned the practice before her... interment... but thankfully for the lunar princess, she had long since forgotten the ancient holiday, which would give her a much-appreciated and deserved edge. Given how her older sister had come back to her, she knew in her heart that this was going to be the best week ever.

Those poor, unsuspecting foals, the midnight princess thought to herself as she ascended the stairs of the tower. *By the time they and Celly realize what is going on, it will be far too late.* A Cheshire grin spread across her face when she came to the window. She had been scouting out the best spot for this diabolical plan for over a year, and it felt to her like Celestia designed this tower JUST for this purpose. Luna giggled to herself as the large burlap sack opened to reveal a rainbow of coloured balloons.

With great stealth, the alicorn poked her head out the window and surveyed her surroundings. From her perch, she had a view of most of the grounds, plus the front gate, which would make for some interesting times. She immediately sought out a target, seeing two of the Pegasus guards circling the grounds. Since they were off duty, and free of the armour's enchantments, she immediately identified them as Glint and Alloy. Luna always made it a point to learn the names of all the members of the staff.

They were cousins, but they were also quite competitive, so it was no stretch of the imagination to see them in the middle of a race. Luna smirked and levitated one of the balloons with her magic, the red sphere cast in an aura of dark blue. After a couple of rounds, she felt she had the timing down. Only then did she wait for the opportune moment, chucking the balloon with all the telekinetic speed she had.

Meanwhile, the two cousins taunted and pestered each other with their banter, the charcoal Glint beating out the bronze Alloy by just the width of a feather. However, in mid-flight, something impacted the gray Pegasus hard, making him veer off-course and into the other racer. The two tumbled in the air for what felt like an eternity before finally landing in the moat with a massive splash!

"You feather brain," coughed Alloy as he pulled himself out of the water. "What the hay did you do that for!?"

"I didn't do squat!" Glint defended as he collapsed in a heap. However, the petty bickering could not be heard up in the tower, where the princess of the moon rolled on the floor, forgetting all decorum as her frame heaved with laughter. Never in a thousand years did she think her first hit of the day would result in a two-for-one soaking! *And here I thought I lost my touch*, she reasoned through the tears that streamed down her face.

By the time she risked poking her muzzle out of the window again, the two guards were hoof-wrestling on the outer grounds... probably to determine who was at fault. Still, there were plenty of new targets on the green as Canterlot slowly roused itself from its slumber to begin the new day. After all, she still had about one hundred and ninety-nine balloons to go and the day was still young. Hopefully, she could use them all before ponies got too... well, they could not be mad at their goddess, now could

they?

Tactfully spreading out her attacks, the princess had scored forty more direct hits and about thirty misses in the past three hours. Perhaps she had become rusty at this after all? Ah well, it did not matter to her. Luna had not had this much fun in as much as three thousand years, and by stars, she was going to nail somepony important. Fortunately, for her, opportunity presented her desire on a silver platter. A green and gold carriage pulled up to the castle, dropping off three ponies in back suits, two flanking the one in the middle.

Even from a distance, the princess could identify her target as Regal Scroll: Prime Minister of Equestria. Down on the ground, the black unicorn stallion stepped lively for his appointed summons with Princess Celestia. Behind him trotted his two bodyguards: a yellow Pegasus stallion with an orange mane, and a white unicorn mare with a two-tone mane of white and purple. Both wore dark sunglasses to obscure the colour of their eyes.

Suddenly, before any of the ponies could notice, a barrage of technicolor came from one of the towers. Immediately, the bodyguards sprung into action, kicking or zapping as many of the balloons as possible. However, one managed to get past and strike the Prime Minister directly in the face. "GAH!" he cried out, "Sunny! Go up there and drag that foal over here!"

"Yes, Sir!" the stallion saluted and flew up, before coming back seconds late with a rather wet face, "You're not going to believe this, Sir, but... um... it's Princess Luna throwing the balloons." If he was not so composed, the black stallion would have ruptured the ear drums of his bodyguards with his agonized scream.

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"...no sense of respect for Parliament, and she ruined my best suit!" Regal Scroll ranted through the closed doors of Celestia's office. Princess Luna, however, sat outside unapologetically, glancing at the two bodyguards the Prime Minister left in the hall. She did not care if she got in trouble, since no punishment could be worse than a millennium on the cold, empty moon.

Sure enough, after a couple of minutes of ranting, the doors to her older

sister's office opened, the aging oak chipping and peeling in obscure spots. "Luna, please come inside," Celestia asked calmly. The blue alicorn obliged, stepping inside the office with a smile upon her face. She had nothing to fear, especially since this was something the white alicorn was more inclined to laugh about. Behind closed doors, of course.

"Yes, sister? What did you wish to see me for?" the younger sibling asked, smiling as she saw the royal pony sitting in her chair, just as planned. She trotted over to the small table in front of her desk and sat on the right-hoofed side, directly opposite from the slightly soaked Prime Minister.

"You know quite well why I have called you here, Luna," the princess of the sun spoke sternly, crossing her hooves on the top of the table. "It is one thing to pelt unsuspecting members of our staff with water balloons, but quite another to do so to the head of government, who was elected by the ponies of Equestria themselves. It might be misconstrued as a lack of respect for our subjects, dear sister."

"Well, it was not meant that way, Celestia. I simply felt the time was appropriate to spread a little bit of the Element of Laughter about the castle, as I have noted a distinct up-tightness. Therefore, I took matters into my own hooves by tossing some of the more... stiff member of our staff a few water balloons. It was all an attempt to make them lighten up, and was in no way meant to impugn the integrity of our Prime Minister."

Celestia took a deep breath and let out a large, relieved sigh. Millennia of experience told the younger alicorn that this was merely a facade she put on for the political pony. Luna, however, had no such reservations and cracked a large grin as she looked at him. To make a long description short, he looked more akin to a drowned rat than a pony.

"I am very glad to hear that, dear sister. Now, if you will both excuse me, I must go see my advisor about..." she trailed. Her alabaster cheeks flushed just a tiny bit as she realised her flank would not disconnect from the chair. Indeed, even as she stood at her full height, it remained affixed to the solar sister. "Luna, did you...?" However, the rest of her sentence was cut short by the roaring laughter of the regent of the moon.

"Oh, Celly," she cried in between fits of laughter, "I knew you were

attached to your work, but I didn't know it was physical as well!" The midnight pony lost all of her composure, lying flat on the floor, pounding her hooves against the regal blue carpet as she struggled to regain her breath. Meanwhile, Regal Scroll sat there terrified: unsure if he should laugh, or yell, or just get out of the room as fast as possible.

"Prime Minister, you are dismissed," the elegant mare replied, to the stallion's relief. Without another word, he bowed to the princesses and made a hasty retreat. Only when the door shut did Celestia speak once more. "I am surprised at you, sister. Surely, I taught you better than such foalish pranks! We are royalty, we are above such nonsense... and how did you think of it before I did?"

"Happy Foal's Week," the younger giggled before she left her sister to try and pry herself from the synthetic glue's sticky claws. Luna felt confident that she already won the war, since her sister's jokes usually needed far more time to set up, meaning by the time her elaborate revenge was complete, the week would be over, and she would have the last laugh. *Oh, Luna, you foxy little filly*, the younger princess thought to herself as she trotted happily down the corridors.

Meanwhile, back in her office, a disturbing grin crept across the face of the regal white alicorn. "Foal's Week? Why, I daresay I had completely forgotten about the practice. Thank you for reminding me, sister: together, we will revive its ways." A few low peals of deliciously ominous laughter echoed in her office. Stepping out into the halls, stifled giggles and chortles, as well as a couple of cat calls, resounded through the castle, all directed at her. At first, the regent of the sun had no clue as to why... until she happened across a particularly well buffed suit of armour.

There, written on some paper taped to the very bottom of the chair, there was a note that read, 'Desperate: Free rides, no waiting!' A strange mixture of embarrassment, annoyance, and a sense of challenge blew about her, as if she stood in the midst of a hurricane. "Oh, my dear Luna. It. Is. ON!" she growled in determination. If she wanted a prank war, then by the stars above, they would have a prank war of mythic proportions!

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Luna woke the very next day, more invigorated than she had felt in a very

long time over her decisive victory against her sister, little knowing it was but the first shot. After performing her usual morning chores, she stepped out of her private suite and began the long trek down to the royal dining room for breakfast. "Good morning, your highness!" chirped a voice all too familiar to the blue alicorn.

"Ah, good morning, Sable," she replied to the wine-red unicorn mare. "How was your sleep last night?" Despite being on Celestia's staff, the princess and the servant were good friends. At first, Luna thought the red-stained unicorn was instructed to make friends with her, but as time went on, she began to trust that she first approached the princess on her own terms.

"I slept fine, Princess. Might I ask how you slept?"

"Let's just say I'm feeling ready to seize the day and have some fun. I trust by now you have heard about Celestia and the chair?" The red mare nodded her head, doing her best to suppress a grin from the memory of seeing the esteemed mare trotting down the halls with her office chair glued to her rear end. It was as close to a laugh as the princess was going to get out of her... in public, at least.

The two continued down the winding halls of the castle, ignoring the rich tapestries, statues, and windows as they went. Small fillies and colts ran in the halls up ahead, playing and laughing as they went to breakfast before their classes. Celestia's school had been in existence for five hundred years as a part of the castle, yet separate in its own right. The princess of the moon had not been in that wing yet, if only because she still felt uncomfortable around foals.

Suddenly, as Luna rounded a bend in the hall, she felt her hooves slip. She yelped in surprise and struggled in vain to gain some traction as she skidded around another bend and over to a series of buckets stacked in a pyramid. "Oh no!" she cried before smashing into the buckets. A sticky substance splashed over her body as she hurtled into a suspiciously piled pack of punctured pillows.

"W-watch out, Princess!" Sable shouted as she slid into the royal rump. Luna let out a small groan as she laid on her back, her friend in a rather awkward position that made her blush just thinking about it. Her tongue

snaked out of her mouth and tasted the substance that made her feel so incredibly sticky.

"Tree sap," she growled. "I HATE tree sap!" Ancient cogs turned in her brain: the situation seemed far too familiar to be a coincidence. *Why that little... she's actually playing dirty for once! Oh, Celestia, you want a prank war? You're going to get one!* She shuffled to her feet, trace amounts of butter still on the bottom of her hooves. A large, conveniently placed, mirror showed the alicorn covered in the yellow sap, looking like a deranged chicken.

"Go wash up, Sable," the princess spoke to her friend. "If anypony gives you problems for being late for anything because of it, just send them to me and I will set them straight."

"Yes, Princess. Thank you." With that, the red unicorn trotted (with the occasional squeak) towards the nearest bathroom. Meanwhile, Luna continued on to the dining room as dignified as she could in light of the circumstances. The occasional hushed giggle would drift across her ear only to be promptly silenced as soon as she came into sight. Sure, they did the same with Celestia, but there was... tension in the air surrounding her. Considering recent history, it did not surprise her one bit.

Approaching the dining room doors, she ignored the poorly hidden smirks on the guards' faces as they opened the door into the impressive space. Unlike most rooms in the castle, it did not have any windows to the outside, lit only by the pink-stained fireplace. "Um... Luna, my dear sister," Celestia chimed as she crossed the threshold. "I am afraid you are about a month late to dress up for All Horses Eve. Although, I must say that I do like how you wear that disheveled chicken look."

The blue alicorn ignored her sister's deadpan delivery, knowing full well that the next moment she had alone, the older princess would put up a soundproofing spell and laugh with all the force her black little heart would give her. Already, dozens of plans for revenge churned in her brain, each more diabolical and hilarious than the last. However, she would not go too far too fast, there was a subtle art to one-up-mareship, and she would play it by the book.

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If it were not for the increasing nip in the air, birds would be perched happily in the trees and singing their delightful little tunes. As it was, they were probably somewhere on the south coast, soaking up the perpetual summer warmth. Luna sat with her friend Sable in her royal suite, having tea after dinner, the previous days prank (and feathers) naught but a distant memory... and it would grow far more distant in a couple of minutes.

Celestia was a pony of habit. Every evening, after a filling dinner, she would retire to her chambers for the night and have a quick shower before catching up on her reading, or any unfilled business from the previous day before she went to bed. Unfortunately, this made her as predictable as the sunrise, and thus an easy target.

"So, how did you get Princess Celestia back for the chicken incident, your highness?" asked the wine-red unicorn as she held her lemon tea with magic.

"Oh, something tells me that you'll find out very soon," the princess of the moon replied with a sly wink and a bout of giggles.

"Well," Sable added, sipping her tea, "Whatever it is, it sounds like it is going to be good. But please, your highness, keep me out of it? I like my job and besides, I didn't have fun getting that tree sap out of my coat last night with only thirty minutes to do it in." In fact, the unicorn still had a couple of feathers stuck to her flank. As a maid to Princess Celestia, she did not have the luxury of time to take care of the problem herself.

"Then consider this my apology for getting you involved yesterday," Luna spoke after sipping her tea. Her horn shimmered in a dark glow as the feathers on her friend's flank vanished from existence, off to parts unknown. "There we go, now they have a nice new home on the moon. Celestia isn't the only pony who can send stuff there," she smirked, well aware of the rumours that her sister was a little...quick to banish stuff to her former prison.

"ARGH! **LUNA!** I'M GOING TO **GET** YOU FOR THIS!" screamed said sun pony suddenly, her voice resounding through the entire castle.

"She sounds livid," the unicorn replied calmly. "What did you do?"

"Oh, you'll find out tomorrow morning," Luna smiled happily.

Indeed, the very next morning, the castle was in an uproar of laughter as the princess of the sun made her way down to breakfast. On the inside, she was happy to see her subjects loosening up and having a little bit of fun at her expense. Stars knew that she had done so to them on multiple occasions and that they deserved the laughter, but her icy fury towards her little sister knew no bounds. How DARE she steal one of her trademarked pranks!?

Even the guards to the dining room could not help but crack a smile at her... unique appearance and opened the door for the monarch. As soon as the double doors opened, she was treated to a wall of laughter from her younger sister and several members of the waiting staff as she walked to her chair with as much dignity as she could muster. "Good morning, sister!" Luna chirped with a devilish smile on her muzzle after composing herself. "Did you have a good sleep? Also... you look a little different. Did you do something with your mane?"

"Do not play dumb with me, Luna. I assure you that retribution will be at hoof for this... travesty."

"You don't look mad to me... In fact, I think you're...TICKLED PINK?" she giggled at her own pun. Indeed, the mover of the sun was pink, but she was far from amused. While she sat in court the previous afternoon, Luna sneaked into her chambers and inserted bubblegum pink mane dye into her showerhead. Needless to say, it stained her alabaster coat and turned her wafting, rainbow-like mane into a frilly disaster.

The look upon her face: it was just too much for the younger princess to bear. She pressed her muzzle into the fine cloth and roared with laughter, slamming her hoof into the table hard enough to shake the candlesticks and floral arrangements down on the opposite end. That sort of behaviour would not stand! Besides, Celestia refused to be bested by her LITTLE sister. Oh yes, she would have the last laugh, even if it killed her!

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It had been a long day of meetings, holding court, and entertaining a

couple of aids that had come in advance of a visiting ambassador, but somehow Luna had managed to live with it. As a side-effect from her prank on Celestia, she deigned herself sick, so all of her duties (except for raising the sun) were given to her for the next day, or however long it took to bleach all of the offensive dye from her coat.

The midnight alicorn found herself in a muted fit of giggles as the memory of her pink sister washed across her waking mind, reminding her of better times when they would eat cotton candy at the fair and get it all in their manes, much to the chagrin of their mother. It was just a shame that the two sisters could not let down their manes anymore and just... be sisters as opposed to co-rulers and goddesses of a nation.

Maybe they would have some time off when they found ponies to be their successors? Luna could already tell who Celestia would choose, beyond any shadow of a doubt, but somehow it did not seem as if that would solve their lack of time together. The alicorn gently derailed her train of thought as she gracefully trotted down the gilded alabaster halls to her chamber for a good night's rest.

A thought suddenly crossed her mind as she approached her chamber doors, flanked by two white Pegasus guards in their enchanted golden armour. "Excuse me," the princess politely inquired, "But may I ask if you have seen my lovely older sister around here, or anything else out of the ordinary?"

"No, your highness," replied the guard on the left. "We've been on duty since noon and we have not seen a single pony enter or leave your chambers." As much as the younger princess stared, she could not sense any deception upon their faces, but it could have been years of training behind that stoic look. Still, if she could not trust her own guards, then she could not trust anypony but her sister.

"Very good, Lieutenant," she nodded as she made for her chamber door. Unfortunately, she could not see the smirks on their faces as she opened the dual portals. Everything seemed all clear to the moon princess, but she still proceeded forward with caution. With a full-on prank war declared, Celestia could use any one of her ten million sneaky little tricks to get back at her.

However, the moment she placed a single hoof beyond the threshold of her door, the world spun and warped as if being sucked down a drain. Luna could tell that she had walked into a one-time teleport spell almost immediately, which begged the question of where she would end up. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, all but expecting an express ride to that little castle she made on the moon to pass the time.

Thankfully, or perhaps unfortunately, Celestia possessed far more tact than that. As soon as she opened her eyes, she found herself in a cramped little green room with a bewildered-looking Pegasus sitting right in front of her. It took her a couple of seconds to realize that she had been teleported into a bathroom stall. He started screaming, covering up what he could, causing the princess to scream and claw at the stall door with her hooves, desperate for escape.

After a couple of terrifying seconds, she managed to break free of the cramped, green stall and out into the main part of the bathroom. She instantly regretted doing that. There, standing in front of her had to be about a dozen colts, all in the midst of bathing themselves under the rows of shower heads. More screams erupted from the bathroom, not because she had seen the guards naked (since ponies never really wore clothes to begin with) but because she had invaded the privacy they were entitled too.

Luna welded her eyes shut and made a beeline for the door, using her magic, which nearly ripped the thing off its hinges. However, unbeknownst to the alicorn, one of the guards had dropped a bar of soap right in the path of her flight, causing her hoof to come into contact with it. For the second time in a week, she slid out of control, past the open door, and crashed through one of the opposite side of the hall.

When the princess opened her eyes again, she found herself wedged in a laundry cart full of dirty clothes, her flank high in the air beyond the rim of the large container. With as much dignity as she could muster, she pulled herself out of the laundry cart, flopping onto her side as the contents spilled. Several saddles, socks, and pieces of armour rained on top of her. "I hate socks," she spat as she shook her horn free from an obnoxious, rainbow-coloured tube sock.

Disappearing in a flash, the younger princess appeared at the scene of the crime to find her two door guards roaring with laughter. She shot them

both a scolding look before they smirked and radiated golden light, combining to complete the form of her older sister. "Why Luna," she said with an air of smugness, "If you wanted to go have some 'unconventional' fun with the guards, you could have just summoned one or two to your chambers. They DO deliver, you know."

"You're... so... DEAD," Luna growled before teleporting into her suite.

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The next morning found the lunar princess awake far before the dawn with a strange smile, given the circumstances, plastered on her face. She trotted down the usual gilded marble halls and down into the cold stone of the basement, towards her goal. The only thing down here that would pique the interest of the royal family would be the archives, but nopony knew she had no interest in looking up an obscure fact in a dusty, ancient book.

"P-princess Luna!" stammered the royal sister's head chef. The blue alicorn had suddenly come through the door to the royal dining room's dedicated kitchen, the white stallion just beginning to get things ready for the breakfast service. "I just opened the kitchen, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait if you're feeling peckish, your highness."

"Oh, no, I'm not hungry, Entree," Luna replied. "I just need you to point me in the direction of the muffin recipes. I've realized how useless and unproductive all of this pranking is, so I want to bake some apology muffins for my beloved Celestia."

"Oh, how wonderful," Entree Delights replied. "Wait right there, your highness: I know just the book." Soon enough, he trotted back to the moon goddess with a book levitating behind him in a soft white glow. "If there is anything else you may require, just ask." With that, he left her to her task, confident that she would not need assistance, or rather hoped so since he was on a tight schedule to get everything ready for breakfast, and make it fit for royalty.

The princess smiled and nodded her head, moving to an unoccupied corner of the kitchen. Her presence would be distraction enough without her getting underhoof and messing with the normal morning rhythm. Indeed, as she gathered the supplies she would need to create the batter,

she found the kitchen staff awed by a member of the royal family working alongside common ponies, especially this early in the morning.

With the bowls, beaters and other utensils ready, the lunar princess went about gathering the flour, eggs, and other necessary items for the batter of her delicious muffins. She followed the recipe in the book down to the very punctuation, never mind the letter. However, just as she was about to pour the batter into the tray, she dumped a vial filled with blue food colouring, laced with a very special potion she had "cooked up", so to speak.

Luna giggled in delight as she poured the batter into the muffin tray, imagining her sweet, wonderful revenge for that tasteless bathroom scare. Forty-five minutes of patient waiting later, her muffins finished just in the nick of time, the waiting staff reporting Celestia's order to the kitchen staff. After dropping off her own order, the blue alicorn happily trotted up the stairs and into the dining room.

"Good morning, dear sister," she happily chirped.

"Luna? What were you doing down in the kitchens?" the elder alicorn asked, suspicious of her motives.

"Well..." she trailed, "I felt absolutely horrible about this silly prank war. I could NEVER hope to measure up to your years of trolling our subjects. So, to bury the proverbial hatchet, I decided to bake you some muffins. I did it all by myself to show you how sorry I am and how lucky I feel to have such an awesome and forgiving big sister like you!"

Celestia carefully picked up one of the muffins with her telekinesis, sniffing the confection to make sure the younger princess had not laced it with hot sauce or itching powder, or something equally heinous. Sensing no danger, she took a small nibble of the baked treat. "Mmm!" she murmured with delight, "Are you sure your special talent is raising the moon, Luna? This is simply divine!"

"Oh, I'm glad you like them, Celly! Here, have the whole dozen. I'm not in a muffin mood this morning, myself." A shadow of a smile crept across her muzzle as her sister happily took the entire tray, blissfully unaware of the humiliation that awaited her in just two mere hours. Soon, vengeance would be hers, and in record time too, since there was only one more day

left in Foal's Week.

A couple of hours later, the younger sister happily trotted up the forward grand staircase in the entrance hall, up to the throne room. She nodded politely to the guards and said hello to the waiting petitioners before quietly entering the chambers to watch the show as her special muffins kicked into effect. The moon princess nodded to the guards and her sister before sitting beside her to begin court for the day.

The first petitioner passed normally, and so did the pony after that. It was not until about the fifth pony for the day that the muffins began to take effect on the solar sister, obviously delayed by her power and divinity. "So, I was thinking that it would be a wise investment to harness the power of lightning for pony use," spoke the brown colt. "I have an idea on how to do this and with your permission, I'd like a research grant and... your highness? Um... are... are you okay?"

One of Celestia's eyes had drifted into an obscure corner of her socket, leaving the other trained on the pony in front of the royal sisters. Luna crack a smile and tried to suppress a giggle over what was about to occur. "Um... that sounds fine..." the solar sister mused, "... but I think MUFFINS sound better! Muffins for everypony!" Suddenly, a giant storm cloud appeared in the throne room, the baked treats raining down everywhere. Every possible flavour started pelting everypony, causing some to flee the refurbished room in terror.

Meanwhile, Luna clutched her sides, tearing up from laughter as magical muffins rained down all around her. Sure, Celestia would be royally pissed off... but not for another two or three hours when the spell wore off. By then, she hoped to be far enough away to avoid her initial indignation. No matter the punishment, she would always treasure the memory of Princess Celestia: The Muffin Mare!

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Later that evening, the younger alicorn trotted down the stairs to the dining room in triumph. The castle was in an uproar over her devilish little prank, not soon to be forgotten by any present member of the staff. For the past few hours, Celestia had terrorized the entire facility with muffin-related shenanigans, including making the main fountain spew the treat instead of

water.

A certain grey Pegasus from Ponyville nearly had a heart attack in delight of what she saw whilst delivering a package to the solar pony from her faithful student. Luna had never seen a Pegasus do the backstroke in a pool of muffins before, so the day had turned out far better than expected. However, her thoughts soon became dark as her imagination kicked into overdrive about how her sister would seek her revenge.

Still, much to her credit, she kept that grin plastered on her face as she entered the dining room, her sister already seated on the far side, a serious look upon her face. The elder princesses' front legs lay flat on the table, her normally soft lavender eyes hard and cold. Luna gingerly seated herself in her chair, half expecting the elaborate piece of furniture to be electrified. "Sister," Celestia spoke as soon as the blue alicorn's rear end made contact with the cushions, "I think this stupid little prank war has gone on long enough. It was fun while it lasted, but what you did this morning was a severe breach of my trust for you."

The blue princess felt her ears droop and bit the corner of her mouth in apprehension. Her tone was not that of anger, but of severe disappointment. Sure, she knew she crossed a line when she spiked those muffins, but she had it coming! "If I cannot trust you, Luna," she continued, "Then I cannot afford to trust anypony. Let us call it a victory for you, and leave it at that. Ambassador Longfang will be here tomorrow, and he will be thrilled to see you again after your time away. Dragons do not appreciate pranks, if you will remember."

"Yes, sister," Luna replied. She never intended to shake Celestia's trust in her since it was all in good fun... was it not? Still, there was no denying her words, or the fact that dragons simply did not understand a good prank. Granted, it would be wonderful to see her old (and ancient, by then) friend once more.

"Good. With that out of the way, I have some good news for you," the regent of the sun smiled.

"Oh, what is it?"

"Three weeks ago, I wrote to your favourite author: Baroque Quill. I told

him how much you adore his works, and he was excited to hear that you of all ponies regard him as your favourite. So, I took it upon myself to arrange a get-together for you two. You will meet outside the gates tomorrow at sunrise and spend the whole day together before the dinner for Ambassador Longfang."

"REALLY!?" the blue alicorn jumped, beyond excited. Baroque Quill was only the best (living) author ever, and her sister set her up on a... on a date with HIM!? She was almost as giddy as a school filly to meet such a creative soul! In her mind's eye, a vision of a tall, handsome stallion stood before the gates of the castle, bathed in the soft glow of the morning sun, his eyes like jewels and his coat as smooth as silk. Luna wolfed down her meal and trotted off to her room to get some sleep. Tomorrow was going to be the best day ever!

Dawn came swiftly and with little sleep for the moon princess, far too excited at the prospect of meeting such an amazing author as him. At about five in the morning, she abandoned the attempts at a night-long sleep and waltzed to her bathroom. There, she bathed in her private shower, trimmed her mane, brushed it all about one hundred times and even put on some dark eye shadow before she polished her crown, necklace and shoes. With everything ready to go, the alicorn happily cantered down to the front gates, her tail up high and swishing back and forth as she moved.

A large, eager grin manifested itself on her muzzle as her adornments shined in the twilight that proceeded the dawn. Luna had even set the moon early today so that she would not be bothered by her sisters' ethereal beckoning in the middle of a conversation. In fact, she was so excited that she whistled a cheery tune with no regard for any of the sleepy ponies who may have wandered out to begin their days. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could ruin this day for her!

The doors to the castle opened with a creak and a low groan as the massive doors swung on their rusty, old hinges. Luna licked her lips as the drawbridge slowly lowered to open Canterlot Castle to the public for the day, the famous author surely beyond the massive planks of wood. As soon as it lowered, a carriage appeared on the other side, prompting the princess to hurry over to meet it.

As soon as the door of the carriage opened, a blur of seven colours filled her vision as she was tackled by some strange force and shoved roughly to the ground. Dazed, Luna's ears rung in her head, her world nothing but the dying stars present in the mauve sky overhead. Eventually, when the lunar princess regained her stature, she saw not the gorgeous stallion she imagined, but three over-excited fillies babbling back and forth to one another about something beyond her range of hearing.

One of them was a yellow earth pony filly with a dusty rose mane and tail. The second filly was an orange Pegasus with a soft lavender mane, while the third was a white unicorn filly with a two-tone mane of light pink and purple. Occasionally, a word would rise over the low din caused by the three excited foals, but not enough to be of any coherence to the blue alicorn.

"Pardon me, girls," the princess asked politely, "May I ask why you are here, and if there is anypony else in that carriage?"

"No, why would there be?" asked the earth pony.

"... Why are we here again?" the unicorn asked, looking around in a confused daze.

"To get our cutie marks, of course! Princess Celestia invited us over in one of her letters to Twilight and said that she could help us get them!" spoke the irritated orange filly. "Who are you supposed to be?" she asked rudely, looking the alicorn over.

"I'm Princess Luna," she replied. "I have no clue why my sister would tell you that she could help you earn your marks, but she is very busy preparing for a visiting foreign dignitary today, so I'm afraid you will just have to go home." The three fillies moaned, looking down to the ground, their eyes beginning to fill up with tears. They had come a long way for, obviously, nothing.

"Wait a minute," piped the unicorn. "You're a princess too, so you can help us!"

"Well, I guess, but I ca---"

"We could be her bodyguards!" cried out the Pegasus in excitement. "Then we could kick all sorts of flank!"

"That's not really---"

"Ah know!" chirped the yellow earth pony, "How about we be her royal chefs!"

"Didn't we already try baking?" asked the white pony.

"Oh! We could always be ones of those ponies that follows her around!" voiced the orange filly. "Then, if there IS any danger, we can help! What do they call those again?"

"Girls, I really don't thi---"

"Escorts!" exclaimed the unicorn. "We'll be her royal escorts!"

Immediately, their eyes sparkled at the suggestion of being around one of the princesses all day, even if it was not Celestia, as promised. The three put their heads together, gathered a single deep breath and shouted, "CUTIE MARK CRUSADER ROYAL ESCORTS! Yay!" Suddenly, Luna became very stiff at what she had just heard. Sure, the three ponies seemed vaguely familiar, but it was not until then that she had pinned just who they were.

Of all the ponies to use the bait and switch with, Celestia just HAD to use the three most energetic, mischievous and delusional fillies in all of Equestria. Electricity flowed through her blood as she realized that it was all a prank setup by her sister. She built up her hopes and crashed her dreams, then stuck her on babysitting duty with the most aggravating fillies she knew. The lunar princess bristled with anger, humiliation and tears at having been played the fool. Never in a thousand years would Luna do something so... cruel, so... heart wrenching to her sister.

Sadly, she would have to let those emotions stew, as she saw one of the ponies edge closer to the moat. "No! Um... Sweetie Belle! Stay away from there!" she panicked, flying over to save her from falling into the strong currents before the waterfall. It was going to be a long, long day.

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Luna collapsed upon her bed, huffing and puffing, fuming over how her sister had played with her emotions and hurt her fragile feelings. She knew that she had a crush on the author, and she dared use it to make her a fool? That was not in the spirit of the holiday at all! The midnight princess sobbed into her pillow again, too emotionally distraught to even consider going to the welcome dinner for Longfang. She could just see Celestia downstairs in the state dining room, a cheesy grin on her face as she shrugged off her absence as something embarrassing, obviously.

Celestia knew how easy it was to build up her hopes, especially after all that happened over the past thousand years or so. How could she have been so cruel? Sure, she would have expected this from the Celestia she knew right before being banished, but her loving sister? How dare she play with her emotions like that!? That uptight, overzealous little tyrant needed to be taught a lesson, and in a big way that only a goddess could do!

A happy smirk crossed her muzzle as a plan formed. Getting angry had never done anything but cause trouble for her, so she would find another outlet for her divine fury. Being a sad sack would never earn her the respect she rightfully deserved either. Luna stood upright, her eyes shut in concentration. Wisps of cold midnight extinguished all light in the room, enveloping the blue alicorn as her smile became more devious and wicked.

Suddenly, flames as black as the abyss erupted around her in a controlled explosion of magic, the power coursing through her veins. A cold laugh escaped her muzzle as the familiar form returned to her, granting her a power she would not have otherwise. The mare stood taller than ever over her surroundings, her mane sparkling like the stars themselves, flowing like water. Out of the corner of her eye, a white Pegasus mare in a midnight body suit approached the princess, her head in a deep bow.

"It is a pleasure to see you like this again, my queen," the manifestation grinned.

"Shadow Star, my faithful servant," the midnight alicorn spoke in a lower, colder voice than she used to. "We have much work to do and little time in which to do it. Princess Celestia shall PAY for making a fool of me, the mistress of the moon, and I have just the plan."

"I am all ears, your majesty." The dark princess approached her servant and placed her muzzle against her ear, whispering sweet plots of revenge. Each word uttered made the enigmatic Pegasus grin more wickedly than the last, her amber eyes flickering behind her flight goggles. After several seconds, the queen of the night pulled away, leaving her servant to giggle in delight. "This will be more fun than the time you ordered me to steal her favourite bath pillow! I shall not fail you, Nightm---"

"Enough!" the alicorn chastised. "You have your assignment. Do not fail me!"

"Never, my queen." With that, the Pegasus opened up the chamber window and took flight, setting about her task.

A smile crept across her face as everything she hoped for was coming to fruition. Soon, she would have her revenge on her beloved older sister and everypony would respect her once more... or else! The mare chuckled as her body turned into a purplish mist, filtering under the door. It felt so good to have these powers back and it would feel even better once she had gotten even with the annoying sun-loving pony in the great hall.

Meanwhile, Celestia sat at her chair at the head of the table in the majestic state dining room. The ceiling above yawned out into the sky, enchanted to reflect the mood of the room so that she could swiftly end any uprisings. It served as a reminder to her about how far she had come since she made it: she never needed to use it anymore. To her right sat a large, red dragon wearing many golden rings upon his scaled fingers. He could never fit in the castle normally, but thanks to some enchantments, his weight and dimensions scaled down to an accommodating size.

"I apologize for Luna's absence, Longfang," the celestial pony spoke to her friend as the main course arrived. "I am afraid she became... indisposed and simply could not make it. I am sure she will be present for breakfast. It has been so long and she is genuinely excited to see such an old friend. Alas, the past year and a half has been rough on her: a new capital, new technology... and my new attitude to say the least."

"I understand, Celestia," the red dragon replied in a gruff, deep voice, "It is hard to believe that it has been one thousand years already. But, to be

fair, it was expected considering how you were back then. I must admit I was honestly scared to be ambassador to Equestria when I was first appointed. But thankfully, that is now all behind us."

"Indeed. I can never apologize eno-" she replied, before being cut off by a loud crack of thunder. Everypony in the hall snapped to attention, looking around wildly to find the source of the noise. However, a new sound swiftly overcame the hall: a choir of mad laughter which chilled Celestia's blood. She felt her jaw drop and eyes glisten with tears. Had the princess inadvertently pushed her dear sister over the brink with her innocent little prank?

Suddenly, the massive doors leading into the great hall slammed open, revealing a towering mass of blackness, pushing wind into the room. The moving air howled past her ears, nearly drowning out the mad laughter of her younger sister. A low rumble sounded from the portal, causing her to wonder just what monstrosity was about to descend upon them. Frightened, the guests held their breath as the first creature popped through the black void... and then the next, and the one after that.

"Stampede!" cried one of the door guards as he was quickly overwhelmed by the white menaces that filtered past. Noble ponies cried out and screamed as the little horrors ran into the room and hopped upon the table. Try as they might to shoo them, the meddlesome little critters refused, chowing down on the ponies meals. How could she have done this!? Not only the technical aspect, but the fact that something like this just was not her style! Bunny rabbit after bunny rabbit poured through the portal, quite possibly the entire population of all Equestria!

Meanwhile, the noble ponies screamed and ran in terror, trying to get away from the common wild animals that dared to eat their fine cuisine. They simply did not know how to handle the adorable critters, and had she not had a dragon sitting beside her, she would have laughed as some of them fainted melodramatically. A wisp of purple smoke swirled into the room and coalesced on top of the table, tossing away some of the plates as the towering form appeared.

"How do you like your fancy dinner now, Celestia!" the midnight alicorn raised her voice over the din, cackling at the chaos. In an instant, all of the sun pony's fears and worries melted away, replaced with sheer joy and

mirth. Luna stood tall, equally Celestia's own height. Her blue mane wafted in an ethereal wind, speckled with the twinkling of the night sky. She wore no dark armour and had no slit in her turquoise eyes, yet she carried a quiet power about her that no pony save the solar sister could quite comprehend.

"I love it, Luna!" she laughed out loud, causing a smirk to appear on the younger pony's face as well. "You really went all out with this!" The black void blocking the exit disappeared, allowing both bunnies and ponies to escape into the night, crying out in distress. Forgetting all protocol, the elder sister joined the younger upon the surface of the table, trotting over to give her a big hug. "It's so wonderful to finally see you confident enough to get back into your proper form!"

Once everything calmed down, the two sisters looked to their honoured guest and apologized for the mess and the chaos that had occurred. "It is no problem," he waved a clawed hand in gesture. "They were a stuffy bunch anyway. I am just so glad to see you both happy and together at long last." With the hall utterly ruined, the three retreated to the usual dining room to resume the meal in peace and quiet.

"You know, I learned something today," Luna spoke as she finished chewing on a piece of apple pie. "Sometimes the best way to deal with hurt feelings is to find something you enjoy and do it. Or, you can always find something to laugh at instead of staying angry or upset and letting those feelings fester."

"I learned something as well, dear sister," Celestia added with a bright smile. "Although it is good to have fun with others, and perhaps laugh at their expense, it is only okay to do so as long as things do not get carried too far, and feelings get hurt. I am truly sorry if I hurt you with my deception, Luna."

"It's fine, Celly," she chirped, "It was actually kind of funny in hindsight. Plus, I got to help steer those poor, misguided fillies a little closer to discovering their talents."

Sure, there would be some cleaning up, and explaining to do for the noble houses, but it was a small price to pay for the slice of happiness the two long-lived, world-weary ponies got to share. They laughed happily in

the company of their old friend, ready to finally close a dark chapter of their lives and move on to something new, something brighter. Yes, there would still be dark days and bumps in the road ahead, but with their renewed love and trust, the sisters felt ready to tackle them... together.

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The End of Clash of the Heavenly Titans

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My Little Muffin

Chapter 1

Soft, classical music echoed through the halls and rooms of the humble abode that night. It was a gentle tune, violins and bass bringing forth a powerful, yet emotional crescendo. For some reason, ponies liked playing Posh Ball's 'Canon in D Major' at weddings, possibly to reflect what they hoped the future would bring. Meanwhile, Derpy Hooves busied herself with fixing her dinner: she was not nearly conceited enough to play this sort of thing while reading.

The amber-eyed pony hummed along with the tune as she chopped up some celery to put in her salad, looking out her window and into the night sky. Although it grew warmer in her house by the minute, she didn't dare open the windows or else succumb to the horrid stench that came when hundreds of ponies expelled the contents of their stomachs. Derpy shook her head at the thought, dumping the chopped vegetable into her salad.

It all started out innocently enough. The town threw a massive party to celebrate its founding, so Pinkie naturally had to bake a magnificent cake for all in attendance. However, unbeknownst to the pink baker, the ingredients for the cake had spoiled. Needless to say, anypony who had a piece of the massive confection quickly ended up having their stomach pumped before the virus could get into their bloodstream. Some moulds can be pretty nasty.

Grabbing a bottle of milk from inside her fridge, the mailmare emptied the contents into a waiting glass, the record playing out its final notes as she took her first bite. It was a perfectly normal meal fitting a rather abnormal pony. Nights like this made the Pegasus realize how alone she really was in the world, and how much the hurt of past pains continued to vex her. Even though she had largely moved on, some of them could never be

forgotten.

Unlike most Pegasus ponies, Derpy was born and raised in Hoofington, a town twice the size of Ponyville. All things considered, it was a good place to grow up, though not as homey or friendly as her new home. Where the ponies here mostly tolerated her... peculiarities... her old town was much less kind. Her inability to speak properly and curious eyes inspired the notion of mental incompetence in the rest of the town. She was, predictably, bullied and called names by the other foals, and even some of the more brazen adults.

Still, the mare never let that stop her, not for an instant. Despite everything they did to make her feel worthless and stupid, she demonstrated a learning capacity beyond her years, having learned to fly first out of all the Pegasus ponies of her year. Not to mention her Cutie Mark... but that would be a story for another day. Eventually, after having been told that she could never teach due to her disability, Derpy settled for a job as a mailmare in the Royal Equestrian Postal Service.

For the time being, Derpy focused on the meal before her, trying to push past those bad memories of the past and focus on the happier ones. The tantalizing aroma of her salad, complete with dressing of her own blend, floated into her nostrils as she ate. Bits of onions, peppers, tomato and pieces of stale bread brought forward an incomparable texture to the normally dull meal. It was almost enough for her to not notice when her lazy eyes acted up again.

An unknown amount of time later, the gray mare cleaned her plate. Gently taking the delicate porcelain into her mouth, Derpy fluttered over to the kitchen sink to clean up. A quick scrub of the plate later, the straw-maned Pegasus trotted over to her fridge and drew her favourite dessert of all time: a chocolate muffin. She wished she knew who first made this wonderful pastry. If she did, and had a time machine to meet them, she would like nothing more than to shake their hoof and thank them from the bottom of her heart.

However, halfway through her precious muffin, a terrible, awful sound filled her ears and made the hair in her mane stand on-end. The bell's toll rung in her ears like a terrible cry, chilling the grey Pegasus to her very soul. Derpy sprang into action immediately, forgetting about her delicious

dessert. She dashed up the stairs and into her room at full gallop, thrusting aside the sliding doors of her wardrobe.

With a flurry of hooves, the mare quickly shuffled her attire down the metal rod, aiming for the last on the rack. It was a brown jacket with long sleeves and reflective, yellow tape circling the cuffs and lining the back. The jacket bore her name on the front, just below the neckline. The number fifteen was embroidered on the back in bold, black lettering. She grabbed it in her teeth and quickly stepped into it, pulling down a yellow helmet from the shelf above, placing it gingerly on her head.

A last minute adjustment had her wings pop out of the slits on either side of the firepony uniform, allowing her to spread her wings and take flight out of the window. It did not take long to see the source of the flames and smoke from her aerial vantage point: a small house on the other side of town. Wasting no time, the volunteer firemare took off to join her comrades. In a town with buildings made of wood and hay, time was definitely a factor.

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Despite her quick reaction time, Derpy found that she was not the first pony to arrive on the scene. Her fellow Pegasus and good friend Raindrop hovered over about half a dozen other ponies as they started attaching the hoses to the closest fire hydrant. Other airborne ponies gathered up as many clouds as they could, pouring water into them to get them as wet as possible. In Ponyville, hovering rainclouds over the scene of a fire served as a delaying tactic to stall the flames as much as possible.

Meanwhile, two other teams would address any other issues that needed handling. Unicorns would lead teams that attached hoses to the fire hydrants and direct them to douse the flames, since the water pressure could easily overpower most earth ponies. In addition, the final team would brave the fires and head inside to ensure everypony got out as safely as possible. Of course, sometimes things would not go as planned, or ponies would be too slow and become injured or, unfortunately, die.

Raindrop, as Ponyville's chief firemare, directed new ponies as they ran down the streets, or flew across the skies overhead, many of them not in uniform. In a town this size, everypony had a job to do during a fire to help put it out and to stop it from spreading. Already, flames began to lick the

adjacent houses, their occupants evacuating the area. "Derpy!" the golden Pegasus addressed her friend. "Always one of the first on the scene, aren't you? Listen closely: I want you to round up a team of five ponies to get in there and get any stragglers out."

A front hoof swiftly met the straw-maned pony's forehead as Derpy saluted the Chief. "Wagon jam!" she chirped in reply. With great haste, the mailmare flew down to the ground to round up a team. Since every pony knew of her disability, they devised a series of hoof-signals for her to use in times of crisis, rather than trying to decipher her inane babbling. "Squirrels cuddle fish in lighthouses!" It did not really mean anything; she just wanted to say something to get their attention.

The firemare pulled aside three Earth ponies and two other Pegasus ponies to aid her in her search. "Jackal, Mongoose, Rabbit. Tickle gophers lightly!" the wall-eyed Pegasus ordered, using her signals as well to tell the three earth ponies to check the ground floor. "Zebu, Daffodil. Kick sky potatoes," she continued, telling the other two Pegasus ponies to join her checking the top floor.

"Hey!" voiced the white mare Derpy addressed as Daffodil. "How come they get animals, but I'm a plant!?" Obviously, she didn't know her well enough to know there was no rhyme or reason to her outbursts.

"We've got more important things to worry about right now!" shouted a cyan earth pony, already galloping off to the supply cart. Derpy and the rest of the fire ponies quickly followed suit, fitting on oxygen tanks and masks. Although they were a little cumbersome, the tanks still allowed for flight, even if only just. The masks covered their entire faces and curved to form an air-tight seal to protect them from smoke inhalation.

"Monkey, hop!" the mailmare chirped to the other ponies in her group. They did not need signals to tell them she meant for them to go in, thankfully. With the ferocity of a hurricane, the six ponies braved the tongues of flame and penetrated into the heart of the fire. Derpy entered the upstairs hall to find walls of flames dancing around her, the heat nearly unbearable.

She called out every few steps, random words replacing her pleas for a pony to call out in aid. Hopefully, just the sound of a voice calling out would

suffice. Derpy strained to see through the blinding grey smoke, depending completely on her other senses to navigate. Still, she kept calling out as loud as she could, secretly hoping that nopony but the six fireponies currently dwelt within.

However, her heart sank when a shrill "HELP!" echoed forth from somewhere beyond the torrent of smoke and flame. Derpy Hooves called out louder than before, hoping the voice would continue to communicate. Eventually, she came upon a door, the cries for help clearly echoing from beyond. Remembering her training, the Pegasus placed her hoof lightly on the door, feeling for any heat for fear of a backdraft. If there was fire in the room that used up most of the oxygen, it would burst forward and incinerate anything in its path when more air rushed in from the open door. She shuddered as she remembered watching the dramatization.

Feeling no heat on the other side of the door, the gray mare turned around and bucked with all her strength, breaking the door open. The shrill voice cried out in surprise at the sudden intrusion, but Derpy ignored it and pressed forward. Hidden under the bed cowered a small unicorn foal, mane a pale blonde and coat a purplish-gray with amber eyes that screamed in terror.

The firemare quickly closed the gap between her and the cowering foal, wasting no time in her trot. She reached under the bed to grab her, the unicorn quickly latching on to the mare in desperation. It was just in the nick of time as a flaming timber landed on top of the bed she took refuge under, prompting a scream from the small filly. Derpy hugged the tiny thing close to her and slowly backed away from the flaming wreckage, feeling the floor underhoof begin to give way.

Thinking quickly, the mare flapped her wings with all her strength, lifting the filly as well as the heavy equipment right before the floor fell through. A wall of flames shot up around the pair, the little unicorn screaming and kicking in complete terror as Derpy tried to keep them aloft. It would be only a matter of seconds before the rest of the room caught on fire, meaning she needed to act fast.

Spying a window to her right, the gray Pegasus charged flying head-first into the second story window. The glass shattered around her as she made impact, her jacket and helmet mostly protecting her from the myriad of

razor-sharp shards. With the filly tucked in close to her, the mailmare could only hope her own body shielded the fragile filly enough.

Derpy gently placed the shaking filly on the ground and into the waiting hooves of the nurse ponies as she landed on the ground. She took off her mask and helmet, wiping her sweating brow in triumph over saving the young foal. "Derpy!" exclaimed Nurse Headheart. "You're bleeding! Come with me in the tent, now!" At first, the mailmare tried to resist the nurse. She and doctors had never been on the best of terms, but seeing her wings dripping small streams of blood prompted her to give in.

Reluctantly, she took off her jacket and air tank, wincing as the tiny shards of glass cut deeper into her wings as she removed the article of clothing. She hardly noticed the tiny unicorn clutching her forehoof as if her life depended upon it. "Dear," spoke the nurse. "I can't make sure you're okay if you keep clutching to her like that!"

"No!" the little filly cried. "Not until Mommy and Daddy come!" Derpy gave the nurse a look, gesturing that she did not mind, as long as it made the poor thing feel better. The mare brought her hoof in closer, and used her other forehoof to gently stroke the sobbing and scared filly as the nurse gingerly removed the glass from her wings. Derpy winced slightly with each shard removed from her tender wings. Looking over the sobbing unicorn, the Pegasus figured she could not be more than five years old or so.

Frowning, the nurse applied an ointment to prevent infection, then bandaged her wings. "Now, Derpy," the nurse started. "You won't be able to fly for a week, okay?" The blonde Pegasus nodded her head in reply and climbed onto one of the hospital beds, to make sure the filly clutching her was comfortable. "What's your name, little one?" The nurse asked the poor, traumatized foal.

"D-D-Dinky," she muttered, still shaking from the recent events.

"Well, Dinky, wouldn't you be a little more comfortable on a bed of your own?"

"NO!" She screeched, clutching the grown Pegasus with enough strength to cut off the blood circulation. Derpy frowned a little at the poor foal, nuzzling her gently, which seemed to calm her down. Defeated, the nurse

trotted out of the tent, allowing the unicorn and her saviour to be alone.

"Coconut harness," the blonde Pegasus muttered into her ear, hoping to calm her down, even if she could not understand. She tried to tell her that everything would be okay, but as usual, her stupid disability got in the way of any meaningful communication. Perhaps she should go through with that spell Twilight offered. The one to let her communicate with other ponies for once.

Together, the two laid down on the bed: the small filly's shaking eventually fading away as time passed on. However, deep in the mind of the firemare, she began to worry about the poor foal's parents. Surely, her team must have found them by now, right? Sadly, no answer came to her as she continued to comfort the sobbing unicorn, the minutes slowly passing into hours.

Eventually, three ponies lead by the nurse entered the tent. It was the mayor and two of Derpy's search ponies, each of them dragging a white sack filled with something heavy. The blond Pegasus' heart dropped as she realized the solemn look on their faces: forcing herself to fight back tears for the little filly's sake. Instead, she put on a brave face and continued to comfort the unicorn.

"Doesn't she have anypony else in town?" the nurse asked the mayor in whispers as the two bags were set on some beds.

"No, sadly," the political pony replied, "I'm not sure what we're going to do with her. We can't simply give her away to an orphanage, but she has no place to stay while I look for any kin in another town." A rare sigh passed the composed mares lips, her head lowered in mourning. It was times like this that made her regret a career in politics.

Unnoticed by any of the adults present, the little unicorn had slipped off the hoof of the grown Pegasus, curiosity over the bags temporarily overpowering her distraught. She blinked before using her mouth to open the zipper on the closest bag, seeing her mother napping inside of it. "Oh, Mommy, you're so silly!" she chirped. "Taking a nap inside of a bag like that? Is Daddy playing the same game? Is this like hide-and-go seek, 'cause I'm really good at it!"

A moment passed in the tent when the most audible sound was their own breathing as the adults looked at the filly with a mixture of surprise and sorrow. Derpy got to her hooves and slowly walked over to her, for the moment when realization would hit. "Come on, Mommy. Wake up. You win! I give up!" She fell silent for a minute, waiting for a reply that would never come.

"Mommy?" she asked, prodding a little with her hoof. "M-mommy? Wake up, Mommy... you're scaring me... Mommy? Mommy! Wake up, Mommy, this isn't funny... MOMMY!!!"

"Dinky..." started Nurse Redheart. "She... she's never going to wake up... Daddy either. They... they breathed in too much bad stuff and... well... they stopped breathing. We tried as hard as we could, but they just wouldn't start again... I'm so very sorry, Dinky."

"No!" the little filly cried out in pain. "Mommy's just... just playing with Dinky! She'll wake up! She always does! Mommy? The other ponies say you won't wake up... please, please show them that you're just playing. Please, Mommy!" After a while of shaking, prodding and screaming, the poor little filly came to realize that her mom was not playing. She really was never going to wake up... she was just going to leave her, alone and cold in the world.

Derpy cuddled the crying foal close as a cascade of tears rivalling a large waterfall fell down her cheeks and onto the dirt. The blonde mare could not help but cry too as she gently ran her hoof down her back, whispering quiet nothings into her ear to help soothe her. Meanwhile, the other ponies present silently bowed their heads as the nurse zipped up the bag containing the deceased mare.

The mayor quietly walked over to the sobbing filly, lowering her head to talk to her. "Dinky, do you have any family here in Ponyville? An aunt, or uncle, or cousins or something you can stay with? Perhaps a friend or two if not?" She frowned as the filly shook her head and continued to sob, but spying the look on the mailmare gave her an idea. "Well... how about you stay with Ms. Derpy for a while? At least, until we figure out how to help you, okay?"

All she could do was shudder and nod her head, too swept up in emotion

and sorrow to really register what was being said. She needed something warm to latch onto and the Pegasus proved to be the closest thing available. "I'm willing to give you some time off, Derpy, so please don't worry about going to work in the morning," the mayor continued. "Consider yourself on paid vacation, until things settle, at least."

The mailmare nodded her head and picked up the sobbing filly, placing her gently on her back before trotting slowly out of the medical tent. She purposefully avoided the charred remains of the once handsome home, moving slowly through the darkened streets, the cries from the unicorn the only sound above that of her hooves clapping against the cobblestone streets.

Arriving at home a few short minutes later, Derpy found that the poor little foal had sobbed herself to sleep. She quietly walked up the stairs and deposited her in her own bed before returning to the kitchen to finish her muffin. It had been a very long night for the both of them, and the blonde Pegasus could not help but frown at the poor thing's loss. To have her parents taken from her so young must have been heartbreaking. After finishing the baked good, she returned upstairs and laid in bed beside her, so that when she woke up, she would find at least a little comfort.

"Stars yip, muffin," Derpy spoke softly to Dinky before giving her a hug, drifting off to sleep soon after.

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The next few days passed slowly for Derpy and Dinky, the sorrow in the house quite apparent to even the most socially inept pony. A sizable crowd came out to mourn the loss of the young foal's parents, mostly those involved in the attempt to save them from the flames. Up until that point, the blonde unicorn refused to wander more than a hoof away from the mare that saved her life.

It was the Monday after the funeral that Derpy stopped cuddling the mourning filly near constantly. The day started out as the others did, except the pair woke up far earlier than usual. Placing a bowl of cereal in front of the pouting unicorn, the mailmare tried to put on a stern face as she refused to eat, pushing the food away every time she brought it closer to her.

"I don't wanna go to school!" the filly whined. "I miss Mommy and Daddy and I don't feel good and my tummy hurts and my hoof hurts and..." A stern look from the Pegasus made the young unicorn stop with her complaining, seeing that she would not take those excuses.

"Jewels sparkle dimly, muffin," Derpy started. "Pickle, pies taste like sprinkles." She held out a spoon to Dinky's mouth, planning to feed her like a newborn, if need be. However, the young filly's expression took an unusual turn, going from pouting to shocked, then finally, a smile cracked across her face, making her giggle.

"Oh, lady," she chirped. "You're so silly! Dinky wants to try!" Just then, the filly tried to cross her amber eyes, telling Derpy that her own eyes did that thing again. Thinking quickly, the grown mare started making faces at the foal, prompting more giggles and ever full-on laughter. "Ow! That hurts!" she exclaimed after trying to make her eyes do the same thing, "Why can't I do it too? I want to make super silly faces too!"

The mailmare chuckled and played with the little one's mane a bit, smiling as she finally decided to eat on her own. It would be a long time yet before the filly would come even close to being her normal self, but Derpy did not mind tending to the poor thing in the meantime. She just hoped that if she did have an aunt or uncle able to take her, they would be able to give her the love and attention she deserved.

After a little bit of effort, the pair left the house and started the somewhat lengthy walk to school, which resided on the outskirts of town. Derpy never attended school in Ponyville, but she knew the building well from the times she would deliver mail to the town's teacher, Cheerilee. Unlike most of the adults in town, the teacher was one of the few to treat the mailmare the same as anypony else, where other treated her as... mentally incompetent (a nice word for it) despite their tolerance for her.

"Dinky!" the purple earth pony exclaimed as the pair drew close, "We've all been so worried about you. It's so nice to see you back, especially after what happened." She drew the purplish-grey filly in for a gentle hug. "Are you doing okay, Derpy?" Cheerilee added, seeing the bandages on the Pegasus' wings.

Derpy nodded with a smile on her face: her wings stung a little, but they were fine nonetheless. "Well, lady there wanted me to come to school really badly. So badly she made funny faces at me to cheer me up a little!"

Cheerilee laughed a little at the innocence of her charge. "Yes, that sounds like something Derpy would do. She's a really smart pony who loves to see little ponies learn," she smiled, looking to the mailmare warmly. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll make sure she's all right."

The mailmare nodded her head and smiled, nuzzling the little filly gently. "Kelp love tuna, muffin," she wished her a good day. Reluctantly, the grey Pegasus slowly trotted away from the schoolhouse, watching as Dinky walked beside her teacher and inside to begin her lessons anew. It brought a smile to Derpy's face to see such a brave little filly, knowing that at her age she did not even have half the courage the foal possessed.

Suddenly, the trot over to the postal office took a lot longer than she remembered, half of her mind lingering on the schoolhouse. Would she really be okay? What if the other foals were cruel to her? She shook her head as these questions entered her head. Sure, Derpy had saved her life, but had it really grown to the point that she already cared for the little filly as more than a saviour for a distraught survivor? It confounded her, to say the least.

"Derpy, you came in today?" spoke her boss, that grizzle-faced Pegasus known as Boxy Brown. "Well, you missed morning pick-up. Although, Star Chaser called in sick, so if you don't mind, I suppose you could be on the front desk." The grey mailmare nodded her head, accepting the job at the front desk. They usually got out around the time the little ponies at school did, so it worked perfectly for her.

Usually, sitting at the front desk would be one of the jobs she would never do, yet Derpy knew the ins and outs of it simply by observation. Although it required talking, she had long developed a system just in case she ever got put on it. She smiled, as this would be the prime opportunity for her to show she could do any job, regardless of her disability. Then, maybe she could receive a promotion and a pay raise. Sure, she could support two ponies on her salary, but it did not exactly facilitate anything fancy.

Wait, was she seriously thinking about supporting TWO ponies? Derpy

shook her head as she arrived at the desk, trying to shake this conundrum from her waking mind. Dinky probably had family in Manehattan or something, and she would be setting herself up for disappointment when the time came to let her go. She simply could not afford to grow attached to her. Not yet, anyway.

Using a series of signals she developed, Derpy expertly directed the questions and concerns of anypony that walked into the post office that day. That is, to say, nopony. The only time a pony would come to the post office for anything would be if they were dropping off, or picking up a package far too big for a mailpony to bring in their saddle bags. Thankfully, the quiet solitude gave her some much needed time to think.

Alas, the day passed slowly for her as her waking thoughts constantly drifted back to Dinky. Sure, it was normal for a pony to worry about such a vulnerable and hurt filly, but quite another to obsess over them. It spooked her somewhat just how much she worried, enough to go out to the schoolhouse on her lunch break just to see her having fun with the other foals. Seeing her relatively happy like that did far better for her than any muffin could ever do, and that was saying something.

The rest of the day progressed just as the morning had. It was with great joy that the wall-eyed Pegasus finally left the post office, heading back to the schoolhouse in a canter. However, upon arriving at the school, the cool, light breeze carried with it echos of a confrontation.

"My DAD said that she was... oh, how did he put it? RETARDED," echoed the voice of a snobbish filly, "Aw, what's the matter, blank-flank?"

"Yeah," her partner in crime chortled. "Your life must really SUCK. You've got no cutie mark, you've lost your parents, AND you're living with the most retarded pony in the country!" Derpy immediately identified the pair as Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara. Her mind recalled a label applied to them by some of the adults, at least the one unsuitable to be spoken of in pleasant company.

"Ahem," the mailmare cleared her throat sanding right behind the pair. She tapped her hoof against the ground impatiently and met their looks of contempt with one that said 'I know what you were talking about, and I'm not impressed.' Meanwhile, Dinky looked up from her lying position on the

ground, eyes still flowing with tears.

"Whatever," Silver Spoon continued, "See you around, blank-flank," they both uttered in unison as they made their retreat.

Derpy trotted over to the sobbing filly and nuzzled against her wet face. "Mingle carp, muffin," she tried to soothe. "Ham loves turnip, and so does Rocky." With a gentle push, the pair walked home in silence, taking time to enjoy the scenery. Deep inside, the words of the two... fillies cut deeply into the mare, if only for the memories that word brought up. It was bad enough being the one called that, but hearing that the pony who saved you is one? She could not even imagine how that must have hurt.

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It was that abysmal day in town history: The Reckoning. Not far from the heart of Ponyville, a grey Pegasus and her unicorn charge sat outside of Mr. Shake's Milkshake Emporium. It was a quiet, bright and early afternoon before all the Sorrel Hells broke loose. Derpy would remember that day well: she and Dinky drank their shakes outside in the open air, sitting across from each other at the modest wooden table.

To be precise, it was the Saturday after Dinky's first day back at school, the trip to the favoured late-spring-time haven a treat for the glowing report Cheerilee gave about her progress. "Oh, Derpy, you're so funny!" the small filly chirped as the mailmares' eyes 'derped' again. The grown Pegasus replied in kind by making some silly faces for her, causing the unicorn to giggle and clap her front hooves together in delight.

Although conversation was not really big between them, considering the adult's disorder, the two seemed to be connecting nonetheless. Dinky had managed to find confidence and happiness around Derpy despite her enormous and recent loss. Meanwhile, the Pegasus had found companionship and a pony quickly growing to mean more to her than anything else in the world. Even if the mayor found her kin soon, perhaps the mailmare could benefit from becoming close to the foal.

However, the calm of the day broke down into chaos and disorder, as events playing out across town came to a head. Just as the pair finished their milkshakes, a loud noise sounded from a distance away, causing the

tables, chairs, and even the glass in the shop windows to vibrate dangerously. Ponies screamed and ran as splinters of raining wood fell across the street: the familiar shape of Sugarcube Corner in the distance shattered and deformed. Soon after the initial blast, that awful bell began to toll as Derpy could see the remains of the once iconic building burst into flames. An unknown streak of lavender shot across the sky like a bullet, leaving the mailmare to wonder what could fly so fast, other than Rainbow Dash.

With no time to think, the Pegasus quickly swept up the tiny unicorn and rushed her down the street to Town Hall. At first, the receptionist looked confused at her sudden appearance, until a wave of understanding swept across the butterscotch mare's face. "Oh, right. I'll look after her," the earth pony receptionist spoke, her voice echoing in the large circular room, "Just be safe."

At that, the door to the mayor's office opened with a slam. The grey-maned earth pony galloped around the hall and down the stairs. "Come on, we don't have a lot of time!" she nearly screamed at the Pegasus, "The fire's already spreading, now go!" Derpy galloped out of the building and took flight to her house to gather her firemare uniform.

From her lofty perch, the wall-eyed Pegasus could already see ponies trying to tackle the flames on the sweet shop, others trying to save what they could from their homes as the flames jumped from one building to the next. Already, the acrid smoke began to fill the skies to choke and blind the Pegasus until she dropped below the plume, nearly flying into somepony's roof.

The streets below were total chaos as the firemare landed outside her door: the ponies here were not exactly known to keep a level head during any sort of crisis. Still, they managed to get by, even if only just. Derpy emerged from her home moments later, wearing her uniform with some measure of pride before taking flight again. Drills had told the mare that her boss, the fire chief, would be talking to the mayor as they formed a plan of attack.

After another somewhat chaotic flight, this time dodging panicking Pegasus ponies as they raced to the town square, Derpy finally arrived to see her boss huddled in a small group around the mayor. "All right," the

mayor started. "Big Mac and Caramel: I need you two to evacuate all the foals and elderly and take them to Sweet Apple Acres so they don't get into trouble."

"Eyup!" the burly red stallion replied before he and his friend went off to do as instructed.

"Sunny," the mayor continued, "Since Rainbow Dash is laid up right now, you are in charge of the weather squad. I need you all to get as many clouds over town, and create as big a rainstorm as possible! Priority goes to buildings adjacent to ones on fire. Move!" With that, the white Pegasus took to the sky with as much speed as she could muster.

"Raindrop, I need you and the other fireponies to put buildings that have just caught on fire as high priority. Sugarcube Corner, for example, is too far gone to save, so don't waste the resources. Hopefully, everypony will have evacuated by then, but I want you to still conduct quick searches, at least at the beginning."

"Yes mayor," the yellow Pegasus responded before she too took to the sky. Derpy immediately followed suit, flying behind the chief. With all the speed of a hurricane, the two quickly descended to a rendezvous point, several other member of the volunteer firepony brigade waiting for them. "All right, everypony," Raindrop addressed. "I want four teams of thirty in all cardinal directions! Priority goes to buildings that have just caught on fire! Conduct quick searches on those front-line buildings only!"

After effectively splitting the Ponyville Fire Department into quarters, the teams broke up to tackle their jobs. Derpy found herself assigned to the western team who would cover the road leading to Sweet Apple Acres. Foals and elderly ponies rushed by as the flames slowly tried to cross the road and block the path. Thankfully, the weather team spotted their plight and brought forward a deluge of rain to help halt the advancing flames.

The rainwater soaked through her coat, and the hose tasted akin to mud, but not quite as pleasant. Derpy strained to keep her moral up, but the more they battled the persistent flames, the more it became apparent that they would lose this battle. No matter what they did, or how much water they used, the fireponies could only slow or stall the advancement of the fires. It was almost as if they had a mind of their own.

Thankfully, for this level of emergency, all able-bodied ponies were conscripted to aid in whatever capacity they could. It was somewhat of a load off of the blond Pegasus' mind, but a great deal of anxiety rested on it nonetheless. Ever since arriving to battle the flames, she had neither seen nor heard Dinky pass by with the others escaping to the farm. She silently prayed that Dinky had fled before she came to fight the fires.

Suddenly, a shrill scream that the blonde Pegasus knew all too well sounded through the abandoned streets, chilling her to the bone. Derpy literally dropped everything as instinct kicked in: flying off with all haste in the direction the scream had come from. She flew through the air like a rocket, not caring for her own safety as she recklessly dodged between buildings and ponies.

Dinky stood in the middle of a street beyond the firewall, scared and alone, her body pressed to the ground in an effort to cool herself from the roasting flames. How could she have been so careless and become separated from the group? No pony probably realized she was gone, and probably would not until it was far too late.

Flames encircled the cringing unicorn, like a pack of ravenous wolves surrounding a deer. The filly sobbed and cried freely as she began to realize this would be her end. On the other hoof, she would be reunited with her mom and dad again, so maybe it wouldn't be so bad. "MUFFIN!?" came a shout overhead. Dinkys eyes widened as she realized it was the mare who took her in.

"Derpy!" she cried out, hoping she could be heard, "Help me!" Derpy looked down to find the filly in the middle of a ring of fire the likes of which she had never seen. They danced and crackled menacingly as they moved forward, slowly approaching the filly. Wasting no time, the mare dove down after her, the wind nearly deafening her as it blew across her ears.

The ground raced towards her, but Derpy did not dare pull up until she could see each cobblestone individually. The Pegasus rocketed forward out of the dive, hurtling to Dinky with speeds that would make Rainbow Dash proud. In fact, if she did not know any better, she could have sworn she left a hay-coloured trail in her wake. She raced through the flames with her front legs outstretched, grabbing her muffin right before pulling up sharply.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" Dinky cried, blurring her words together as she hugged the Pegasus tightly. Derpy hugged her back, heart still racing as adrenaline pumped through her body. All that mattered to her at that moment was the purplish-grey unicorn foal clutched in her hooves. The mailmare nuzzled against her gently, as the filly had broken down into crying once more.

Eventually, the two arrived at Sweet Apple Acres, the big red stallion greeting them with a measure of worry in his eyes for the filly. "Do you really have to go?" Dinky asked with tears still streaming down her eyes. Derpy nodded her head sadly. She really did not want to leave the filly alone, but the town needed her, and she could not shrug off her duty to the other ponies.

"Crabs bark, muffin," she soothed. "Chipmunks nip at squirrels nicely." The mailmare gently stroked the filly's mane with her hoof, hoping that she understood her promise to keep safe. Without another word, the Pegasus took to the skies once more to battle the stubborn and surprisingly vigorous flames. Knowing that her charge was safe, the firepony could finally concentrate on the task at hoof. However, it would not be until sometime in the afternoon that the fires suddenly gave up the fight: extinguishing as easily as a match.

However, the damage had been done. Derpy and Dinky walked together through the charred and smouldering streets. The clouds overhead continued to rain, just in case the fires decided to reignite. It was a sombre and awe-inspiring sight as the two clopped down their street. It had not dawned on the Pegasus before that her house could have been among the casualties, but the possibility rapidly sprung to mind as she saw ponies dig through the wreckage to unearth any valuables that might have survived.

The streets echoed with the sounds of crying and despair. Derpy kept her head low and pondered: just what could have caused all of this mindless destruction? Dinky could feel the anxiety and sorrow build up in her two-time saviour and nuzzled her side gently as they walked. "It's okay, Derpy," she chirped, "Even if the house is gone... at least we still have each other!" The Pegasus looked to the small unicorn, eyes shimmering with tears at the wisdom and courage she possessed. Derpy nuzzled her back softly, sniffing a tiny bit as they turned the corner.

Standing there was Derpy's house: untouched by the flames that had completely gutted a house not more than three doors down. Walking closer, she found no markings of any kind on the door, telling her that everything inside was just as they left it. A smile crossed her muzzle for the first time since the explosion... she and Dinky had finally been given a break. Maybe now things would finally begin to look up for the pair of troubled ponies.

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It is simply amazing how fast the sands of time can move, depending on the situation. For some, it feels as if there is never enough time, while for others, it drags on and tortures them mercilessly. Six months had passed since that horrible late-spring day. Flakes of snow drifted lazily to the ground that afternoon, creating a picture-perfect image for any aspiring artist or photographer.

All physical evidence of that terrible day vanished over the half year delay. Sugarcube Corner stood once more in all its glory, and somewhat more beautiful than before. Like a phoenix from the ashes, the bakery celebrated its grand re-opening just before the Running of the Leaves, and experienced an unprecedented surge in popularity since then. Of course, the rumours of that day had reached the ears of the blonde Pegasus.

She trotted through the light snowfall with a measure of pride on her face. Just last week, the mayor had promoted Derpy Hooves to Head Mail Carrier. It meant she could take any route she wanted, morning or afternoon, and secured a paycheque to provide a comfortable living for herself and Dinky. A stream of visible breath left her muzzle as she approached the facade of the bakery. She was so glad that Pinkie had her home back, and that her filly could actually help with something.

The tiny bell jingled overhead as Derpy stepped inside the warm building, wiping the rapidly melting snow off of her hooves before moving inside. "Muffin! Shadows can tuna!" she called out into the shop. A clang of pots and pans met her cheerful greeting, a small unicorn filly emerging from the back room. The Pegasus giggled as she trotted from behind the counter and nuzzled against her.

"Derpy!" she chirped happily, "Pinkie Pie taught me how to make cupcakes today! I was so good at it she might teach me how to make a whole CAKE tomorrow!" Derpy practically beamed with pride at the little filly nuzzling against her, rubbing off some of the flour that shrouded her like a ghost. Moments like this made her glad she chose Pinkie to watch after Dinky while she was at work.

Speaking of the devil, the pink mare herself emerged from the back rooms. Between the two of them, they must have had a whole sack of flour on their coats. "Hi, Derpy!" she said. "How was your day at work today? Mine was super-dee-duper fun with Dinky here! We made a big mess, but it was still fun because she's just a filly and learning, plus we have a lot of flour anyway so it's not really a big deal if we used a whole lot of it while she practiced."

Convinced her spiel was finished, Derpy answered, "Monkeys flip turnips to chase weasels. Hop on the magic bus, tickets buy you." She blinked as looks of recognition registered across both face.

"Oh dear," the filly spoke, eyes watering at how she slipped and popped her shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay? It sounds like you had a nasty fall!"

Derpy smiled, forgetting for a brief moment that Pinkie was tutoring her in how to interpret her inane outbursts. "Cats bark, muffin," she said, ruffling her little muffin's mane a little, brushing off the flour while she did so. "Chortle lightly, piggy!"

"See you tomorrow, Derpy!" Pinkie waved with enthusiasm as they put on their scarves and walked out the door. Derpy never really paid much attention to the cold, or the heat for that matter. It must have come from years of delivering the mail in both conditions that numbed her against it. Other ponies, however, galloped from one place to the other, wanting to spend as little time outside today as they could.

The pair of grey ponies, however, proceeded through the snow-filled streets at a slight canter, looking in windows of shops as they passed to see what was new for the season. Naturally, if it were not for Derpy, Dinky could very well spend all day gazing wistfully into the window of the toy shop. As usual, the blonde Pegasus had to pull her away after about five

minutes of wide-eyed awe over the newest gizmos and dolls they had in stock.

Arriving at home, the two wiped their hooves against the mat and removed their scarves and Derpy her hat before they settled into the living room. "I wanna continue the story with the fish and the big boat that could go underwater today, Derpy!" Now there was a request the blonde Pegasus would be happy to oblige. Gathering her copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* off the shelf, she cracked the book open and began to read aloud.

Dinky lay on the couch beside her and listened intently as a tale of an un-lived marvel echoed through her ears. Granted, some of the words would become garbled because of her lack of prowess at understanding her saviour, but what counted was that she actually read to her. It reminded her of the cold nights her old mom would do much the same for her before bedtime.

They only took a break from the spellbinding tale to eat supper, the story just too thrilling for the blonde unicorn to stop drinking in. It was not until well into Luna's night that the gentle calls of dreamland finally took the filly on the wisps of sleep. Derpy looked to her side and noticed the sleeping filly, probably already dreaming of Captain Nemo and his fantastic machine. A smile crept over her weary face before gently lifting her muffin onto her back and up the stairs. Formerly a barren and cramped spare bedroom, Dinky's room radiated in all different colours of the rainbow, a small collection of dolls stacked against the hoof of her bed, all to calm the filly as she slept.

Gently tucking the sleeping foal under the warm and soft covers, the mailmare offered a soft wish for a good night's sleep before turning out the light. Shutting the door with a soft click, the Pegasus silently fluttered into her room and got herself ready for bed. A brief moment of reflection reminded Derpy that this was not the life she had wanted for herself, but she smiled nonetheless. The creators moved in mysterious ways, often seeming unfair at times... but Derpy could not deny that she had found true happiness for the first time in a very long while.

It only made what happened the next day even more unfair.

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It was cold, the carriage ride was long, and to top it all off, he had to miss breakfast if he wanted to get there in due time. Candid sat in the pony-drawn carriage in utter contempt over his newest assignment. The unicorn stallion had a coat almost as white as the snow outside, with a dusty brown mane and sea-green eyes. Ponyville was not that far away, but it was not like he was important enough to warrant a Pegasus Chariot. Sure, it would have been colder, but it did not mean he would miss breakfast either.

Normally, the unicorn carried himself with dignity and pride in his work, wearing a tailor-made black suit and tie. Sure, it was part of the uniform for an agent of the FPS, but he made it look good, especially when he added the dark sunglasses to the mix. Of course, he did not feel dignified being carted around in such a decrepit carriage, never mind the fact he nearly lost his non-existent breakfast countless times due to the bumps in the road.

After three stomach-churning hours, the colt from Canterlot finally arrived at the square of Ponyville. He was thankful to step out of the carriage (he really was) but this town screamed 'hickville' to him. No, no, it was probably his mood making him prejudiced. Candid shook his head and stepped away, the carriage moving to find a place to park until his work was complete.

Looking at the brief his superiors had given him, the snowy unicorn moved with celerity through the surprisingly busy thoroughfares of the small town before coming up to one of the larger houses near the square. His horn dazzled in a soft blue glow as he knocked gently on the door. Not more than a moment later, an emerald green earth pony mare answered the door. "Hello, how can I help you?" she asked politely, but with a measure of irritation in her voice.

"My name is Agent Candid of the FPS," he addressed. "You are the same Miss Viridian Gem who contacted us, correct?"

"Oh!" she gasped in recognition. "Why yes, please come in." The alabaster unicorn stepped beyond the threshold of the door, politely wiping his hooves on the mat before trotting into the living room. Meanwhile, the mare continued on deeper into the house, perhaps the kitchen. As far as

living rooms went, it was fairly spacious and well decorated, but he was not here to admire the decor. After a couple of minutes, Viridian confirmed his suspicions by bringing in a bowl of lemon drops and some soda.

"Yes, please, and thank you, ma'am," he replied to her kind offer to help himself to the treats. "I am ashamed to say I was denied breakfast, so your hospitality is most welcome." After helping himself to a polite number of the sour treats, he got back into the swing of things. "Now, let us get down to business. I'm afraid I wasn't given most of the details, so please enlighten me as to why you think Miss..." He looked down briefly to check his notes. "...Derpy Hooves, is an unfit caretaker?"

"Well," the mare started with a tone that nearly made Candid cringe. He knew he was about to hear a long winded spiel and he braced himself for it as best he could. "For one thing, she is developmentally delayed, has a communication disability and... her eyes do the MOST perverse thing ever. No, they don't cross, but they...well, they go off in different directions in some cases."

"I greatly doubt that lazy eyes constitute bad parenting, ma'am. But I must confess the other two are slightly worrying."

"And rightly so!" the green earth pony piped up. "That is why I wrote to you lot in the first place! I trust you are going to do what's right for the poor foal?"

"After a thorough investigation, I assure you, miss," Candid replied honestly. "If you will please excuse me, I would like to get started." He stood to attention, giving the mare of the house a polite nod before taking his exit, making sure he was excused before he did so.

The day progressed much how the unicorn expected it to. In a town as small as this one, Candid banked on everypony knowing each other, at least to some extent. Thankfully, Miss Derpy seemed to be very well known in town, and was regarded as an excellent mailmare and firepony... but in terms of personality, the reviews were less than stunning. Nearly every pony relayed the same story the emerald mare had: that Miss Hooves was mentally incompetent. Even the local medical authorities concurred that, while Derpy was good at working, she was not really all there.

Later that evening, already deep into Luna's night despite the early hour, Agent Candid approached the mailmare's house, flanked by two members of the local police. A carriage pulled by two Pegasus colts, whom he had to charter with his own bits, rested behind them as they walked briskly through the cold evening air. He really hated this part of the job, but protocol forbade him from communicating with the parents because they would always lie to keep their foals. Reluctantly, he put his hoof to the door and knocked.

A grey Pegasus mare with straw-like blonde hair answered the door. "Jays whisper lightly, pickles?" She blinked, obviously dumbfounded by the sudden police presence.

"My name is Candid, ma'am. I represent the Foal Protection Services. I am afraid we have received some disturbing reports about you from various members of the community. Following an investigation, I regret to inform you that we find you unable to raise a foal. As she is without any kin, we have no choice but to place her in an orphanage."

Derpy's mouth hung open in shock. Had the other townsfolk really said such things about her? Especially knowing who this stallion was and probably why he was there. How could they betray her like that when she had finally found a slice of happiness to call her own!? She hardly noticed as the three colts pushed past her. "Jackal!" she cried, running up to them. "F-f-fire ants... don't like cheese!" As much as she tried to talk normally, her mouth would not co-operate.

"Wait!" Dinky cried as they advanced on her, "Why are you here... and why is Derpy saying she's not funny in the head? I know she's not funny in the head, even if she is funny."

"I'm sorry," Candid spoke earnestly as he got down to the young unicorn's level. "She's not related to you, Dinky, and she can't look after you anymore. I'm afraid you'll have to come with me now."

"No! I don't want to leave! Derpy takes care of me and I don't want to go!"

"You don't have a choice, Dinky." He nodded to the two police officers who picked her up, causing her to wiggle and cry hopelessly in their grasp. The unicorn was always mindful to keep himself between the police ponies

and the crying Pegasus as they moved out to the carriage.

"Muffin!" she cried, trying desperately to jump after her once they got outside.

"Miss Hooves," the unicorn spoke, using his magic to keep her grounded, "If you try to go after her again, I'm afraid I will have to place you under arrest." With the crying filly inside the carriage, the police ponies and agent swapped places. Derpy's amber eyes continued to stream with tears as the sharply-dressed unicorn stepped into the carriage as well, causing it to lurch forward suddenly as the pegasi pulling it ran down the street.

"Muffin!" Derpy cried out one last time, waving her hoof goodbye, just in case they never saw each other again. Only when the carriage flew out of sight did the police ponies drop their guard and trot away, leaving her to sob outside in the cold streets. The mailmare was no fool: she knew she had the right to an appeal, and she would pursue it with all her heart. But in order to do so, she needed help... a lot of help, and only one pony in town could provide it for her.

A giggle sounded somewhere beside her, chilling her more than the winter's night ever could. Derpy turned her head to see the sickeningly green neighbour of hers stand outside of her door, obviously amused by the spectacle before her. "I hope this teaches you a lesson, Derpy," she smiled wickedly. "You should have never tried to contaminate that poor, innocent foal with your stupidity. I can only hope the damage you did to her isn't permanent."

Anger unlike anything Derpy ever experienced before coursed through her veins. If only she could rush over and strangle that... that... she dare not say, until her eyes bugged out of their sockets. She wanted, more than anything, to rip, mutilate and kill that disgustingly smug earth pony, and she could probably get away with it too, since everypony thought she was touched in the head.

No! She would have justice, but she would not stoop down to that dastardly mare's level and seek revenge. She would get her muffin back... even if it was the last thing she would ever do!

Chapter 2

Soft, classical music echoed through the halls and rooms of the humble abode that night. It was a gentle tune, violins and bass bringing forth a powerful, yet emotional crescendo. For some reason, ponies liked playing Posh Ball's 'Canon in D Major' at weddings, possibly to reflect what they hoped the future would bring. Meanwhile, Derpy Hooves busied herself with fixing her dinner: she was not nearly conceited enough to play this sort of thing while reading.

The amber-eyed pony hummed along with the tune as she chopped up some celery to put in her salad, looking out her window and into the night sky. Although it grew warmer in her house by the minute, she didn't dare open the windows or else succumb to the horrid stench that came when hundreds of ponies expelled the contents of their stomachs. Derpy shook her head at the thought, dumping the chopped vegetable into her salad.

It all started out innocently enough. The town threw a massive party to celebrate its founding, so Pinkie naturally had to bake a magnificent cake for all in attendance. However, unbeknownst to the pink baker, the ingredients for the cake had spoiled. Needless to say, anypony who had a piece of the massive confection quickly ended up having their stomach pumped before the virus could get into their bloodstream. Some moulds can be pretty nasty.

Grabbing a bottle of milk from inside her fridge, the mailmare emptied the contents into a waiting glass, the record playing out its final notes as she took her first bite. It was a perfectly normal meal fitting a rather abnormal pony. Nights like this made the Pegasus realize how alone she really was in the world, and how much the hurt of past pains continued to vex her. Even though she had largely moved on, some of them could never be forgotten.

Unlike most Pegasus ponies, Derpy was born and raised in Hoofington, a town twice the size of Ponyville. All things considered, it was a good place to grow up, though not as homey or friendly as her new home. Where the ponies here mostly tolerated her... peculiarities... her old town was much

less kind. Her inability to speak properly and curious eyes inspired the notion of mental incompetence in the rest of the town. She was, predictably, bullied and called names by the other foals, and even some of the more brazen adults.

Still, the mare never let that stop her, not for an instant. Despite everything they did to make her feel worthless and stupid, she demonstrated a learning capacity beyond her years, having learned to fly first out of all the Pegasus ponies of her year. Not to mention her Cutie Mark... but that would be a story for another day. Eventually, after having been told that she could never teach due to her disability, Derpy settled for a job as a mailmare in the Royal Equestrian Postal Service.

For the time being, Derpy focused on the meal before her, trying to push past those bad memories of the past and focus on the happier ones. The tantalizing aroma of her salad, complete with dressing of her own blend, floated into her nostrils as she ate. Bits of onions, peppers, tomato and pieces of stale bread brought forward an incomparable texture to the normally dull meal. It was almost enough for her to not notice when her lazy eyes acted up again.

An unknown amount of time later, the gray mare cleaned her plate. Gently taking the delicate porcelain into her mouth, Derpy fluttered over to the kitchen sink to clean up. A quick scrub of the plate later, the straw-maned Pegasus trotted over to her fridge and drew her favourite dessert of all time: a chocolate muffin. She wished she knew who first made this wonderful pastry. If she did, and had a time machine to meet them, she would like nothing more than to shake their hoof and thank them from the bottom of her heart.

However, halfway through her precious muffin, a terrible, awful sound filled her ears and made the hair in her mane stand on-end. The bell's toll rung in her ears like a terrible cry, chilling the grey Pegasus to her very soul. Derpy sprang into action immediately, forgetting about her delicious dessert. She dashed up the stairs and into her room at full gallop, thrusting aside the sliding doors of her wardrobe.

With a flurry of hooves, the mare quickly shuffled her attire down the metal rod, aiming for the last on the rack. It was a brown jacket with long sleeves and reflective, yellow tape circling the cuffs and lining the back.

The jacket bore her name on the front, just below the neckline. The number fifteen was embroidered on the back in bold, black lettering. She grabbed it in her teeth and quickly stepped into it, pulling down a yellow helmet from the shelf above, placing it gingerly on her head.

A last minute adjustment had her wings pop out of the slits on either side of the firepony uniform, allowing her to spread her wings and take flight out of the window. It did not take long to see the source of the flames and smoke from her aerial vantage point: a small house on the other side of town. Wasting no time, the volunteer firemare took off to join her comrades. In a town with buildings made of wood and hay, time was definitely a factor.

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Despite her quick reaction time, Derpy found that she was not the first pony to arrive on the scene. Her fellow Pegasus and good friend Raindrop hovered over about half a dozen other ponies as they started attaching the hoses to the closest fire hydrant. Other airborne ponies gathered up as many clouds as they could, pouring water into them to get them as wet as possible. In Ponyville, hovering rainclouds over the scene of a fire served as a delaying tactic to stall the flames as much as possible.

Meanwhile, two other teams would address any other issues that needed handling. Unicorns would lead teams that attached hoses to the fire hydrants and direct them to douse the flames, since the water pressure could easily overpower most earth ponies. In addition, the final team would brave the fires and head inside to ensure everypony got out as safely as possible. Of course, sometimes things would not go as planned, or ponies would be too slow and become injured or, unfortunately, die.

Raindrop, as Ponyville's chief firemare, directed new ponies as they ran down the streets, or flew across the skies overhead, many of them not in uniform. In a town this size, everypony had a job to do during a fire to help put it out and to stop it from spreading. Already, flames began to lick the adjacent houses, their occupants evacuating the area. "Derpy!" the golden Pegasus addressed her friend. "Always one of the first on the scene, aren't you? Listen closely: I want you to round up a team of five ponies to get in there and get any stragglers out."

A front hoof swiftly met the straw-maned pony's forehead as Derpy

saluted the Chief. "Wagon jam!" she chirped in reply. With great haste, the mailmare flew down to the ground to round up a team. Since every pony knew of her disability, they devised a series of hoof-signals for her to use in times of crisis, rather than trying to decipher her inane babbling. "Squirrels cuddle fish in lighthouses!" It did not really mean anything; she just wanted to say something to get their attention.

The firemare pulled aside three Earth ponies and two other Pegasus ponies to aid her in her search. "Jackal, Mongoose, Rabbit. Tickle gophers lightly!" the wall-eyed Pegasus ordered, using her signals as well to tell the three earth ponies to check the ground floor. "Zebu, Daffodil. Kick sky potatoes," she continued, telling the other two Pegasus ponies to join her checking the top floor.

"Hey!" voiced the white mare Derpy addressed as Daffodil. "How come they get animals, but I'm a plant!?" Obviously, she didn't know her well enough to know there was no rhyme or reason to her outbursts.

"We've got more important things to worry about right now!" shouted a cyan earth pony, already galloping off to the supply cart. Derpy and the rest of the fire ponies quickly followed suit, fitting on oxygen tanks and masks. Although they were a little cumbersome, the tanks still allowed for flight, even if only just. The masks covered their entire faces and curved to form an air-tight seal to protect them from smoke inhalation.

"Monkey, hop!" the mailmare chirped to the other ponies in her group. They did not need signals to tell them she meant for them to go in, thankfully. With the ferocity of a hurricane, the six ponies braved the tongues of flame and penetrated into the heart of the fire. Derpy entered the upstairs hall to find walls of flames dancing around her, the heat nearly unbearable.

She called out every few steps, random words replacing her pleas for a pony to call out in aid. Hopefully, just the sound of a voice calling out would suffice. Derpy strained to see through the blinding grey smoke, depending completely on her other senses to navigate. Still, she kept calling out as loud as she could, secretly hoping that nopony but the six fireponies currently dwelt within.

However, her heart sank when a shrill "HELP!" echoed forth from

somewhere beyond the torrent of smoke and flame. Derpy Hooves called out louder than before, hoping the voice would continue to communicate. Eventually, she came upon a door, the cries for help clearly echoing from beyond. Remembering her training, the Pegasus placed her hoof lightly on the door, feeling for any heat for fear of a backdraft. If there was fire in the room that used up most of the oxygen, it would burst forward and incinerate anything in its path when more air rushed in from the open door. She shuddered as she remembered watching the dramatization.

Feeling no heat on the other side of the door, the gray mare turned around and bucked with all her strength, breaking the door open. The shrill voice cried out in surprise at the sudden intrusion, but Derpy ignored it and pressed forward. Hidden under the bed cowered a small unicorn foal, mane a pale blonde and coat a purplish-gray with amber eyes that screamed in terror.

The firemare quickly closed the gap between her and the cowering foal, wasting no time in her trot. She reached under the bed to grab her, the unicorn quickly latching on to the mare in desperation. It was just in the nick of time as a flaming timber landed on top of the bed she took refuge under, prompting a scream from the small filly. Derpy hugged the tiny thing close to her and slowly backed away from the flaming wreckage, feeling the floor underhoof begin to give way.

Thinking quickly, the mare flapped her wings with all her strength, lifting the filly as well as the heavy equipment right before the floor fell through. A wall of flames shot up around the pair, the little unicorn screaming and kicking in complete terror as Derpy tried to keep them aloft. It would be only a matter of seconds before the rest of the room caught on fire, meaning she needed to act fast.

Spying a window to her right, the gray Pegasus charged flying head-first into the second story window. The glass shattered around her as she made impact, her jacket and helmet mostly protecting her from the myriad of razor-sharp shards. With the filly tucked in close to her, the mailmare could only hope her own body shielded the fragile filly enough.

Derpy gently placed the shaking filly on the ground and into the waiting hooves of the nurse ponies as she landed on the ground. She took off her mask and helmet, wiping her sweating brow in triumph over saving the

young foal. "Derpy!" exclaimed Nurse Headheart. "You're bleeding! Come with me in the tent, now!" At first, the mailmare tried to resist the nurse. She and doctors had never been on the best of terms, but seeing her wings dripping small streams of blood prompted her to give in.

Reluctantly, she took off her jacket and air tank, wincing as the tiny shards of glass cut deeper into her wings as she removed the article of clothing. She hardly noticed the tiny unicorn clutching her forehoof as if her life depended upon it. "Dear," spoke the nurse. "I can't make sure you're okay if you keep clutching to her like that!"

"No!" the little filly cried. "Not until Mommy and Daddy come!" Derpy gave the nurse a look, gesturing that she did not mind, as long as it made the poor thing feel better. The mare brought her hoof in closer, and used her other forehoof to gently stroke the sobbing and scared filly as the nurse gingerly removed the glass from her wings. Derpy winced slightly with each shard removed from her tender wings. Looking over the sobbing unicorn, the Pegasus figured she could not be more than five years old or so.

Frowning, the nurse applied an ointment to prevent infection, then bandaged her wings. "Now, Derpy," the nurse started. "You won't be able to fly for a week, okay?" The blonde Pegasus nodded her head in reply and climbed onto one of the hospital beds, to make sure the filly clutching her was comfortable. "What's your name, little one?" The nurse asked the poor, traumatized foal.

"D-D-Dinky," she muttered, still shaking from the recent events.

"Well, Dinky, wouldn't you be a little more comfortable on a bed of your own?"

"NO!" She screeched, clutching the grown Pegasus with enough strength to cut off the blood circulation. Derpy frowned a little at the poor foal, nuzzling her gently, which seemed to calm her down. Defeated, the nurse trotted out of the tent, allowing the unicorn and her saviour to be alone.

"Coconut harness," the blonde Pegasus muttered into her ear, hoping to calm her down, even if she could not understand. She tried to tell her that everything would be okay, but as usual, her stupid disability got in the way of any meaningful communication. Perhaps she should go through with that

spell Twilight offered. The one to let her communicate with other ponies for once.

Together, the two laid down on the bed: the small filly's shaking eventually fading away as time passed on. However, deep in the mind of the firemare, she began to worry about the poor foal's parents. Surely, her team must have found them by now, right? Sadly, no answer came to her as she continued to comfort the sobbing unicorn, the minutes slowly passing into hours.

Eventually, three ponies lead by the nurse entered the tent. It was the mayor and two of Derpy's search ponies, each of them dragging a white sack filled with something heavy. The blond Pegasus' heart dropped as she realized the solemn look on their faces: forcing herself to fight back tears for the little filly's sake. Instead, she put on a brave face and continued to comfort the unicorn.

"Doesn't she have anypony else in town?" the nurse asked the mayor in whispers as the two bags were set on some beds.

"No, sadly," the political pony replied, "I'm not sure what we're going to do with her. We can't simply give her away to an orphanage, but she has no place to stay while I look for any kin in another town." A rare sigh passed the composed mares lips, her head lowered in mourning. It was times like this that made her regret a career in politics.

Unnoticed by any of the adults present, the little unicorn had slipped off the hoof of the grown Pegasus, curiosity over the bags temporarily overpowering her distraught. She blinked before using her mouth to open the zipper on the closest bag, seeing her mother napping inside of it. "Oh, Mommy, you're so silly!" she chirped. "Taking a nap inside of a bag like that? Is Daddy playing the same game? Is this like hide-and-go seek, 'cause I'm really good at it!"

A moment passed in the tent when the most audible sound was their own breathing as the adults looked at the filly with a mixture of surprise and sorrow. Derpy got to her hooves and slowly walked over to her, for the moment when realization would hit. "Come on, Mommy. Wake up. You win! I give up!" She fell silent for a minute, waiting for a reply that would never come.

"Mommy?" she asked, prodding a little with her hoof. "M-mommy? Wake up, Mommy... you're scaring me... Mommy? Mommy! Wake up, Mommy, this isn't funny... MOMMY!!!"

"Dinky..." started Nurse Redheart. "She... she's never going to wake up... Daddy either. They... they breathed in too much bad stuff and... well... they stopped breathing. We tried as hard as we could, but they just wouldn't start again... I'm so very sorry, Dinky."

"No!" the little filly cried out in pain. "Mommy's just... just playing with Dinky! She'll wake up! She always does! Mommy? The other ponies say you won't wake up... please, please show them that you're just playing. Please, Mommy!" After a while of shaking, prodding and screaming, the poor little filly came to realize that her mom was not playing. She really was never going to wake up... she was just going to leave her, alone and cold in the world.

Derpy cuddled the crying foal close as a cascade of tears rivalling a large waterfall fell down her cheeks and onto the dirt. The blonde mare could not help but cry too as she gently ran her hoof down her back, whispering quiet nothings into her ear to help soothe her. Meanwhile, the other ponies present silently bowed their heads as the nurse zipped up the bag containing the deceased mare.

The mayor quietly walked over to the sobbing filly, lowering her head to talk to her. "Dinky, do you have any family here in Ponyville? An aunt, or uncle, or cousins or something you can stay with? Perhaps a friend or two if not?" She frowned as the filly shook her head and continued to sob, but spying the look on the mailmare gave her an idea. "Well... how about you stay with Ms. Derpy for a while? At least, until we figure out how to help you, okay?"

All she could do was shudder and nod her head, too swept up in emotion and sorrow to really register what was being said. She needed something warm to latch onto and the Pegasus proved to be the closest thing available. "I'm willing to give you some time off, Derpy, so please don't worry about going to work in the morning," the mayor continued. "Consider yourself on paid vacation, until things settle, at least."

The mailmare nodded her head and picked up the sobbing filly, placing her gently on her back before trotting slowly out of the medical tent. She purposefully avoided the charred remains of the once handsome home, moving slowly through the darkened streets, the cries from the unicorn the only sound above that of her hooves clopping against the cobblestone streets.

Arriving at home a few short minutes later, Derpy found that the poor little foal had sobbed herself to sleep. She quietly walked up the stairs and deposited her in her own bed before returning to the kitchen to finish her muffin. It had been a very long night for the both of them, and the blonde Pegasus could not help but frown at the poor thing's loss. To have her parents taken from her so young must have been heartbreaking. After finishing the baked good, she returned upstairs and laid in bed beside her, so that when she woke up, she would find at least a little comfort.

"Stars yip, muffin," Derpy spoke softly to Dinky before giving her a hug, drifting off to sleep soon after.

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The next few days passed slowly for Derpy and Dinky, the sorrow in the house quite apparent to even the most socially inept pony. A sizable crowd came out to mourn the loss of the young foal's parents, mostly those involved in the attempt to save them from the flames. Up until that point, the blonde unicorn refused to wander more than a hoof away from the mare that saved her life.

It was the Monday after the funeral that Derpy stopped cuddling the mourning filly near constantly. The day started out as the others did, except the pair woke up far earlier than usual. Placing a bowl of cereal in front of the pouting unicorn, the mailmare tried to put on a stern face as she refused to eat, pushing the food away every time she brought it closer to her.

"I don't wanna go to school!" the filly whined. "I miss Mommy and Daddy and I don't feel good and my tummy hurts and my hoof hurts and..." A stern look from the Pegasus made the young unicorn stop with her complaining, seeing that she would not take those excuses.

"Jewels sparkle dimly, muffin," Derpy started. "Pickle, pies taste like sprinkles." She held out a spoon to Dinky's mouth, planning to feed her like a newborn, if need be. However, the young filly's expression took an unusual turn, going from pouting to shocked, then finally, a smile cracked across her face, making her giggle.

"Oh, lady," she chirped. "You're so silly! Dinky wants to try!" Just then, the filly tried to cross her amber eyes, telling Derpy that her own eyes did that thing again. Thinking quickly, the grown mare started making faces at the foal, prompting more giggles and ever full-on laughter. "Ow! That hurts!" she exclaimed after trying to make her eyes do the same thing, "Why can't I do it too? I want to make super silly faces too!"

The mailmare chuckled and played with the little one's mane a bit, smiling as she finally decided to eat on her own. It would be a long time yet before the filly would come even close to being her normal self, but Derpy did not mind tending to the poor thing in the meantime. She just hoped that if she did have an aunt or uncle able to take her, they would be able to give her the love and attention she deserved.

After a little bit of effort, the pair left the house and started the somewhat lengthy walk to school, which resided on the outskirts of town. Derpy never attended school in Ponyville, but she knew the building well from the times she would deliver mail to the town's teacher, Cheerilee. Unlike most of the adults in town, the teacher was one of the few to treat the mailmare the same as anypony else, where other treated her as... mentally incompetent (a nice word for it) despite their tolerance for her.

"Dinky!" the purple earth pony exclaimed as the pair drew close, "We've all been so worried about you. It's so nice to see you back, especially after what happened." She drew the purplish-grey filly in for a gentle hug. "Are you doing okay, Derpy?" Cheerilee added, seeing the bandages on the Pegasus' wings.

Derpy nodded with a smile on her face: her wings stung a little, but they were fine nonetheless. "Well, lady there wanted me to come to school really badly. So badly she made funny faces at me to cheer me up a little!"

Cheerilee laughed a little at the innocence of her charge. "Yes, that sounds like something Derpy would do. She's a really smart pony who

loves to see little ponies learn," she smiled, looking to the mailmare warmly. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll make sure she's all right."

The mailmare nodded her head and smiled, nuzzling the little filly gently. "Kelp love tuna, muffin," she wished her a good day. Reluctantly, the grey Pegasus slowly trotted away from the schoolhouse, watching as Dinky walked beside her teacher and inside to begin her lessons anew. It brought a smile to Derpy's face to see such a brave little filly, knowing that at her age she did not even have half the courage the foal possessed.

Suddenly, the trot over to the postal office took a lot longer than she remembered, half of her mind lingering on the schoolhouse. Would she really be okay? What if the other foals were cruel to her? She shook her head as these questions entered her head. Sure, Derpy had saved her life, but had it really grown to the point that she already cared for the little filly as more than a saviour for a distraught survivor? It confounded her, to say the least.

"Derpy, you came in today?" spoke her boss, that grizzle-faced Pegasus known as Boxy Brown. "Well, you missed morning pick-up. Although, Star Chaser called in sick, so if you don't mind, I suppose you could be on the front desk." The grey mailmare nodded her head, accepting the job at the front desk. They usually got out around the time the little ponies at school did, so it worked perfectly for her.

Usually, sitting at the front desk would be one of the jobs she would never do, yet Derpy knew the ins and outs of it simply by observation. Although it required talking, she had long developed a system just in case she ever got put on it. She smiled, as this would be the prime opportunity for her to show she could do any job, regardless of her disability. Then, maybe she could receive a promotion and a pay raise. Sure, she could support two ponies on her salary, but it did not exactly facilitate anything fancy.

Wait, was she seriously thinking about supporting TWO ponies? Derpy shook her head as she arrived at the desk, trying to shake this conundrum from her waking mind. Dinky probably had family in Manehattan or something, and she would be setting herself up for disappointment when the time came to let her go. She simply could not afford to grow attached to her. Not yet, anyway.

Using a series of signals she developed, Derpy expertly directed the questions and concerns of anypony that walked into the post office that day. That is, to say, nopony. The only time a pony would come to the post office for anything would be if they were dropping off, or picking up a package far too big for a mailpony to bring in their saddle bags. Thankfully, the quiet solitude gave her some much needed time to think.

Alas, the day passed slowly for her as her waking thoughts constantly drifted back to Dinky. Sure, it was normal for a pony to worry about such a vulnerable and hurt filly, but quite another to obsess over them. It spooked her somewhat just how much she worried, enough to go out to the schoolhouse on her lunch break just to see her having fun with the other foals. Seeing her relatively happy like that did far better for her than any muffin could ever do, and that was saying something.

The rest of the day progressed just as the morning had. It was with great joy that the wall-eyed Pegasus finally left the post office, heading back to the schoolhouse in a canter. However, upon arriving at the school, the cool, light breeze carried with it echos of a confrontation.

"My DAD said that she was... oh, how did he put it? RETARDED," echoed the voice of a snobbish filly, "Aw, what's the matter, blank-flank?"

"Yeah," her partner in crime chortled. "Your life must really SUCK. You've got no cutie mark, you've lost your parents, AND you're living with the most retarded pony in the country!" Derpy immediately identified the pair as Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara. Her mind recalled a label applied to them by some of the adults, at least the one unsuitable to be spoken of in pleasant company.

"Ahem," the mailmare cleared her throat sanding right behind the pair. She tapped her hoof against the ground impatiently and met their looks of contempt with one that said 'I know what you were talking about, and I'm not impressed.' Meanwhile, Dinky looked up from her lying position on the ground, eyes still flowing with tears.

"Whatever," Silver Spoon continued, "See you around, blank-flank," they both uttered in unison as they made their retreat.

Derpy trotted over to the sobbing filly and nuzzled against her wet face.

"Mingle carp, muffin," she tried to soothe. "Ham loves turnip, and so does Rocky." With a gentle push, the pair walked home in silence, taking time to enjoy the scenery. Deep inside, the words of the two... fillies cut deeply into the mare, if only for the memories that word brought up. It was bad enough being the one called that, but hearing that the pony who saved you is one? She could not even imagine how that must have hurt.

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It was that abysmal day in town history: The Reckoning. Not far from the heart of Ponyville, a grey Pegasus and her unicorn charge sat outside of Mr. Shake's Milkshake Emporium. It was a quiet, bright and early afternoon before all the Sorrel Hells broke loose. Derpy would remember that day well: she and Dinky drank their shakes outside in the open air, sitting across from each other at the modest wooden table.

To be precise, it was the Saturday after Dinky's first day back at school, the trip to the favoured late-spring-time haven a treat for the glowing report Cheerilee gave about her progress. "Oh, Derpy, you're so funny!" the small filly chirped as the mailmares' eyes 'derped' again. The grown Pegasus replied in kind by making some silly faces for her, causing the unicorn to giggle and clap her front hooves together in delight.

Although conversation was not really big between them, considering the adult's disorder, the two seemed to be connecting nonetheless. Dinky had managed to find confidence and happiness around Derpy despite her enormous and recent loss. Meanwhile, the Pegasus had found companionship and a pony quickly growing to mean more to her than anything else in the world. Even if the mayor found her kin soon, perhaps the mailmare could benefit from becoming close to the foal.

However, the calm of the day broke down into chaos and disorder, as events playing out across town came to a head. Just as the pair finished their milkshakes, a loud noise sounded from a distance away, causing the tables, chairs, and even the glass in the shop windows to vibrate dangerously. Ponies screamed and ran as splinters of raining wood fell across the street: the familiar shape of Sugarcube Corner in the distance shattered and deformed. Soon after the initial blast, that awful bell began to toll as Derpy could see the remains of the once iconic building burst into flames. An unknown streak of lavender shot across the sky like a bullet,

leaving the mailmare to wonder what could fly so fast, other than Rainbow Dash.

With no time to think, the Pegasus quickly swept up the tiny unicorn and rushed her down the street to Town Hall. At first, the receptionist looked confused at her sudden appearance, until a wave of understanding swept across the butterscotch mare's face. "Oh, right. I'll look after her," the earth pony receptionist spoke, her voice echoing in the large circular room, "Just be safe."

At that, the door to the mayor's office opened with a slam. The grey-maned earth pony galloped around the hall and down the stairs. "Come on, we don't have a lot of time!" she nearly screamed at the Pegasus, "The fire's already spreading, now go!" Derpy galloped out of the building and took flight to her house to gather her firemare uniform.

From her lofty perch, the wall-eyed Pegasus could already see ponies trying to tackle the flames on the sweet shop, others trying to save what they could from their homes as the flames jumped from one building to the next. Already, the acrid smoke began to fill the skies to choke and blind the Pegasus until she dropped below the plume, nearly flying into somepony's roof.

The streets below were total chaos as the firemare landed outside her door: the ponies here were not exactly known to keep a level head during any sort of crisis. Still, they managed to get by, even if only just. Derpy emerged from her home moments later, wearing her uniform with some measure of pride before taking flight again. Drills had told the mare that her boss, the fire chief, would be talking to the mayor as they formed a plan of attack.

After another somewhat chaotic flight, this time dodging panicking Pegasus ponies as they raced to the town square, Derpy finally arrived to see her boss huddled in a small group around the mayor. "All right," the mayor started. "Big Mac and Caramel: I need you two to evacuate all the foals and elderly and take them to Sweet Apple Acres so they don't get into trouble."

"Eyup!" the burly red stallion replied before he and his friend went off to do as instructed.

"Sunny," the mayor continued, "Since Rainbow Dash is laid up right now, you are in charge of the weather squad. I need you all to get as many clouds over town, and create as big a rainstorm as possible! Priority goes to buildings adjacent to ones on fire. Move!" With that, the white Pegasus took to the sky with as much speed as she could muster.

"Raindrop, I need you and the other fireponies to put buildings that have just caught on fire as high priority. Sugarcube Corner, for example, is too far gone to save, so don't waste the resources. Hopefully, everypony will have evacuated by then, but I want you to still conduct quick searches, at least at the beginning."

"Yes mayor," the yellow Pegasus responded before she too took to the sky. Derpy immediately followed suit, flying behind the chief. With all the speed of a hurricane, the two quickly descended to a rendezvous point, several other member of the volunteer firepony brigade waiting for them. "All right, everypony," Raindrop addressed. "I want four teams of thirty in all cardinal directions! Priority goes to buildings that have just caught on fire! Conduct quick searches on those front-line buildings only!"

After effectively splitting the Ponyville Fire Department into quarters, the teams broke up to tackle their jobs. Derpy found herself assigned to the western team who would cover the road leading to Sweet Apple Acres. Foals and elderly ponies rushed by as the flames slowly tried to cross the road and block the path. Thankfully, the weather team spotted their plight and brought forward a deluge of rain to help halt the advancing flames.

The rainwater soaked through her coat, and the hose tasted akin to mud, but not quite as pleasant. Derpy strained to keep her moral up, but the more they battled the persistent flames, the more it became apparent that they would lose this battle. No matter what they did, or how much water they used, the fireponies could only slow or stall the advancement of the fires. It was almost as if they had a mind of their own.

Thankfully, for this level of emergency, all able-bodied ponies were conscripted to aid in whatever capacity they could. It was somewhat of a load off of the blond Pegasus' mind, but a great deal of anxiety rested on it nonetheless. Ever since arriving to battle the flames, she had neither seen nor heard Dinky pass by with the others escaping to the farm. She silently

prayed that Dinky had fled before she came to fight the fires.

Suddenly, a shrill scream that the blonde Pegasus knew all too well sounded through the abandoned streets, chilling her to the bone. Derpy literally dropped everything as instinct kicked in: flying off with all haste in the direction the scream had come from. She flew through the air like a rocket, not caring for her own safety as she recklessly dodged between buildings and ponies.

Dinky stood in the middle of a street beyond the firewall, scared and alone, her body pressed to the ground in an effort to cool herself from the roasting flames. How could she have been so careless and become separated from the group? No pony probably realized she was gone, and probably would not until it was far too late.

Flames encircled the cringing unicorn, like a pack of ravenous wolves surrounding a deer. The filly sobbed and cried freely as she began to realize this would be her end. On the other hoof, she would be reunited with her mom and dad again, so maybe it wouldn't be so bad. "MUFFIN!?" came a shout overhead. Dinkys eyes widened as she realized it was the mare who took her in.

"Derpy!" she cried out, hoping she could be heard, "Help me!" Derpy looked down to find the filly in the middle of a ring of fire the likes of which she had never seen. They danced and crackled menacingly as they moved forward, slowly approaching the filly. Wasting no time, the mare dove down after her, the wind nearly deafening her as it blew across her ears.

The ground raced towards her, but Derpy did not dare pull up until she could see each cobblestone individually. The Pegasus rocketed forward out of the dive, hurtling to Dinky with speeds that would make Rainbow Dash proud. In fact, if she did not know any better, she could have sworn she left a hay-coloured trail in her wake. She raced through the flames with her front legs outstretched, grabbing her muffin right before pulling up sharply.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" Dinky cried, blurring her words together as she hugged the Pegasus tightly. Derpy hugged her back, heart still racing as adrenaline pumped through her body. All that mattered to her at that moment was the purplish-grey unicorn foal clutched in her hooves. The mailmare nuzzled against her gently, as the filly had

broken down into crying once more.

Eventually, the two arrived at Sweet Apple Acres, the big red stallion greeting them with a measure of worry in his eyes for the filly. "Do you really have to go?" Dinky asked with tears still streaming down her eyes. Derpy nodded her head sadly. She really did not want to leave the filly alone, but the town needed her, and she could not shrug off her duty to the other ponies.

"Crabs bark, muffin," she soothed. "Chipmunks nip at squirrels nicely." The mailmare gently stroked the filly's mane with her hoof, hoping that she understood her promise to keep safe. Without another word, the Pegasus took to the skies once more to battle the stubborn and surprisingly vigorous flames. Knowing that her charge was safe, the firepony could finally concentrate on the task at hoof. However, it would not be until sometime in the afternoon that the fires suddenly gave up the fight: extinguishing as easily as a match.

However, the damage had been done. Derpy and Dinky walked together through the charred and smouldering streets. The clouds overhead continued to rain, just in case the fires decided to reignite. It was a sombre and awe-inspiring sight as the two clopped down their street. It had not dawned on the Pegasus before that her house could have been among the casualties, but the possibility rapidly sprung to mind as she saw ponies dig through the wreckage to unearth any valuables that might have survived.

The streets echoed with the sounds of crying and despair. Derpy kept her head low and pondered: just what could have caused all of this mindless destruction? Dinky could feel the anxiety and sorrow build up in her two-time saviour and nuzzled her side gently as they walked. "It's okay, Derpy," she chirped, "Even if the house is gone... at least we still have each other!" The Pegasus looked to the small unicorn, eyes shimmering with tears at the wisdom and courage she possessed. Derpy nuzzled her back softly, sniffing a tiny bit as they turned the corner.

Standing there was Derpy's house: untouched by the flames that had completely gutted a house not more than three doors down. Walking closer, she found no markings of any kind on the door, telling her that everything inside was just as they left it. A smile crossed her muzzle for the first time since the explosion... she and Dinky had finally been given a

break. Maybe now things would finally begin to look up for the pair of troubled ponies.

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It is simply amazing how fast the sands of time can move, depending on the situation. For some, it feels as if there is never enough time, while for others, it drags on and tortures them mercilessly. Six months had passed since that horrible late-spring day. Flakes of snow drifted lazily to the ground that afternoon, creating a picture-perfect image for any aspiring artist or photographer.

All physical evidence of that terrible day vanished over the half year delay. Sugarcube Corner stood once more in all its glory, and somewhat more beautiful than before. Like a phoenix from the ashes, the bakery celebrated its grand re-opening just before the Running of the Leaves, and experienced an unprecedented surge in popularity since then. Of course, the rumours of that day had reached the ears of the blonde Pegasus.

She trotted through the light snowfall with a measure of pride on her face. Just last week, the mayor had promoted Derpy Hooves to Head Mail Carrier. It meant she could take any route she wanted, morning or afternoon, and secured a paycheque to provide a comfortable living for herself and Dinky. A stream of visible breath left her muzzle as she approached the facade of the bakery. She was so glad that Pinkie had her home back, and that her filly could actually help with something.

The tiny bell jingled overhead as Derpy stepped inside the warm building, wiping the rapidly melting snow off of her hooves before moving inside. "Muffin! Shadows can tuna!" she called out into the shop. A clang of pots and pans met her cheerful greeting, a small unicorn filly emerging from the back room. The Pegasus giggled as she trotted from behind the counter and nuzzled against her.

"Derpy!" she chirped happily, "Pinkie Pie taught me how to make cupcakes today! I was so good at it she might teach me how to make a whole CAKE tomorrow!" Derpy practically beamed with pride at the little filly nuzzling against her, rubbing off some of the flour that shrouded her like a ghost. Moments like this made her glad she chose Pinkie to watch after Dinky while she was at work.

Speaking of the devil, the pink mare herself emerged from the back rooms. Between the two of them, they must have had a whole sack of flour on their coats. "Hi, Derpy!" she said. "How was your day at work today? Mine was super-dee-duper fun with Dinky here! We made a big mess, but it was still fun because she's just a filly and learning, plus we have a lot of flour anyway so it's not really a big deal if we used a whole lot of it while she practiced."

Convinced her spiel was finished, Derpy answered, "Monkeys flip turnips to chase weasels. Hop on the magic bus, tickets buy you." She blinked as looks of recognition registered across both face.

"Oh dear," the filly spoke, eyes watering at how she slipped and popped her shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay? It sounds like you had a nasty fall!"

Derpy smiled, forgetting for a brief moment that Pinkie was tutoring her in how to interpret her inane outbursts. "Cats bark, muffin," she said, ruffling her little muffin's mane a little, brushing off the flour while she did so. "Chortle lightly, piggy!"

"See you tomorrow, Derpy!" Pinkie waved with enthusiasm as they put on their scarves and walked out the door. Derpy never really paid much attention to the cold, or the heat for that matter. It must have come from years of delivering the mail in both conditions that numbed her against it. Other ponies, however, galloped from one place to the other, wanting to spend as little time outside today as they could.

The pair of grey ponies, however, proceeded through the snow-filled streets at a slight canter, looking in windows of shops as they passed to see what was new for the season. Naturally, if it were not for Derpy, Dinky could very well spend all day gazing wistfully into the window of the toy shop. As usual, the blonde Pegasus had to pull her away after about five minutes of wide-eyed awe over the newest gizmos and dolls they had in stock.

Arriving at home, the two wiped their hooves against the mat and removed their scarves and Derpy her hat before they settled into the living room. "I wanna continue the story with the fish and the big boat that could

go underwater today, Derpy!" Now there was a request the blonde Pegasus would be happy to oblige. Gathering her copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* off the shelf, she cracked the book open and began to read aloud.

Dinky lay on the couch beside her and listened intently as a tale of an un-lived marvel echoed through her ears. Granted, some of the words would become garbled because of her lack of prowess at understanding her saviour, but what counted was that she actually read to her. It reminded her of the cold nights her old mom would do much the same for her before bedtime.

They only took a break from the spellbinding tale to eat supper, the story just too thrilling for the blonde unicorn to stop drinking in. It was not until well into Luna's night that the gentle calls of dreamland finally took the filly on the wisps of sleep. Derpy looked to her side and noticed the sleeping filly, probably already dreaming of Captain Nemo and his fantastic machine. A smile crept over her weary face before gently lifting her muffin onto her back and up the stairs. Formerly a barren and cramped spare bedroom, Dinky's room radiated in all different colours of the rainbow, a small collection of dolls stacked against the hoof of her bed, all to calm the filly as she slept.

Gently tucking the sleeping foal under the warm and soft covers, the mailmare offered a soft wish for a good night's sleep before turning out the light. Shutting the door with a soft click, the Pegasus silently fluttered into her room and got herself ready for bed. A brief moment of reflection reminded Derpy that this was not the life she had wanted for herself, but she smiled nonetheless. The creators moved in mysterious ways, often seeming unfair at times... but Derpy could not deny that she had found true happiness for the first time in a very long while.

It only made what happened the next day even more unfair.

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It was cold, the carriage ride was long, and to top it all off, he had to miss breakfast if he wanted to get there in due time. Candid sat in the pony-drawn carriage in utter contempt over his newest assignment. The unicorn stallion had a coat almost as white as the snow outside, with a dusty brown

mane and sea-green eyes. Ponyville was not that far away, but it was not like he was important enough to warrant a Pegasus Chariot. Sure, it would have been colder, but it did not mean he would miss breakfast either.

Normally, the unicorn carried himself with dignity and pride in his work, wearing a tailor-made black suit and tie. Sure, it was part of the uniform for an agent of the FPS, but he made it look good, especially when he added the dark sunglasses to the mix. Of course, he did not feel dignified being carted around in such a decrepit carriage, never mind the fact he nearly lost his non-existent breakfast countless times due to the bumps in the road.

After three stomach-churning hours, the colt from Canterlot finally arrived at the square of Ponyville. He was thankful to step out of the carriage (he really was) but this town screamed 'hickville' to him. No, no, it was probably his mood making him prejudiced. Candid shook his head and stepped away, the carriage moving to find a place to park until his work was complete.

Looking at the brief his superiors had given him, the snowy unicorn moved with celerity through the surprisingly busy thoroughfares of the small town before coming up to one of the larger houses near the square. His horn dazzled in a soft blue glow as he knocked gently on the door. Not more than a moment later, an emerald green earth pony mare answered the door. "Hello, how can I help you?" she asked politely, but with a measure of irritation in her voice.

"My name is Agent Candid of the FPS," he addressed. "You are the same Miss Viridian Gem who contacted us, correct?"

"Oh!" she gasped in recognition. "Why yes, please come in." The alabaster unicorn stepped beyond the threshold of the door, politely wiping his hooves on the mat before trotting into the living room. Meanwhile, the mare continued on deeper into the house, perhaps the kitchen. As far as living rooms went, it was fairly spacious and well decorated, but he was not here to admire the decor. After a couple of minutes, Viridian confirmed his suspicions by bringing in a bowl of lemon drops and some soda.

"Yes, please, and thank you, ma'am," he replied to her kind offer to help himself to the treats. "I am ashamed to say I was denied breakfast, so your

hospitality is most welcome." After helping himself to a polite number of the sour treats, he got back into the swing of things. "Now, let us get down to business. I'm afraid I wasn't given most of the details, so please enlighten me as to why you think Miss..." He looked down briefly to check his notes. "...Derpy Hooves, is an unfit caretaker?"

"Well," the mare started with a tone that nearly made Candid cringe. He knew he was about to hear a long winded spiel and he braced himself for it as best he could. "For one thing, she is developmentally delayed, has a communication disability and... her eyes do the MOST perverse thing ever. No, they don't cross, but they...well, they go off in different directions in some cases."

"I greatly doubt that lazy eyes constitute bad parenting, ma'am. But I must confess the other two are slightly worrying."

"And rightly so!" the green earth pony piped up. "That is why I wrote to you lot in the first place! I trust you are going to do what's right for the poor foal?"

"After a thorough investigation, I assure you, miss," Candid replied honestly. "If you will please excuse me, I would like to get started." He stood to attention, giving the mare of the house a polite nod before taking his exit, making sure he was excused before he did so.

The day progressed much how the unicorn expected it to. In a town as small as this one, Candid banked on everypony knowing each other, at least to some extent. Thankfully, Miss Derpy seemed to be very well known in town, and was regarded as an excellent mailmare and firepony... but in terms of personality, the reviews were less than stunning. Nearly every pony relayed the same story the emerald mare had: that Miss Hooves was mentally incompetent. Even the local medical authorities concurred that, while Derpy was good at working, she was not really all there.

Later that evening, already deep into Luna's night despite the early hour, Agent Candid approached the mailmare's house, flanked by two members of the local police. A carriage pulled by two Pegasus colts, whom he had to charter with his own bits, rested behind them as they walked briskly through the cold evening air. He really hated this part of the job, but protocol forbade him from communicating with the parents because they

would always lie to keep their foals. Reluctantly, he put his hoof to the door and knocked.

A grey Pegasus mare with straw-like blonde hair answered the door. "Jays whisper lightly, pickles?" She blinked, obviously dumbfounded by the sudden police presence.

"My name is Candid, ma'am. I represent the Foal Protection Services. I am afraid we have received some disturbing reports about you from various members of the community. Following an investigation, I regret to inform you that we find you unable to raise a foal. As she is without any kin, we have no choice but to place her in an orphanage."

Derpy's mouth hung open in shock. Had the other townsfolk really said such things about her? Especially knowing who this stallion was and probably why he was there. How could they betray her like that when she had finally found a slice of happiness to call her own!? She hardly noticed as the three colts pushed past her. "Jackal!" she cried, running up to them. "F-f-fire ants... don't like cheese!" As much as she tried to talk normally, her mouth would not co-operate.

"Wait!" Dinky cried as they advanced on her, "Why are you here... and why is Derpy saying she's not funny in the head? I know she's not funny in the head, even if she is funny."

"I'm sorry," Candid spoke earnestly as he got down to the young unicorn's level. "She's not related to you, Dinky, and she can't look after you anymore. I'm afraid you'll have to come with me now."

"No! I don't want to leave! Derpy takes care of me and I don't want to go!"

"You don't have a choice, Dinky." He nodded to the two police officers who picked her up, causing her to wiggle and cry hopelessly in their grasp. The unicorn was always mindful to keep himself between the police ponies and the crying Pegasus as they moved out to the carriage.

"Muffin!" she cried, trying desperately to jump after her once they got outside.

"Miss Hooves," the unicorn spoke, using his magic to keep her grounded,

"If you try to go after her again, I'm afraid I will have to place you under arrest." With the crying filly inside the carriage, the police ponies and agent swapped places. Derpy's amber eyes continued to stream with tears as the sharply-dressed unicorn stepped into the carriage as well, causing it to lurch forward suddenly as the pegasi pulling it ran down the street.

"Muffin!" Derpy cried out one last time, waving her hoof goodbye, just in case they never saw each other again. Only when the carriage flew out of sight did the police ponies drop their guard and trot away, leaving her to sob outside in the cold streets. The mailmare was no fool: she knew she had the right to an appeal, and she would pursue it with all her heart. But in order to do so, she needed help... a lot of help, and only one pony in town could provide it for her.

A giggle sounded somewhere beside her, chilling her more than the winter's night ever could. Derpy turned her head to see the sickeningly green neighbour of hers stand outside of her door, obviously amused by the spectacle before her. "I hope this teaches you a lesson, Derpy," she smiled wickedly. "You should have never tried to contaminate that poor, innocent foal with your stupidity. I can only hope the damage you did to her isn't permanent."

Anger unlike anything Derpy ever experienced before coursed through her veins. If only she could rush over and strangle that... that... she dare not say, until her eyes bugged out of their sockets. She wanted, more than anything, to rip, mutilate and kill that disgustingly smug earth pony, and she could probably get away with it too, since everypony thought she was touched in the head.

No! She would have justice, but she would not stoop down to that dastardly mare's level and seek revenge. She would get her muffin back... even if it was the last thing she would ever do!

Chapter 3

A rhythmic click echoed through the kitchen early the next morning, reminding him of just how empty his home felt before noon. Ever since the day of her return, Spike noticed something a little... off about his friend and caretaker. It almost seemed like she could no longer trust herself with any magic bigger than a simple levitation spell. Sure, she still went outside and laughed with her friends, but even then, they would be all she would associate with.

The baby dragon sighed and pushed himself away from the table, mentally bracing to give it another try. His claws clicked lightly on the wooden floors as he walked up the stairs to the purple pony's bedroom. Eventually reaching the second floor of the library, he knocked loudly on the right-hand door at the top of the landing. "Twilight!" he shouted. "Wake up! It's almost ten in the morning and you got another letter from the princess!"

Pressing his ear to the door, he heard a moan echo from somewhere beyond, followed by a quiet mumble of cranky disposition as the unicorn beyond regained consciousness. "I already wrote her back, but I'm getting sick of covering your flank for you! Either you write a report soon, or I'm not responding to her next letter, and you can deal with her!"

In the time since her return, Twilight had not written a single report on the magic of friendship to her teacher. It was not like she had not learned anything; she just could not bring herself to do it. Every time she tried, the last interaction she had with her mo... mentor, and the reasons behind it, sprang to mind. The unicorn wandered down the stairs to the lower part of the floor and made her way to the door. "I'm up, Spike! Can you please get breakfast ready for me?"

A scampering of little claws on wood met her ears as the door opened before her in a soft lavender glow. Stepping beyond, the door on the other side of the hall followed suit, allowing her passage into the library's only bathroom. It was a small, yet cozy room that could easily fit a single pony, but no more. A deep soaking tub with a built-in shower sat immediately to

her right, while a white vanity rested to her left. Before anything else, the purple mare went through her usual morning chores.

Not more than ten minutes later, Twilight stepped out of the tub to give her mane a quick brush before going down to eat. Yet, something was off as she looked into the mirror. Staring back at her was a much sadder looking version of herself with a much longer horn and a golden crown upon her head. "AHH!" she shouted, almost jumping out of her skin. With a shake of her head, she looked back into the mirror to see her as she had always been.

"Twilight, are you okay?" echoed the voice of a concerned baby dragon.

"Y-Of course I am, Spike!"

No, you're not stressed, spoke a nagging voice in the back of her head. "Stupid eyes," the lavender mare muttered to herself. "Why do they always have to try and play tricks on me?" With another shake of her head, and a quick brush of her mane, Twilight stepped out of the bathroom and walked downstairs. Her little startle had shaken her awake, so she did not mutter darkly under her breath as she entered the kitchen.

Spike sat cheerfully on his little chair, a bowl of cereal already sitting directly opposite of the baby dragon. "So why did you wake me up so early?" she asked as she took her seat. "It's not like any of my friends are going to come over, or that we'll go outside. It's far too cold to do anything for very long." Levitating the spoon to her mouth, the purple mare began to eat.

"I know, and I'd love to sleep in too, but today was the day YOU wanted to re-organize the books!"

"Since when did I..." thinking about it, however, she realized the baby dragon did have a point. She groaned and slumped at the idea of going through every book she possessed, but she had been putting it off for a good month. It needed to get done, and the winter lull was the best time to do it... it might even serve well as her next excuse not to write the princess. Still, re-organizing and cataloguing all the books would take days of hard work with no time to study anything interesting.

However, just as Twilight put her bowl in the sink to wash it, a loud series of rhythmic knocks sounded on the front door of the library. "Pinkie Pie..." she muttered as she walked out into the main room. Pinkie usually never knocked on her door: she just sort of... appeared out of thin air whenever she pleased with no regard for such petty social norms. Her initial wave of annoyance turned into one of worry when soft sobs met her ears as she approached.

"Pinkie, what's wro- Derpy?" the purple unicorn said as she opened the door. Beyond it stood her pink friend who supported the grey Pegasus like a living crutch. Twilight stepped to the side to let them in and get out of the brisk morning air. "Wh...what happened?"

"It's just awful, Twilight!" Pinkie chirruped with no hint of cheer in her voice. "Some fuddy-duddy in town called the FPS and they came and took Dinky away! How could they do that!? Everypony knows Derpy took good care of her despite her strangeness... how could they do something so mean!? Oooohh, I wish I knew who did it! Then I'd do something about all of this, Pinkie-Pie Style!"

Twilight saw a flash of anger in the pink mare's eyes the likes of which she had never seen before. It chilled her to the bone, causing her to shake a little inadvertently. Yet, for all her anger, the party mare carried an air of comfort around her, gently caressing the sobbing Pegasus even as she ranted. It was something truly admirable, and the lavender mare felt she could never split her emotions in two so seamlessly like that.

"So..." she said. "I don't mean to be insensitive, but why are you coming to me? I'm upset Dinky got taken away too, but what exactly do you want me to do about it? As much as it pains me to say so; but I don't think the princess has the time to deal with something like this, as unjust as it is."

"Everypony knows that, Twilight!" Pinkie replied, suddenly happy once more. "Derpy means to sue the FPS for... wrongful conviction, was it?" She twisted her head to the sobbing mare, who only nodded her head in confirmation. "... And she wants the Supreme Court to overrule them finding her as an unfit caretaker." Being the highest public court in all of Equestria, it could overturn any rulings a lesser court or government agency gave. The only higher legal authorities in the country were the Royal Courts of the Regents of Sun and Moon: the personal courts of

Celestia and Luna.

"Okay..." the purple pony trailed off, confused. "I still don't see what you need me for, unless you want me to look up legal references."

"Well, sure, that would help," Pinkie said. "I mean, you are going to be her lawyer, right?"

"What!? Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no. Are you CRAZY!?" Twilight huffed. "I can't be her lawyer! I don't have a law degree, large crowds of judgmental ponies make me nervous, and I'd just be really, really awful!" Pinkie's eyes shimmered, her pupils growing to twice their size. The purple mare steeled herself, used to Pinkie and those same sad, puppy-dog eyes that made Fluttershy sing that ridiculous song despite her condition.

She did not, however, expect the brilliant Pegasus to follow suit. Her amber eyes glistened with fresh tears, radiating sadness the likes of which she had never seen. Twilight wanted to help, she truly did, but she just did not have the credentials to represent her friend. She took a deep breath and steeled herself against the onslaught of guilt. "That's not an argument. That's just looking sad and hoping I'll cave in."

Derpy looked to the floor sadly before walking off to a corner of the library, possibly to cry and further guilt the unicorn. Pinkie reached around and extracted a picture of Dinky from the depths of her mane. "Where did you get that?" Twilight inquired. Of course, she quickly realized that asking would lead to trouble and quickly continued. "Never mind... it's still not a valid argument! I just can't represent Derpy. I want to, really, but I don't have a law degree. They're kind of important."

"Aww," Pinkie moaned. "But you were a princess for three weeks! Shouldn't that give you royal authority, or something?"

"That doesn't mean squat!" Twilight shouted, the memories coming back to her once more, making her sound more angry than she felt. "As far as the law is concerned, I don't have any training or authority, so I can't be her lawyer! I'm sorry." At that, the blonde Pegasus returned to her friends, eyes still watering with tears as she placed an open book at the lavender unicorn's hooves. She gave her friend an inquisitive look before levitating the book up where she could see it.

"What is this all about, Derpy?" she asked. The Pegasus promptly pointed to a specific paragraph, urging her to read it aloud. *"By order of King Helios and Queen Kantara of Equestria, no matter the length of rule, any pony whomsoever assumes the duties of either Regent of the Sun or Regent of the Moon will thereafter have authority to preside over, or represent a pony in any and all legal matters."* Twilight groaned and put a hoof to her face. It was a new printing of that particular legal book; therefore only laws still in effect were present. If she did not know any better, she could have sworn it was made *just* to inconvenience her.

"Aha! TAKE THAT!" Pinkie exclaimed, dancing about the room in jubilant triumph.

With the combined might of her saddened friends and the law on their side, the pressure on the unicorn to accept her friend's plea for help quickly became overwhelming. "Fine," she sighed in defeat. Immediately upon accepting, two pairs of hooves wrapped around her neck as the Pegasus and the pink mare drew her in for a small group hug. It was then that Twilight began to wonder just what she was getting herself into.

"So, is there a date set?" the lavender unicorn asked as the hug broke off.

"Not yet," Pinkie answered. "But Derpy said she'll try to get in as soon as possible, so maybe a week or two."

"Monkey flip," the Pegasus spoke. Twilight was relieved to see that she had stopped crying her amber eyes out. "Lemons jog to the beach, but cupcakes swim instead. Germs throw parties over a dog's tail. Oils lick gently at hostile pigeons."

"She said," the pink mare translated. "Not to worry since we have an airtight case. They simply can't ignore all the evidence we have to prove just how super-smart she is! Besides, we plan to get some ponies to act as character witnesses, so they can't ignore her smartness."

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If taking the poor foals was the worst part of Candid's job, then gathering

the evidence to make an iron-clad case against the parents had to be the most tedious. For the past three days, he spent his nine to five going though just about every record agency there was to find in Canterlot. It was times like this that he wished they had the budget to hire runners to do this sort of mindless task while the supervising agent got time to relax and actually prepare.

At about two in the afternoon on the third day, the weary unicorn strolled into the building and up the stairs, his saddle bags bulging with any and every paper he could find that held relevance. He had no time to read any of it, but he had documents from the Register's Office and even staff records from the Royal Equestrian Postal Service. In the interests of fairness, he grabbed every record he could instead of just those that would help their case.

Eventually, the unicorn stallion trudged up to his third floor office. If only the stupid elevator had not broken down, and the owners of the building were not too cheap to bother repairing it, instead of all these stairs. Alas, he had to keep his delusions to himself as he parked his flank behind his desk and emptied the contents of his bags onto the table. With a deep breath and a heavy sigh, the stallion went to work poring over every paper in front of his muzzle.

Granted, such a task was easier said than done. Beyond the thin walls of the entombing cubicle, other agents were doing all they could to distract themselves for the tedium of the day. Often, this resulted in loud, impromptu games of Hoofball using old reports or unused forms. When a pony actually had work to do, it could be quite vexing and extremely difficult to concentrate. Thankfully, Candid had an ace up his sleeve: a sound barrier spell he picked out one day from a library book.

With the spell blocking out most of the noise from beyond the walls of his cubical, the sharply dressed stallion found he could finally concentrate. His cubicle was like most of the other agents': it was barely big enough for a pony to move around in. On the white mobile walls, he had stuck pictures drawn by his own foals, a picture of them and his loving wife gazing at him on his desk. In addition, he also erected posters from his favourite plays and movies in order to give it some more personal flare.

The hours ticked by slowly as he laboured at his desk: reading through

every single document was a tedious and boring task if he ever knew one. Yet, as he read on into the life of Miss Derpy Hooves, the more he became aware that the agency had made a grave mistake. His initial investigation was merely a formality, as they told him they had already looked into her records. Obviously, they had not looked close enough.

Unfortunately, only one pony in the entire building had the authority to issue a pardon to the poor Pegasus. Slipping the papers into a safe place, the unicorn stallion got up from his desk and began the trot to the director's office on the next floor. Near the top of the fourth floor landing sat an impressive set of double doors, dark stained wood casting the rest of the bright room in shadow. A shiver ran down his spine as his hoof made contact with the door: make no mistake, the director seemed like a nice enough pony, he was just...intimidating at times.

"Enter," came his gruff voice after the swift knock. Candid stepped into his office. A single, arched window sat behind a solid mahogany desk. A grandfather clock ticked away the seconds in some unseen corner of the room as the white stallion advanced, the thick white carpeting softening his hoofsteps. Bookshelves lined the walls, serving as a façade of intimidation if he ever knew one. Although, he could not help but notice a tiny nick in the wall paper that imitated wood-paneling.

"Sir," Candid spoke with a nod of respect. "I have some concerns regarding the upcoming appeal of Miss Derpy Hooves."

"Ah yes," the well groomed unicorn said. "What about it?" The director had a large build and a face as if a pony had chiseled it out of raw granite. Everything about him screamed 'big and powerful,' his grey coat, steely eyes and salt and pepper mane only adding to this opinion.

"Well, I've been doing some research into her past and after some thought on the matter, well... I think there was some sort of mistake in the initial investigation."

"Oh, there can't be any mistake," the grey unicorn replied coldly, "You've been working here long enough that I can be--ahem--candid with you." He smirked, but then frowned when his fellow unicorn did not laugh at his joke. "There never was an initial investigation. You did all of it."

"But," he sat there, muttering in disbelief, "We always do an initial investigation into the parent's background before we send out the field agent. Are you telling me that we didn't do that this time? Why!?"

"That is not for you to know."

"When it rips apart a happy and functioning family, I believe I'm well within my rights to ask why there was such a drastic breach of protocol!" Candid did not like where the tone of this conversation was heading, but he felt compelled to press forward, for the sake of justice.

"There can be no happy or functional family when the sole provider of a foal is so stupid she can't even speak properly," his boss replied.

"That's the thing, sir. She can't speak, but she's as eloquent in her written communication as you, or me, or anypony... maybe even more so."

"She probably got a higher-functioning but equally mentally incompetent friend to write those letters for her. The fact of the matter, Candid, is that there was no investigation because there can be no way such an idiotic pony can support a foal!" His last sentence was punctuated by a slam of his hooves on his desk: the director was doing his best to intimidate his subordinate. The white unicorn would have none of that.

"I think I understand what is going on here, sir," Candid ground out, "And quite frankly, I don't think I can live up to your 'standards' here. I'm giving you my two weeks' notice. Or in plainer terms: I QUIT. Have a good day, Mr. Director."

Just as he was about to open the door, the aging stallion coughed and cleared his throat to gain his attention. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I wish you the best of luck in the future. Just be careful, since the world can be so pointlessly cruel, don't you agree?" It took all of Candid's willpower to stop himself from backing up and bucking that smug, bigoted pony in the face. He could tell he was being threatened, but he would not let that stop him. If there was any way at all, he would find a way to help Ms. Hooves with her appeal.

Wasting no more time, Candid opened the door and trotted down to his desk. He would have to go quickly if he was going to get those papers out

of the building, before they could be destroyed. Thankfully, upon arrival, his cubicle was untouched by anypony, so he hastily stuffed the papers back into his saddle bags. Since he was quitting anyway, he left his other valuables at his desk, since they could not legally bar him from the building until the two weeks had expired.

In a way, he would be happy to not deal with the heart-wrenching task of separating foals and their parents. However, he quickly became worried about what he would do for a living now that he had quit. Hopefully another government agency could use his experience... perhaps he could apply to the Royal Investigation Bureau again now that he had more experience? Either way, he never wanted to associate with the director again, and hoped he got his just desserts in the upcoming trial.

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A loud thud sounded all down the street as the familiar sound of the closing door reached the ears of the still sleeping ponies, who reacted with a toss in bed at the most extreme. By then, they had become accustomed to the early riser who dwelt on the lane, and now tuned out her early morning shenanigans. However to Derpy Hooves, today would be the most important Saturday morning of her life.

Weeks of planning and hoping would boil down to just a few hours in a courtroom, as the day of her appeal to the Supreme Court finally arrived. The fog-laden streets of Ponyville stretched before her, obscuring details as her hooves clopped against the cobblestone. Snow piled on the sides of the streets threatened to reach into some of the windows, serving to remind her how far off spring still rested.

Out of the early morning fog, the silhouette of a mare with hair as fluffy as a powder puff emerged from the choking haze. Pinkie Pie did not bother to dress up for the occasion, being her usual free-spirited self, unlike Derpy who put on her best winter saddle. Like the Pegasus herself, it was not over the top: a simple brown outfit stuffed with goose down to help insulate the wearer.

"Good morning, Derpy!" she cheeped. "Are you feeling ready for this?" The pink party mare smiled when the gray mailpony nodded her head positively. After receiving her answer, Pinkie followed her, hopping all the

way down the street. It was good to be around a pony so chipper despite the gravity of the day, or the gripping chill that surrounded it. Of course, it was a well-known fact that the party mare had an infectious optimism surrounding her, like an energy field of some sort.

As usual, the gray mare knocked with her usual musical code to tell her learned friend just who lay beyond the threshold. At first, there came no reply, but right as she was about to knock again, the purple mare beyond bid them welcome. Derpy and Pinkie walked into the library, wiping off their hooves on the mat before proceeding on further into the building. Twilight stood in the middle of the room, levitating a couple of books into her saddle bags.

The gray mailmare found herself speechless at her appearance though. It was obvious that she was aiming to try and impress the judges with a smart appearance, yet she missed the mark. The purple mare wore a pressed alabaster dress shirt with a blood red tie under an onyx jacket and complimented it with a matching pair of trousers. On her hooves, she wore two pairs of equally dark, yet shiny dress shoes.

She even styled her mane into a tight bun and made an effort to try and do something to her usually straight and orderly tail. Derpy was not quite sure what she was aiming for, but it looked more a rat's tail than a pony's. Then, of course, the piece de résistance: a pair of thick brown glasses that enlarged her pupils to a profane degree. In short, she looked like a cross between a bug-eyed librarian (noting the irony) and one of those 'Mares in Black' from urban legends about Rosorrel. Now, the blonde Pegasus was not one to criticise another's fashion sense, but she could not help but laugh.

Even the pink mare got in on the laugh riot, joining the gray pony on the floor in a fit, much to the indignation and embarrassment apparent on the scholar's face. "We're sorry, Twilight!" the pink pony cried in between fits of laughter. "But if Rarity ever saw you like that, you'd give her a heart attack!"

Twilight growled and blushed at the same time. "...But I did everything the books said to make a good first impression!" she defended with a hint of a whine in her voice. Once again, her books had failed to help with a fashion-related crisis, but she did not have the time, or the energy to go see her trendy unicorn friend. However, she became further disheartened when her

retort only proved to make her brainy friend laugh even harder.

Once the tidal wave of laughter finally subsided, Derpy pulled herself off the floor and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Tuna fish," she apologized, "Beaker kicks maple trees in December while flutes play the cello. Rabbits hop happily in marshmallow cakes. Lemon kelps dance on disco ducks."

"She said," Pinkie started, "that you should wear your mane and tail like normal, then ditch the shoes and the glasses. That should make you look decent, instead of over-the-top silly like you are." She smiled as she pulled herself off the floor and shook about to get any dirt out of her mane.

"Spike!" Twilight shouted, causing the grumpy dragon to emerge from the kitchen.

"Yeah?" he answered with a certain level of acidity in his voice.

"Can you please go get the balloon ready while I go fix myself up a little?"

"So someone finally told you that you look like a clown?" The baby dragon shook a little as the mare narrowed her eyes at him. "All right, I'm going." With that, the purple and green dragon left to go prepare the balloon for departure, leaving the grey pony and her translator alone in the room.

Together, the two mares stood in silence for the two or three minutes it took Twilight to redress. There really was nothing to say to each other right then, but smirks across their faces hinted what they were thinking about. Derpy had to confess that the mental image of her friend dressed like that would be one to last, perhaps for the rest of her life, considering just how awful it was.

With all the evidence, a well-read attorney, and the secret well of boundless optimism that was Pinkie Pie, Derpy became confident that she would win this legal battle, hooves down. After all, she had the truth that she was indeed a fit caretaker on her side. By the Sorrel Hells, or high water, she would get Dinky back... if the filly still wanted her, that is. She shook her head at the idea, as if a single shred of pessimism would sink the entire game plan. Unfortunately for the gray Pegasus, they were about to receive a whole cartful of it.

A couple of minute later, the lavender unicorn descended the stairs, her mane and tail back to their usual style, having ditched the shoes and the hilariously thick glasses. After receiving a couple of nods of approval over her new look, she decided to voice her thoughts. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea, Derpy," she said. "I mean, I have absolutely zero experience with the legal system, and I haven't had a lot of time to prepare. I'm just worried I'll make you look like a fool."

Derpy shook her head in reply. "Pickle hats, donkey. Yellow fever and gingerbread tango."

"Don't worry about it, Twilight. There's no way you could make her look like a fool," Pinkie Pie translated.

Immediately after the exchange, the door opened behind them, letting in chilling wisps of mid-winter wind as the baby dragon scampered back into the warmth. "It's all ready to go, Twilight," the baby dragon spoke with some disdain. At the very least, he could get a solid day of napping in while they were in Canterlot. "Good luck, by the way," he wished as they headed out the door.

"Just don't throw any wild parties, Spike," Twilight joked as she shut the door. The three mares trotted over to the balloon and hopped into the basket. Derpy would later learn that the purple and elegant vehicle belonged to Princess Celestia herself. Actually, it explained how the balloon could carry them to Canterlot, regardless of an unfavourable wind, quite nicely. It probably had all sorts of enchantments on it to move to the rider's whims.

For now, the Pegasus watched in awe from the perch of the basket as they slowly lifted off the ground. The buildings and trees of town slowly became smaller the higher they went. Sure, she was used to flight, but the feeling of being so high in the air with her wings folded was downright foreign to her. It was an interesting sensation, to say the very least. In no time at all, the ancient balloon would touch down in the capital of all the land.

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An hour of lazy drifting later, the trio of ponies finally began the descent into the forest of towers and fields of buildings that made Canterlot famous. Claws of ivory and alabaster stretched towards the sky, as if hoping to rip the clouds from their lofty perch. Granted, they were not as tall as the legendary skyscrapers of Manehattan, yet they still impressed upon the Pegasus all the same. She had never been to the capital in person before, and hoped that once the whole ordeal was over, the native unicorn could give them a tour.

Eventually, the basket of the large balloon came to rest in front of, essentially, a large box of a building dressed up with stairs, columns topped by equine heads and windows. The three mares hopped out and dragged the hovering transport over to the parking lot beside the boxy courthouse, garnering a few disdainful glances from the more aristocratic unicorns. After securing the transport to the ground with thick ropes and some pikes, the trio rounded the front of the building and ascended the steps.

A few ponies, still drawn in by the landing balloon, continued to watch as they entered the building, pushing open the large wooden doors. Beyond lay a cavernous entrance hall to rival the castle's in size, but not in luxury. Towering columns of marble supported the vaulted ceiling, each hoof step echoing in the distance for an interminable amount of time. Several smaller doors branched off from this chamber down the hall to the courtrooms, a single large wooden circle of desks blocking the courts.

Twilight took the lead in the march to the desks, with Derpy a close second, and Pinkie too busy playing with the echoes to really notice they had moved on. Sitting at the desk was a brown unicorn mare with an electric blue mane and tail. She sported glasses eerily similar to the ones the lavender mare had worn earlier that day. It took all the willpower Derpy possessed not to laugh at the bug-eyed unicorn. "Yes, can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes," Twilight replied, "Can you tell us which courtroom we'll be heading too? We were only given the time and where the building was."

"Just a moment," the mare behind the desk said. Using her magic, the brown mare cycled through the papers, looking for the room they would need. "Can I have the time? Also, I need the client's name."

"I think it was ten o'clock, and Ms. Derpy Hooves."

"Okay," she added, with some flips and turns of various books and papers, "I take it you're her attorney?" Twilight nodded her head in reply as the mare continued to work. "Aha! Okay, I have it right here... you're due in courtroom three. I wish you the best of luck to you, ma'am. The FPS rarely loses an appeal."

"Thank you," Twilight replied, "Pinkie, come on!" she added, seeing her friend still occupying herself with the echoes of the hall. The trio of mares continued, past the circular desk, and over to the door bearing the number three above it. Marble floors, gilded hanging chandeliers and walls of rich, dark woods gave off a presence of regal intimidation. These halls had seen some of the most monumental cases in all of Equestrian history: some presided over by the unicorn's mentor.

Paintings of important ponies hung on the walls, lit by brass lamps sticking out from the frames to better illuminate the subjects. Most of them had extremely hard or displeased expressions, immortalized in oil-based paint for all to see. Two guards flanked the large doors leading into their courtroom. They were brown unicorn stallions who bore a striking resemblance to some of the royal guard, except they wore blue jackets with gold stars pinned to their lapels.

"I take it you're the plaintiff and her lawyer," one of them addressed Derpy, "But who is THAT one?" he asked, pointing towards Pinkie Pie, who was making faces at one of the portraits.

"She's Ms. Hooves' official translator," Twilight explained.

"Right," spoke the other with uncertainty, "Well, you're about five minutes early. I'll escort you to your waiting room."

"Thank you, Sir," Twilight smiled as the unicorn lead them to a small door aside the large double doors of the court room. The plaintiff's waiting room proved to be uncharacteristically small in comparison to the large rooms all around it. Several small seats dotted the edges of the wood paneled walls, only broken by the odd plant or two in an attempt to bring colour to the relatively tiny and dull space.

The doors shut behind the three mares unceremoniously, the clicks echoing through the empty and hard box. Pinkie Pie, as hyper as always, began to bounce around the room, possibly looking for something to do to kill the time until the trial began. Derpy swallowed hard and took a seat on one of the hard benches after placing her warm saddle onto the rack. As nervous as the mailmare felt, it had nothing on how nervous her lavender friend looked.

Twilight took to pacing the room the very instant the door shut, muttering under her breath various legal terms and words of encouragement to herself. *Calm down, Twilight*, spoke that nagging voice in the back of her head. *Take deep breaths and focus. Getting stressed out isn't going to help Derpy, and you remember the last time you got too stressed. Breathe.* The mare very rarely took the advice of a disembodied voice, but this time, she took it up on its offer, taking many deep breaths, feeling the stress slowly lift off her back.

A far too short amount of time later, the intercom in the room dinged, telling them that the Justices of the Supreme Court had taken the bench. The trial was about to begin. The three walked over to the door and awaited their turn, listening intently. "Fillies and gentlecolts," sounded the voice of a mare over the intercom, "Please rise for the five Justices of the Supreme Court: Chief Justice Black Robe, Justice Powdered Wig, Justice Heavy Gavel, Justice Blindfold, and Justice Balanced Scales!"

Loud shuffling of hooves sounded over the radio as the many ponies in attendance rose to attention. "Please, be seated," spoke a gruff voice, possible belonging to one of the judges. More shuffling echoed over the radio as the ponies seated themselves once more. "The Royal Supreme Court of Equestria hereby acknowledges the plaintiff and her entourage."

Chapter 4

The doors to the court opened with a click, a bailiff pony dressed much like the guards outside approaching the grey Pegasus and her friends and beckoned them forward. It was an impressive room filled with intricate and dark wood paneling, etched with elaborate designs that would not look out of place in Celestia's personal chambers. Over a hundred ponies jammed the seats in front of them as they approached the central aisle, all eyes on the three mares.

"Presenting to the court," spoke the stallion after clearing his throat, "The plaintiff, Ms. Derpy Hooves of Ponyville, her personal translator, Ms. Pinkamena Diane Pie, also of Ponyville, and her attorney, Lady Twilight Sparkle of Canterlot." Murmurs echoed through the room as the last name was read aloud. In fact, even Derpy found herself at a loss over the announcement. Since when had Twilight been known as "Lady"? The blonde Pegasus had a sneaking suspicion about what caused the sudden pomp, but now was not the place to voice it.

As they approached the bench---Pinkie's hop thankfully absent---and took their seats at the table, all five of the justices nodded their heads to the purple unicorn as she seated herself. "Lady Twilight," started the pony in the centre, "We understand how you can come before us today with no formal legal training. That said, we will do our best to facilitate you, not out of kindness, or due to perceived incompetence, but out of formality. I hope you do not take offence."

Derpy looked at her friend, noticing a blush the likes of which she had never seen burning on her face. She knew that her lavender friend hated undue attention, or being treated better than others, but she seemed to swallow it as best she could before replying, "N-no, it's fine. Thank you very much, your honour. I'll try to be as small a burden on these proceedings as possible."

After nodding his head in reply, the yellow earth pony stallion sitting in the middle spoke again, "The Royal Supreme Court of Equestria now recognizes the defence and his entourage." The bailiff pony quickly trotted

to a door opposite the one that Derpy and her friends had emerged from. A large and intimidating unicorn stallion emerged from the threshold.

If Derpy did not know any better, she could have sworn the stallion was chiseled from solid granite, and given life through arcane means that made the hairs on her back stand on edge. She shook her head subtly and focused her attention on the second pony to emerge from the door of the defendant's waiting room. The attorney, as she would later learn, proved to be a red Pegasus mare with a light brown mane and tail. She carried a briefcase in her mouth and wore a suit like Twilight's, but with a surprisingly short skirt instead of trousers.

"Presenting to the court," the same stallion spoke after clearing his throat once more, "The Defendant, Mr. Brittle Lullaby, Director of the Foal Protection Services, of Canterlot, and his attorney, Ms. Epona of Ponyclop Ranch." The two ponies proceeded towards their table at a light gait, nodding their heads to the justices of the Supreme Court as they approached.

"Are the two parties ready to begin?" asked the pony in the middle of the bench.

"The prosecution is ready, your honour," Twilight replied with a slight shake in her voice.

"The defence is ready as well, your honour," the red Pegasus spoke with an almost bored confidence.

"Very well," continued the yellow earth stallion, "I now declare this sitting of the Supreme Court in session. The prosecution may begin with its opening remarks."

"Thank you, your honour," the purple mare spoke, standing up and walking before the bench, "Fillies and gentlecolts of the audience, esteemed justices of the Supreme Court, I stand before you today to address a great wrong done to my client by the Foal Protection Services. I intend to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that my client has been wronged by their findings and that she is actually more than competent enough to raise a foal."

Confident in her statement, the lavender mare took her seat at the table once more. As she did so, Derpy could not help but notice the director lean in and whisper something into the ear of his attorney. She, in turn nodded in reply before the justice spoke again. "Does the defence have an opening statement?"

"Yes, we do, your honour," spoke the red mare as she stood to attention, "We aim to prove the FPS' findings to be valid, and assure the decision to separate Ms Hooves from the foal was indeed valid given the circumstances. Now, we have a question we wish to pose to the court. What purpose does Ms. Pie serve? Unless she is a legal advisor, she should not be permitted into these proceedings."

"She is Ms. Hooves' translator, as per our introduction," Twilight replied.

"We have an objection, your honour," the attorney said, "Ms Sparkle, are you trying to prove your case before we actually put it on trial? The presence of a translator ASSUMES that she merely suffers from a speech disability and not from a more severe mental retardation. While neither condition is conducive to proper parenting, the court must determine these matters for itself. We move to have her translator barred from the court."

Derpy saw some of the colour drain from Twilight's face. Obviously, she did not expect the defence to not tolerate the presence of a translator. The blonde Pegasus could see the judge ponies exchanging glances and talking among one another, probably to decide if this argument was valid. She impatiently jabbed the unicorn's side, hoping to coax her out of her mental shutdown. Things were not going as well as she had hoped.

"W-well..." the lavender mare started with great uncertainty, "She has a translator because... because that's the truth! She has a speech impediment."

With a yawn and a roll of her eyes, the red Pegasus looked absolutely bored with the proceedings, seeping a confidence that Twilight sorely lacked. "Next time, Ms Sparkle," she said, "Say 'objection' if you have something against anything I or my client says. Technically, you're out of order, but I'll let it slide THIS time. If Ms. Hooves does indeed have a speech impediment, then show us your PROOF."

Twilight dug into her bags that lay to the side of the table and extracted a series of papers. "Your honours, I do have proof. I have here a series of letters written by my client. I submit these to the court as evidence."

"Objection," the red pony spoke, raising a hoof, "How are we to know they were written expressly by the client and not forged or edited?"

"Sustained," the chief justice replied before banging the gavel, "Ms Sparkle, unless you can prove that your client wrote those letters, we cannot accept it as evidence."

Thankfully for Derpy, the gears in Twilight's head began to turn as she slowly became accustomed to the atmosphere of the courtroom. "I think we can prove it quite well, your honour. I ask the court to call my client to the stand, and request she write an original statement before your eyes. I'm sure you will find the styles to match perfectly."

Chief Justice Black Robe looked to his sides down the bench, the other, silent ponies nodding in approval except for one. "Very well then," he responded, "Ms. Hooves, please take the stand and write for us an account of the day in question. Bailiff, please bring me the submitted letters for comparison."

Derpy stood to her hooves as the bailiff approached and trotted over to the witness' stand quickly. After the letters were given the justices, the brown unicorn returned and delivered her a pen and pad of paper to write on. The Pegasus wasted no time, ignoring the bored yawns of the defence attorney as she elegantly produced a brief synopsis of the events the day her muffin was taken from her.

Once finished, she handed the statement to the uniformed pony, who passed it on to the justices. At first, the previously mute ponies began to murmur and speak among themselves as they decided what to do. After exchanging some quick glances down the bench, the yellow stallion spoke again. "We have found the new statement to match the papers forwarded for evidence in writing style and use of language. As such, we find the prosecution's claim of a speech impediment to be valid. Therefore, Ms. Pie shall not be barred from these proceedings."

Derpy's heart skipped a beat as the judge's gavel made impact with the

bench. She was quickly dismissed from the witness' stand, and managed to catch the shadow of shock on the red mare's face as she gleefully returned to her seat. The blonde Pegasus smiled to her dear friend and attorney, Pinkie doing her best to restrain herself from cheering over their small victory.

"I'd like to congratulate the prosecution," Epona spoke, "It's not every day a pony who isn't even an attorney can totally derail a trial. As great as it is that the plaintiff has proved she has a speech impediment, I remind the court that such a disability holds no bearing on proper parenting. We will accept the court's decision to keep her translator present, but I doubt she will be needed."

Just like that, the air of joy and optimism suddenly shattered like many delicate pieces of china. Derpy was not surprised by how good the lawyer was... after all, they would not have hired a pony who would do them no good. Still, it stung like nothing else as the judge agreed with the red pony and gave her the floor to speak, thus began the trial in earnest.

"Your honours," she resumed after she was given the floor, "I submit to the court the records from the field agent who led the investigation. You will find it contains written testimony from over fifty residents of Ponyville detailing just how unfit Ms Hooves is as a caretaker. You will also find a medical profile that attests to her incompetence."

Every move, every word was calculated and deliberate. It soon became apparent to the blond Pegasus that the red mare was easily one of the best lawyers around, as she had turned the tides of the trial so... effortlessly. Meanwhile, Twilight bumbled and fiddled around in her bags, desperate to find some piece of evidence to prove her mental competence. Derpy could feel their case developing massive holes, and that it would sink faster than the Tandemic unless they could find something to prove her intelligence.

The minutes seemed to drag on for hours, and the hours drag on for days to the diligent mailpony as the relentless assault against her character continued. Even the twenty five glowing character references they had worked so hard to gather were shot down by the defence and the court. No wonder that mare at the front desk wished her luck: they were going to need it if she ever wanted to see Dinky again.

Even after taking the stand, with Pinkie's help, the case did not seem to be going the way she wanted it to. In fact, the grilling comments of the defence and intense pressure on her pink friend proved to be almost overwhelming for her, nearly making her cry in frustration at not being taken seriously. It came as a great relief when the justices announced that it was time for recess.

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"Your honours," Twilight spoke when court resumed after the break, "I'd like to call a witness to the stand, if I may?"

By then, three of the justices looked bored by any pleas the prosecution made. The lavender mare could not help a sneaking suspicion in the back of her mind that they had already made up their minds about the case... and that it would not bode well for her friend. "Very well," Black Robe spoke, "You may call forth your witness." Waiting in the wings, the bailiff pony sprung to action, heading to a door behind the bench.

A sharply dressed unicorn stallion emerged from the back room of the court and sat in the witness' stand. He could not help but shudder as a look from his (former) boss told him that if Derpy lost, his life was about to become a Sorrel Hell. Still, he could not allow this miscarriage of justice to continue. The justices looked at him and asked, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, with the creators' aid?"

"Yes, I do, your honours," he replied.

"Can you please state your full name and occupation for the court records?" Twilight asked as she approached.

"My name is Candid Camera, and I was an agent for the Foal Protection Services. I have recently, however, quit and forwarded my resume to the Royal Bureau of Investigations. In point of fact, I was the agent in charge of the investigation against Ms Hooves."

"Can you, in detail, explain why you have decided to come before the court and bear witness to these proceedings?" Her voice was a little shaky, the systematic dismantling of their case so far crippling what little confidence she had. She knew showing it was akin to a pony bleeding in

shark-infested waters, but she simply could not help herself.

"Well, when I was dispatched to Ponyville, I operated under the assumption that a background check had been performed by other agents in the service. Later, however, I would learn that no such investigation occurred after talking to the director, Mr. Lullaby himself. I spoke with the pony who contacted us first, then proceeded to gather the evidence that was earlier forwarded by Ms. Epona.

"It was not until I began to gather the evidence for the case, however, that I began to see Miss Hooves in a different light. I gathered as many records as I could in order to help the case against her, but I quickly found that a mistake had been made. You see, I discovered that she has an IQ of well over one hundred and seventy, and that she was the one who suggested the future implementation of the Postal Box system."

The courtroom buzzed at the testimony, and not in an unpleasant way. Although the judges showed no emotion, Derpy could not help but see the looks of surprise in their eyes as they learned of her brilliant idea. Repeated bangs of the gavel brought everypony to their senses as the chief justice called for order. "Do you have any evidence to support this claim?" he added.

"Yes, your honour," he replied, producing some papers, "I have here, Ms. Hooves' school transcripts, and a copy of a personal letter of thanks from the president of the Royal Equestrian Postal Service."

However, just as he was about to pass the paper to the bailiff, the red Pegasus cleared her throat. "I have an objection, your honour. Neither Intelligence Quotient, nor organizing a new mail delivery system constitutes proper parenting. This is simply a smoke screen set up by the persecution to blind the court from the real matter at hand. Personally, I have yet to hear any reason that makes me think she is a fit parent."

"Sustained," Black Robed banged his gavel. It was another nail in the coffin of their case. "The court will hereby disregard the evidence forwarded by Mr Camera. The Defence may now begin cross-examination, if the prosecution has nothing left to add."

Twilight found herself stymied---the red Pegasus had destroyed her

trump card with a simple technicality. Perhaps this really was not such a good idea, and she only had herself to blame for giving in to her friend's demands. She should have told her that she was emotionally compromised and was not thinking straight instead of accepting. Suddenly, she found herself shoved out of the way by the red mare, automatically sitting back at the table.

"Mr. Camera," the red mare paced, like a lion going in for the kill, "Can you tell us why you quit a lucrative career in the FPS over a single case?"

"Well, when I went to speak to the director about my findings, he told me that there was no initial investigation that took place. I have a copy of said report here, if the court is interested in seeing it. Anyway, after he told me this, he then threatened me."

"How did the defendant threaten you? What did he say, exactly? I remind you that you are under oath."

"He told me... that the world can be very cruel."

"Well, I'm sorry to inform you that those words do not constitute a threat. Unless you have an exact recording, the idea that he threatened you cannot be proven, and thus should be disregarded."

"No... I don't have a recording..."

"Then tell us, in your own words, why should Ms. Hooves be allowed to have her foal back?" Epona spoke, raising her voice to show her dominance in the court. It was a primal tactic, the blonde Pegasus noted, but effective. Candid seemed to shrink in the booth, intimidated by the red mare in front of him.

"Um... well, when I arrived with the authorities to take the foal in question away, she looked quite happy in the care of Ms. Hooves, and sad when we took her away, so..."

"Your honours," she interrupted, "If the prosecution can't come up with any evidence to support their claim, I motion we stop wasting everypony's time and move on to deliberations. It is obvious that Ms Hooves is mentally incompetent, just by her choice of attorney... not to mention her peculiar

translator. I think that, coupled with no feasible opposition, proves my client's case more than any evidence I could conjure."

A surge of rage the likes of which Derpy had never felt before flooded through her entire being. Epona could tell they were on their last legs, and went straight for the proverbial kill. It took all her control not to jump from her seat and deck the smug "so-and-so" in the face and damn the consequences. Twilight meanwhile shook in her seat, mind racing to find something, anything to keep the trial going.

Pinkie lowered her head in sorrow. She had done nothing to help all this time and now Derpy was going to lose any chance she had to see Dinky again. She'd love to testify for the court, but that red mare had already managed to bar her from it, saying that attorneys or representatives could not testify due to bias. If she did not think it would hurt the case more, she would have broken down and cried.

"Very well," Black Robe spoke, "As the prosecution cannot voice any objections, we shall begin deliberations." Most of the ponies in the court rose to attention as the five justices filed out, and into the back rooms of the court. The blonde Pegasus was not one of them as a crushing feeling of doom surrounded her. She could tell she was never going to see her precious Dinky ever again. It was just too unfair.

"I hope this teaches you a lesson," spoke the grey stallion, who walked over to her. Until then, he had remained silent, with the exception of a few whispers to his attorney. "No pony has ever successfully appealed a decision of the Foal Protection Services. Not as long as I can help it, and have the money to back it up. The fact is, no matter how amazing your case was, you were going to lose. Do you know why? Because I KNOW you're actually retarded, and that these two," he gestured to her friends, "are covering for your idiocy... why, I have no clue. Enjoy a childless life... Ms. Hooves."

"That... that jerk!" Pinkie spoke in indignation as he traveled out of ear shot, "He's even worse than Black Snooty!"

"Did he..." Twilight realized, "Did he just admit to bribing the judges!? I mean, it was subtle enough to not hold here, but..."

It did not matter to Derpy, her pleas falling on deaf ears. Twilight had said it herself: he did not say enough to incriminate himself. It was like his tongue held a serpent most foul in it: a viper of prejudice and hatred that knew no bounds. An electric mixture of pain, sorrow, anger, and a fourth elusive emotion swirled within, distracting her from the re-entry of the justices.

"Please, be seated," the chief justice spoke, "After careful deliberation and a tally of votes, it is the decision of this court that we rule on the side of the Foal Protection Services. Due to lack of applicable evidence, we have no choice but to declare Miss Derpy Hooves an unfit parent. Case dismissed." He raised his gavel, ready to strike it down and seal the finding in stone. However, before that could happen, something strange happened.

A rush the likes of which she had never experienced before coursed through the veins of Derpy as the finding was read out loud. How dare they refuse to look below the surface!? How dare they assume she was an idiot based on fancy wordplay and the tantalizing glint of an overpriced and overly corrosive lawyer!?

"OBJECTION!" she shouted into the highest rafters of the courtroom.

Her ploy seemed to work, buying her precious seconds. "J-j-j-j... just...b-b-because... I... c-c-cannot... sp-speak p-properly," she began, not noticing the jaws of her friends drop, "D-d-does n-not g-g-give y-you the... right to... assume I have... a lack of mental faculties! T-the fact, of the matter... is that I have... spent m-my entire life... being persecuted for being different. T-today is the day... that I say that I have had enough!" She accentuated her point with a swift hit of her hoof to the table.

"I love Dinky. I love her more than... a fresh chocolate muffin... or even more than life itself. I would gladly die... to protect her, and have ALREADY put my life on the line... to do just that! You have no right to call me unfit!" Her whole body rocked as she forced the words to come out of her mouth, sweat dripping profusely from her brow as she concentrated with all her being. Everything was on the line, and for once, she would be heard!

"I swear, by the creators themselves, if you continue to doubt my mental capacities, despite my vehement reprisal, I will go before her highness, Princess Celestia herself, and show her my love and dedication for Dinky!

Even if I have to sell my very soul, I will get her back! For, nothing in this world can compare... to the love of a mother for her foal! Sure, I might not have brought her into this world, but Dinky was born in my heart, and I was born in hers! If you cannot understand that... if you cannot see the indignation that burns in my eyes, nor the passion in my heart, you are the unfit ones, not I! You are unfit to administer justice at all if you cannot acknowledge the reality of love!"

Laboured breathing soon became eclipsed by the ravenous applause of a pony one-hundred fold. All the ponies in the audience, not used to her inane outbursts, quickly came onto her side after the impassioned speech. Perhaps they could sense the effort and love it took to speak them, but the words resonated in the crowd nonetheless. The blonde Pegasus continued to stare daggers into the eyes of the judges, each pair wide at the unexpected applause.

"Give her back, give her back, give her back..." the chant started, slow at first, but gaining steam the longer the justices remained silent.

"Order. Order!" Black Robe shouted over the crowd, banging his gavel to try and bring silence back to the court. Alas, they refused to comply. "I will have order, or I will eject each and every one of you from this courtroom!" Silence fell, as he banged his gavel once more, his eyes scanning the court for any stragglers to eject. "Ms Hooves, you are out of order, and far too late, as the verdict has passed."

The audience booed before he could finish his thought, causing another angry series of slams of the gavel. "SILENCE!!! LET ME FINISH!" he shouted, taking several deep breaths, "However, despite this, we will take your testimony into account. I, personally, have been moved by your impassioned speech. It is clear to me that you love the filly, and the incident reports reflect the dedication you have just spoken of. What say the rest of you?" He looked to his left, and to his right, observing a couple of hesitant nods.

"Very well then," he spoke, "It is the new decision of this court to repeal the verdict handed down by the Foal Protection Services. Although, you will not receive Dinky until after you fill out the proper adoption papers, as you are not her legal guardian. Case dismissed." A final bang of the gavel sealed the deal. Suddenly, anger, sorrow and indignation turned into

unbridled joy and elation. Derpy almost cheered, before the next pony spoke.

"WAIT!!!" screamed an enraged Brittle Lullaby, "I DIDN'T PAY YOU HAY-SUCKING SODS FIVE THOUSAND BITS EACH TO BLOODY SIDE WITH HER!!!" Everypony in the courtroom stared at him. All of a sudden, what little colour the gray unicorn possessed flushed out of him, turning white as a ghost. "Aw, hayseed." Three of the judges shuffled around uncomfortably.

"Well... we decided to do the right thing, in the end," a pink unicorn mare at the end of the bench spoke softly, "So, you can keep your money." The other two judges who shuffled about nodded their heads, ashamed that they had accepted such a bribe now.

"Bailiff," Black Robe addressed, "Please escort Mr. Lullaby outside. I'm fairly certain the police would like to hear what he just said in more intricate detail."

Smack! A red hoof came into contact with the grey stallion's face as the mare seethed with anger. "How dare you! You called me here, begging for my expertise! How DARE you insult me by buying off the judges when I would have won it for you, colt-catcher!"

Epona had to be restrained by a second guard as the bailiff extracted the now black-eyed former director of the FPS into the back room. It was only then that Derpy noticed the two bodies pressing into her, winding her after her draining rant. She looked to them and sighed, hugging them back. The truth had finally prevailed.

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Dear Princess Celestia,

Today, I did not learn a lesson on the magic of friendship, but something that I think is far more valuable. As you might have noticed, I have not written any reports to you since our last ~~batt mee~~ encounter. You see, it wasn't because I hadn't learned anything, but every time I lifted the pen, our last conversation sprung to mind, and then I would doubt myself and lie to cover it. I'm so sorry that I have failed you again.

If you still have the patience to read on, you will find that lesson I told you about. You see, I learned today that the bond between a mother and her foal is one of the most sacred things in this world. Through it, both ponies can achieve impossible goals, or shatter barriers between them, all in the name of their love for each other. I suppose it can explain how I've finally gathered the nerve to write you now. Ha, ha.

Seriously though, I bore witness to a mother defending her right to be with the filly she loves, despite the world being against her. I'm sure you might have read about it in the papers by now, but let me assure you that no journalist can summarize what happened. The mother, normally unable to speak in naught but inane outbursts... the pony who taught me about judging a book by its cover and not to think I'm the smartest pony in the world, managed to shrug off her life-long speech impediment in order to show that she was competent.

I feel blessed to be able to say that I saw this first-hoof. That I felt the passion and the love radiate off of her like a magic I have never felt before in my entire life, except once...with you. Although, I don't feel I've earned the right to be called your daughter, not yet anyway. I have a lot to make up for, and not a lot of time to do it in. Can you ever forgive me for hiding from you all this time? I await your response, and hope we can resume dialogue as we used to, before the unpleasantness.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle.

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A tall, handsome grandfather clock ticked away the minutes and hours, as it had done for years previously. Today, however, the hands swept across the circular face at a cruel snail's pace. The largest hand rested above the number eleven, while the smallest neared the three. Derpy Hooves paced the floor of the hall impatiently, for she was about to hear a knock on the door. Little did she know just who exactly it would be as that knock came a full five minutes before expected.

They're early, she thought as she trotted over to the door. A flood of

excitement cascaded through her entire being, only to be flushed away in an instant. Standing on the other side of the door was none other than Viridian Gem: the hateful pony who caused the entire mess in the first place. It took all of the control she possessed not to slug her in that instant.

"Um... Derpy?" she said, "Listen... I heard about the trial... about what you said. Um... you can buck me, if you wish, since I deserve it. I just... wanted to apologize for, well, misjudging you. It was wrong of me to accuse you and do what I did when I should've seen you only wanted to make Dinky happy. I understa... I understand if you can never forgive me, maybe even hate me. Still... I'm sorry."

She took a deep breath, causing the green earth pony to cringe in sickening anticipation. The blonde Pegasus walked over to her, and gently placed a hoof on her back. "It's fine. Monkey flop," she smiled, forgiving her transgression. It was harder to forgive than to be angry, but she had done something harder still two weeks ago. Breaking her disability allowed her the ability to speak normally... but only if what she had to say was really heart-felt.

"T-thank you," she stammered, tears streaming down her cheeks, "It's... more than I deserve. See you around, Derpy." With that, the green mare left her alone at the door, the Pegasus shutting it before the winter coolness could invade her home. If that pony could have redemption, she mused, then there must be hope in the world, hope that things could improve.

Another knock sounded on the door moments later, just as she was about to seat herself on her couch and read a book. With a deep breath, she approached the door and opened it, to let in the chill once more. Beyond the threshold stood a warm and well-dressed unicorn mare, obscuring the view of a large carriage behind her. She had a peppermint green coat, and a tidy mane of raspberry. "Ms. Hooves, on behalf of the new director of the Foal Protection Services, I'd like to issue you a full pardon... and something even better."

Slowly, the green unicorn stepped aside, allowing the Pegasus' eyes to come across the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. Standing beyond was a purplish-grey unicorn filly, her mane a hay-touched blonde, her amber eyes dripping cold tears onto the frozen cobblestones. "Mommy!"

she cried, rushing forward to hug the Pegasus tightly, nearly cutting off the circulation to her leg.

The unicorn silently bowed out and returned to the carriage which unceremoniously took off moments later. With her free leg, the mare shut the door and carried the filly into the living room. "I missed you so much, mommy! That place was cold and dirty and strange grownups kept trying to take me away, but I wouldn't let them because I KNEW you would come and get me, mommy. I just knew it. I love you so much... please don't let me go away for that long ever again!"

Derpy knew Pinkie had planned a party for them that would start in a few minutes... but she did not care. She held Dinky, her now legal daughter, close and snuggled her tightly, making a silent vow to never let anypony separate them ever again. The pair nuzzled each other and simply held together for many long minutes, drinking in each other's warmth, love, and closeness.

"Never, my little muffin," Derpy soothed her filly, "Momma loves you so very, very much."

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## *The End of My Little Muffin, Part 2*

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The Reluctant Reunion of the Redoubtable Rabble-Rouser

Chapter 1 What's Old is New

It was beginning to shape up like one of those days where the baby dragon wished somepony... anypony else had been the one to hatch him, as opposed to his dearest friend. Sure, Spike saw Twilight as more of an older sister, maybe even a mother then an employer and caretaker, but times like this made the idea of quitting more palatable. Although she had been on-edge all week, the unicorn suddenly reached levels of stress that he had not seen since the fire, and this worried him for obvious reasons.

"No, Spike!" she cried out in annoyance. "What are you doing!? The dictionary goes on the table by the door, not by the stairs! Oh, how am I ever going to get this place sorted out by this evening? She's going to think I'm a disorganized foal who can't even keep a room in order, never mind a library! Stop stalling and get back to work!"

"Twilight!" the baby dragon cried out, finally pushed over the edge. "We're talking about your mom here, not some member of parliament or the princess! I'm sure she won't mind a little mess, but if you don't calm down and breathe for a change, I'm going to get the mayor to block your magic, just in case you go loco again!"

"I am breathing, Spike!" Twilight shouted defensively. "I took a breath about ten minutes ago. I'm fine!"

"I mean like a normal pony! Deep breaths, like Princess Luna taught."

The baby dragon breathed a sigh of relief himself when the purple mare started about her exercises. Almost a week ago, Derpy arrived at the door with a letter for his pony friend. Apparently, Twilight's mom, Shimmer Tail, got a new job with much better pay and vacation time. In fact, in the letter she said she was going to have the next week off and wanted to be with her daughter for the first time in years.

At first it was touching, and the baby dragon was excited to see the white unicorn since the last time they met he was just a hatchling. However, as the week wore on, the purple pony slowly, but surely, became high-strung and neurotic... he actually had to look the word up to describe her! He never did anything like that before! And now, with her arrival in mere hours, he feared for the safety of Ponyville since she became so stressed out. It was not like they could afford to rebuild half the town again, and the princess would have strong words for her if the library got damaged.

"Are you feeling better, Twi?" he asked after the huffing unicorn showed signs of slowing her breathing.

Taking another deep breath, the unicorn finally opened her eyes, still a little bugged out, but much more serene than he remembered. "Yeah, I'm feeling better, Spike," she replied. "I'm sorry for shouting at you. I just want to impress my mom, and I got a little... stressed out. I mean, sure, we've written, but I haven't actually seen her since I was a filly, and I want to make a good impression."

"Gee, you think?" he replied somewhat sarcastically, earning him another look from his old friend. "Right, right, Dictionary by the door, I got it." Picking up the heavy book, Spike slowly carried it over to the door and set it on the table with a heavy thud. If he had dropped it with much greater force, he feared he would have broken the table. His stomach growled in protest, coaxing a giggle out of the purple mare, as the afternoon grew late, and neither had lunch yet.

"How about we take a break from cleaning and have some lunch?" she asked. "You've been a very big help to me today, Spike. Thank you."

The baby dragon practically skipped over to Twilight; she did not have to

ask him twice. It was about two in the afternoon and he was practically starving. Together, the mare and dragon walked into the kitchen, counters flying open as a soft, purple aura surrounded them. Bread, hay and a few stalks of daisy floated out and arranged themselves into a couple of quick sandwiches in front of them.

Trying his best to hide it, a certain look of disappointment filtered through his face. Sure, he could stomach all of this pony food, but it just did not fill him as much as a good gemstone or two. Seeing the lacklustre expression on his face, the purple pony smiled. "Since you've been such a big help to me this week, I think you deserve a little treat." Looking up, the baby dragon's eyes went wide when he saw the most delicious gem he had ever seen float out from one of the cupboards.

"Turquoise! My favourite! Thanks a million, Twi!" He lunged forward and gripped the unicorn tightly around the neck in a hug. It was a little tighter than he meant to, but the purple pony made no move to dislodge him, allowing the time for a proper thank you. He immediately dug into the hand-sized gem, gleefully gnawing on the soft semi-precious stone. The gem positively gleamed in the light coming through the window, the highly polished and delicious stone almost too pretty to eat. Almost, mind you.

Twilight levitated her sandwich and took a bite out of it, chewing thoughtfully. She stared blankly at the wall behind the baby dragon, lost on a train of thought. Spike could gather a guess as to what she was thinking about, but he could not say for sure. It had to be memories of the last time she saw her, the last time she felt her touch or heard her mother's voice. In some ways, he envied her: at least she could remember her mom, even if she was adopted. Yet, the baby dragon reminded himself, in many ways, Twilight was like an adoptive mother herself.

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Life is completely, abhorrently unfair: a literal cornucopia of pain, embarrassment and suffering. It was a lesson she found herself repeating day in and day out, with every waking breath, and with every nightmare she suffered while asleep. Everything had worked out nicely for her until that wretched day she stumbled upon that insipid hick town. Sure, she had a small downward spiral after that, but she got back on her hooves in no time flat. She was even going to perform before the princess... until life decided

to cut The Great and Powerful Trixie down once more. Now, she found herself quite literally on the road to ruin, pulling her tiny replacement cart behind her slowly.

The little cart was not even a quarter the size of her once grand caravan. She could maybe fit herself in the thing if she curled up like a tiny foal and lay down inside. Not that it really mattered, since she did not even have a quarter of the stuff she used to have. Not since the unpleasantness that lead to her current situation. All of her current possessions sat comfortably under a tarp drawn over the tiny, open wagon. It was almost insulting to such an esteemed and talented unicorn to have to pull such a wretched vehicle.

For the eightieth time that day, Trixie pondered the possibility that she was jinxed, or cursed somehow. She had a pretty good idea as to who would be responsible for such a heinous act as well. Every time that purple unicorn reared her ugly face, Trixie could not help but notice her life take a significant downturn soon after. Of course, getting her royal show cancelled was probably just a fluke. At least she hoped so. If she ever found out that Twilight Sparkle was responsible for this situation as well, Trixie would hunt her down and destroy her once and for all!

Looking at the radiant sunset in front of her, the azure mare frowned at the prospect of another night without a solid roof over head. Still, the woods she traversed would offer some protection, but not much. It also did not help that she could see dark clouds gathered on the horizon. It was a good indication a town was not far off, but having to visit during a storm did not suit The Great and Powerful Trixie! The very notion of a town ahead caused her stomach to growl painfully, causing her to wince and pause for a couple of seconds. She had not eaten a proper meal in five days... right when she ran out of bits.

The Great and Powerful Trixie sighed and continued down the wooded path. Trees lightly populated the sides of the road, creating a corridor for her to traverse. They still bore no leaves, as Winter Wrap-Up was only three weeks ago. Still, songbirds sat in the trees and belted out an annoying, cheerful tune that made Trixie struggle to restrain herself from making them all erupt in flames of indignation. Hunger, cold nights, and days of endless walking did nothing to ease her cranky mood, and she was not sure if she could spare the energy to punish those feathered freaks. A

unicorn as beautiful and talented as she should not even be in this mess in the first place!

Rumours of the incident with the Ursa had spread far and wide. Everywhere she went, Trixie found herself as the laughing stock of the town. Sure, some ponies tried to be tactful about it, but most of them would blurt it out with no regard for her feelings... not that The Great and Powerful Trixie needed her feelings protected, of course! All of this reflection was making her soft, and she would not stand for being soft.

Thankfully, the revery would be broken, but not exactly in a kind manner. As The Great and Powerful Trixie passed under a particularly thick branch, she felt something drop onto her mane. Instinctively, she stopped and ran a hoof through it where the sudden weight stuck her. Pulling it in front of her face, she saw a smear of white upon her regal blue hoof.

Some bird had dared aim their... droppings... on The Great and Powerful Trixie's head! This would not stand! She unhooked herself from her cart and walked forward, turning around to look at the offending avian: a blue jay. "How dare you befoul the image of The Great and Powerful Trixie!?" she ranted, "Don't you know that she could turn you into a feather duster at her slightest whim, you foul cretin!?"

The bird glared at her and puffed out its chest, arrogantly to the blue unicorn. No creature had dared look at her with such contempt or arrogance before. Well... that was not true... but only one pony had ever walked away from it without being humiliated, or treated to a black eye. Despite her wishes, she could not help but be reminded one of her more... outstanding performances. It was not outstanding in that it was amazing... but that it helped lead to her present, hopeless situation.

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It was a typical late autumn day some months after her salvation had been snatched from her by the tyrannical jaws of life. Despite the pesky persistence of the Ursa rumours, The Great and Powerful Trixie still managed to eke out a living and support herself. Sure, she did not have the former prestige or fame from when she started out on her own, but at least she was still self-reliant.

Trixie walked into town early that day, as she usually did to maximise her performance time. It was a very small and out of the way town that rarely saw travelers unless they meant to be there explicitly. It bore many striking similarities to the town she never wished to return to, and briefly mistook it for... that town... before finding out it was actually called Hockdale. Looking back, Trixie would find it silly to think that the town could possibly be the one she hated. For one, there were no mountains in sight, which meant Canterlot was nowhere nearby.

Secondly, the architectural style of the town was all wrong: Hockdale had shingled roofs as opposed to the thatched ones in that most horrible place. None of this mattered to the traveling magician anyway, since she did not care what town she was in, so long as it was not that wretched hick town that nearly destroyed her career. She shook her head and puffed out her chest in triumph, as though she were a returning war hero as she trotted into the village proper.

According to plan, mares and stallions turned out to watch as she proceeded into the square. If only she had enough room on her dinky little cart to write out her name in big, bold, stylized letters. Now, that would really attract attention to her and to her fabulous show! Ah well: Trixie was a resourceful mare, and she would make do with what she had. All it meant was that when she found a place to roost, she would have to be a little louder is all.

Eventually, she found her way into the very centre of town, subconsciously cringing at the rounded square and the tall, round building in the centre. It was only then that she started drawing parallels between it and the town that cursed purple unicorn and her meddlesome friends called home. The mare shook her head wildly as she unhooked herself from her cart. Now was not the time to be lost in the past: the show had to go on, and she would rather starve than deny the masses from her spectacular performance for much longer (in fact, if she did not do the latter, she would probably do the former).

With a spark from her horn, the blue tarp covering her possessions lifted away, settling on the ground in front of the cart in a neat pile. Trixie pulled a collapsible stage out from the cart before laying it out on the dusty street. Using her magic, the small platform of wood quickly expanded to allow her enough room (and a suitable height to look down on her audience) to

perform. Before stepping onto the wooden stage, now earning the attention of several passersby, the azure mare extracted a small mirror from her trunk, repeating her mantra.

"You are The Great and Powerful Trixie," she spoke the words of her mentor, gaining strength as she imagined his voice in her place. "You are The Great and Powerful Trixie!" Taking a deep breath, she put the mirror away, secured her trunk and walked up on stage. It was times like this that she missed her hat and cape. Walking up there naked did nothing to help her great and powerful image.

With a puff of smoke, the azure mare appeared on her stage, amplifying her voice to boom across town and draw in her much-needed crowd. "Come one, come all," her radiant voice boomed. "Come and see the magical marvels of... THE GREAT AND POWERFUL.... TR-R-RIXIE!" She stood on her hind legs, pausing for her magical fanfare and fireworks.

"Watch in AWE as The Great and Powerful Trixie performs impossible feats of magic yet unseen by pony eyes! Gaze in wonderment as she weaves tales of greatness of antiquity, and those that she has seen first-hoof!" She immediately dived into her show, a routine embedded into her very soul. She would start off small, conjuring bouquets of flowers, pulling rabbits out of a hat (in this case, a random pot), that sort of thing. Then, she would start with the main draw of her shows: the stories she told.

Just about halfway through her routine, a voice sounded out from the crowd. She could not be sure what exactly he was talking about, but she hoped he was muttering in awe to his friend about her powerful magic. It was always how it started... first the muttering, and then the ponies would start with the insults to her and her abilities. Everything was quickly beginning to go down south, but not as quickly as usual. It had to be because of the remote location of the town.

Sure enough, in the middle of her story, not even related to the incident, a voice piped up from the audience. "The Great and Powerful Trixie?" asked a young stallion. "The same Trixie that boasted she once vanquished an Ursa Major, only to be proven to be a total and utter FRAUD?" He started laughing, taking the whole audience with him as realization crept across the crowd.

"Well, well, well... it seems we have some NEIGH-SAYERS in the audience. Who has the audacity to dare challenge the magical might of The Great and Powerful Trixie!? Well? Step forward and just try to measure up to the awesome ability of The Great and Powerful Trixie! Anything you can do, I can do BETTER."

The slippery slope had started again, flexing down a similar path like the ill-fated performance that doomed her reputation. It was not always like this for Trixie. She used to be respected and command powerful magic worthy of her name, but now... no! She could not afford to think like that! Not when her honour and livelihood were being so brazenly threatened.

Surprisingly, the colt was far younger than Trixie imagined, maybe by about five years younger than her, judged solely on his appearance as he clambered onto the elevated platform. He was a bright, blue-eyed unicorn colt with a shining silver coat and a vividly red mane. Of course, the cocky look on his muzzle ruffled her feathers more than she would ever openly admit.

"So," he started. "You think you're so big with those cheap little ticks of yours? My little brother could do better than you and he's only two." Several members of the audience laughed at the insult, obviously against the undeniably superior Trixie. She could already feel the anger and hate rising in her, taking this now as a personal assault on her character. Such mockery could not stand! This foal needed to be taught a lesson, and it looked like she was going to be the one to do it.

"Enough talk. You're boring The Great and Powerful Trixie. Either try to upstage her, or shut up and get off her stage."

"Fair enough to me," the unicorn replied. Immediately, his horn took on a soft orange glow. A dazzling display of light and music surrounded him as he stood there, looking smug and sure of himself and his cheap little tricks. Trixie could do such feats of magic blindfolded, and had done so several times, in fact. Little light shows like that were the very basics of unicorn magic itself. If he thought he could best her with such a pitiful display, he had another thing coming.

"Oh please, you think you can challenge The Great and Powerful Trixie with such weak magic?" She smiled as her own light show began, earning

a few gasps and cheers from the crowd as she went. Normally, she would use their talent to humiliate them, but such a weak talent could not be made more humiliating. At least, she used to think so before what would happen next. Right in the middle of her performance, the magic in her horn cut out.

"What the...!?" Trixie exclaimed, nudging the appendage with her hoof, trying to spark it back to life. Laughter erupted from the crowd, making her suddenly aware of just how large a crowd had developed. There was the very real possibility that her magic cut out... in front of an entire town of ponies who already saw her with nothing but contempt. Crimson flashed across her cheeks: a unicorn's spell suddenly shorting out was much akin to... well... there was nothing more embarrassing to a unicorn!

Despite the roaring laughter of the crowd, she would not be deterred from showing up the smug unicorn, joining in on the laugh riot with his townsfolk. She closed her eyes and did everything to bring out as much magic as possible, but nothing happened: her horn would only sparkle at best. "I think I know... where you... got your... name, Trixie!" The silver unicorn breathed between bursts of laughter.

The roar of the crowd died down as the hilarity of the disabled unicorn faded away, allowing the red-maned pony the chance to let everypony heard what he thought. "You must have gotten it from... turning tricks in an alley of Canterlot for five bits a ride!" Everypony laughed much harder at the rather... raunchy (and lousy) joke at her expense. Trixie's blush deepened, but not out of embarrassment: her eyes aflame in indignation. She growled and gritted her teeth. No pony, not even that stupid Twilight Sparkle had ever insulted her so much: the little runt was going to pay!

Suddenly, the laughter died as Trixie let out a feral scream and jumped on the silver unicorn. A flurry of hooves met his face as she pounded him from head to hoof, blood from his swiftly broken nose splattering onto her face and down the front of her mane. She wanted him dead, in the most unpleasant and painful way possible. The azure unicorn did not even notice the three strapping stallions it took to pry her off the heavily bleeding colt.

After being removed from the scene, the battered unicorn was taken to the town's only doctor, who ran a small clinic on the edge of the settlement. Meanwhile, Trixie was taken into custody and charged with assault and

battery. One hundred hours of community service, and a new criminal record later, the unicorn left the town behind. This only worsened her reputation, and with winter around the corner, the mare would have an even tougher time ahead of her.

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Trixie shook her head and closed her eyes, slowly bringing herself out of the sudden flood of memories. She was used to this kind of thing happening to her. Sometimes she simply could not help but dwell on the past. Her blank, listless stares earned her many a chortle from the greatest pony she ever knew. In fact, a couple of times, he pulled out a pen and sketched liberally on her face in an effort to snap her out of her reminiscence. He would always say that she needed to get past it, or else she might do it on stage and skunk the show.

No! Now was not the time for another trip down memory lane... especially back to such a time. Trixie was a mare on a mission now, and she would make that blue jay pay for its transgression. Relieving oneself on The Great and Powerful Trixie was a crime punishable by death, or by losing its stupid nest. Whatever came first, or whatever was easier, at any rate.

The unicorn's eyes reluctantly turned away from the demonic bird and down to the branch upon which he perched. She followed it through the tangled mess of branches, getting a little lost a couple of times, but quickly getting back on track. Given that all the leaves on the trees had yet to bud, this made the task significantly easier than it would have been in summer.

Eventually, she found the trunk of the tree that the insidious blue jay sat upon, a villainous smile etched onto her stunning muzzle as she closed the distance between her and revenge. Trixie turned around, putting the strong maple tree in the line of fire of her rear hooves. Charging all the force she could into her back legs, the showmare leaned forward and bucked with all the strength she possessed. After several attempts at doing much of the same, the azure unicorn finally admitted defeat at the hooves of nature.

"Dumb tree!" she scolded, more directed at herself than the plant, "Why won't you fall down!? The Great and Powerful Trixie demands it!" With one last, powerful buck, the mare heard a rustling of the branches overhead. If she could not down the tree, then perhaps she could knock down the stupid

bird's nest instead? Before she could deliver one last buck to dislodge it, a powerful force contacted her head, causing stars to dance in front of her eyes.

Trixie stumbled around awkwardly, nearly losing her hoofing several times as she tried to make it back to her cart in a dazed stupor. Her vision was blurred and her ears rung constantly: she could almost feel her eyeballs rolling around in their sockets from the force of the concussing blow. However, she could not see the branch that fell from the tree directly in her path, causing her to stumble over it. Defeated, Trixie flopped onto her side, away from the branch, and elected to just lie there... until the world stopped spinning anyway.

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Excitement filled the air that afternoon, despite the main attraction for the day being long since over. Happy screams and laughter echoed through the yellow canvas tent. Yet, despite the over abundant mirth and celebration of the longest day of the year, the filly could not enjoy it. She paced around the tent, the butterflies in her stomach threatening to relieve her of her light breakfast. Beyond the red silk curtains, ponies cheered and applauded the competition.

Trixie sighed and walked over to her trunk, double checking to make sure she had everything she would need for the very first show of her life. For countless years, the young unicorn practiced and trained for this moment. Ever since she was a little filly, the young mare wanted to be on the stage and dazzle ponies with her magic. Many ponies called Trixie gifted with illusion magic. Now, however, it would be put to the ultimate test.

The Summer Sun Celebration Talent Show was a renowned venue for young performers to strut their stuff. It was no secret that Princess Celestia herself liked to watch the show, on occasion. Still, if potentially performing for the princess was not pressure enough, many talent scouts and entertainers of great influence were all but assured to be in attendance. A botched show here could utterly destroy her career before it even began.

"Numbah twelve," called the nasally voice of the backstage organizer with the heavy Manehattan accent. "Get ready to go. You're on in two, kid."

Trixie gulped, looking at her flank to confirm the number resting against her cutie mark. Too nervous to use her magic, the azure filly pushed her small chest up the ramp, standing in the wings to watch the final seconds of the show before her. It appeared to be some sort of juggling routine, as the young colt tossed and caught a number of bright, shiny balls in his hooves.

Time sped up significantly for the filly. Backstage, it felt as though time dragged on, but before she knew it, the colt trotted past her, wishing her the performer's version of good luck, 'Break a leg.' Trixie squeaked a little in fear and intimidation. Quickly gathering her wits she pushed her chest out into the middle of the stage. Even from behind the velvet curtain, the voice of the announcer boomed in her ears, making the filly cringe.

"Wasn't that something?" he commented on the last act. "Now, our next act is a magical performance, so let's give it up for... Ms, Trixie Treats!"

The red curtain pulled back suddenly, the light from the sun stunning the azure filly for the briefest of moments. Thankfully, nopony noticed, since they were too busy giving their polite welcoming applause. Once her lavender eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, Trixie scanned the crowd. Thankfully, the princess was absent, and her parents were around the middle of the crowd. Just knowing they were there for her, despite their objections to her choice, lifted her spirits... but only a little bit.

"Um..." Trixie started with an audible gulp. "W-w-WELCOME one and all to... to my show. Um... so... so how about we... um... we get to it?"

With a flash of her horn, the trunk she brought with her opened to allow various tools she would need to float out gently. However, a sudden cough from a member of the audience startled her, causing her to lose concentration, all of her stuff clattering and crashing to the ground loudly. "Uh-oh," she muttered for all to hear, forgetting she was on stage. Trixie turned her back to the audience and started picking up her fallen items with her teeth. It was not like they cared about seeing such easy magic, right?

Once she had all the items in position, the blue filly made them all float and circle around her, one of the items being her precious doll. Trixie took a deep breath and concentrated as hard as she could, causing her toy to twitch and shake before it fell down. Several members of the audience murmured as she welded her eyes shut, needing all her concentration to

get the doll to move around on the ground, essentially bringing it to life. But the oohs and ahs all came from the front rows, leaving ponies in the back bored.

Right, she needed to fix that as soon as possible! After having her dear doll Bella strut around the stage for a good minute, she turned her attention elsewhere, causing the stage around her to warp and distort. This seemed to do the trick, as many ponies awed at her power. "So... um," Trixie started, "I also... also like to use magic to um... help me tell stories... so... um... here's the tale of the... lonely pony."

It was a simple, short foal's story, but one that captivated the audience with just how realistic she presented it with her magic. To the ponies in the audience, it was almost as if she had opened a window into the story itself, allowing them to see the events through a magical window. Although, she would pause and stare blankly for several seconds before continuing, and rarely looked at the crowd.

As the story ended, Trixie felt her confidence pick up just a little more. Now that she had their attention, Trixie decided that now was the time to pull out the big guns: her show stopper. She concentrated with all her might, horn glowing almost as bright as a star in the night sky. Sweat visibly dripped down her face as the magic infused itself with the air beside her, causing it to shimmer and distort as the illusion began to take form.

She had not tried to make a creature as big or complex as this before in public, but there was a first time for everything. A large, intricately detailed manticore appeared on the stage in a sudden flash, roaring loudly, startling the crowd. Some of the more flighty ones actually ran away from her marvellous illusion, but it only stayed there for a few seconds, growling menacingly before it disappeared. Exhausted, Trixie took a bow.

"Th-thank you," she breathed. "You... you've been a gr-great audience!"

There was no cheering and standing ovation like she had hoped, but the crowd still applauded sincerely for her impressive magical might. Picking up her stuff with her magic, Trixie trotted back down the ramp, wishing the next contestant luck, still visibly shaking from her ordeal. With a great sigh, the blue mare slumped on the ground, exhausted and underwhelmed. It was a good start, but it could have been better.

"That was absolutely horrible," spoke a deep, gruff voice from somewhere nearby, "The worst showmareship I have ever seen, and that is saying something."

"Oh yeah?" Trixie spoke defensively, "And just who do you think y-"

Looking up, she saw the stallion who addressed her for the first time, Trixie's parents walking in shortly after him. His yellow coat... black top hat... bristly black mane and handlebar moustache... it just could not be him! Her jaw dropped in realization that she had just been belittled by the greatest magician Equestria would ever see: the Great Hoofdini himself!

"Oh," she squeaked in sudden realization, cheeks turning into a deep crimson colour. If he hated her act, she stood no chance in the world of professional entertainment. She was just three seconds away from sobbing in front of the legend before he spoke again.

"However," he added. "Very few ponies are naturals on the stage, and fewer still possess your level of talent and power, Trixie. I think we can come to some sort of arrangement, don't you?"

Arrangement? Just what did he mean by that? Her worried father voiced these concerns out loud for her.

"Well, in exchange for teaching me a couple of her magic tricks, I can take her under my cape and show her the ins and outs of show business. I am not an easy pony to please though... it will be arduous and frustrating, but she will have a real chance of making a name for herself... if she can handle it. I sense great potential in your daughter, and I would be happy to assist the next generation of entertainment."

Was... was The Great Hoofdini offering HER, Trixie Treats, an apprenticeship under him!? Her head swam in thought as her parents discussed his offer with him, as most adults do. Yet, she could not help but ponder some of his words... mostly since she had no idea what 'arduous' meant, exactly. Still, if they allowed him to ask her outright, then of course she would accept.

"Trixie," The Great Hoofdini started as his conversation with Mr. and Mrs.

Treats ended. "How would you like to join me on the road and learn how to be a better showmare?"

It would not come as a surprise as to what her answer would be. Who in their right mind would turn down a chance to learn from their personal idol, and an icon of the entertainment industry?

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Waking up with a groan, the blue mare opened her eyes to find the ground covered in mud. Had she really fallen asleep with what she assumed was a concussion? She stood on shaky hooves in the dark of the night, trying her best to get rid of the buzzing in her skull. After another small groan, she felt her way to her cart and hooked herself back up to it. She leaned on the yoke, pulling it forward with a slight jolt.

Trixie shook her head as she walked, keeping her eyes on the road to avoid going over the edge. Times like this demoralized the unicorn more than she would ever care to admit. It was like a pit existed in the very centre of her soul, sucking in all positive emotions these days. *No, it just has to be the hunger*, she thought to herself. *You always get angry and upset when you're so hungry. Just try to bea-- keep your chin up until we get to that town. Then, maybe there they will take... pity on us.*

Slowly, the thick woods thinned out as the early spring shower began to soak through her coat, chilling the starving magician to her very bones. If only The Great Hoofdini could see her now: he would be ashamed of her, and maybe even disown her and her title. This line of thinking made Trixie's stomach twirl into a multitude of sickening knots, which would be really bad, since she had nothing in her to throw back up.

Crossing over a small stream, Trixie saw a strangely inviting rock lying on the tiny stone bridge. A thought crossed her mind, but she ignored it as she stepped into some manner of a park. A thick, foreboding wood lay to her right-hoofed side, mist seeping from it like an opened wound. She wisely decided to avoid it, and took the fork in the path that led directly into town, its silhouette vaguely familiar to her through the spreading fog and rain... yet, she could not quite place her hoof on why.

Another hunger pain tore her away from musing once more to focus on

the more pressing matters at hoof. She was hungry, exhausted, cold, and about ready to, more or less, drop dead. The only thing she could do was keep moving and hope a pony would see her, take pity on her, and give her something, anything, to eat. However, the further she pressed on into the town, the more the hairs on the back of her mane stood on-end. It was the most curious feeling she had ever experienced.

Naturally, she saw no pony walking around in this sort of weather. The fog from the creepy forest behind her had already choked the streets of the town, meaning she could not see much more than a few pony lengths in front of her. Sometimes, although she was convinced she was going crazy from hunger, she could hear her name being called from somewhere beyond the veil. Chills ran down her tired spine, the smell of baked goods reaching her nose, causing more growls of protest from her stomach.

Out of the mist, an odd, yet curious structure appeared. If Trixie did not know any better, she could have sworn it was made of gingerbread. In fact, the azure mare found herself subconsciously drifting to it, hunger overriding the strange feeling she had about the town. She sniffed the air, mouth watering as the delicate tickle of baking pies, cakes, and muffins wafted across her muzzle, causing her stomach to growl again. Surely, they would take pity on a poor, starving pony without even two bits to her name, right?

Unhooking herself from her cart, the showmare walked over to the door, voices from beyond perfectly audible to her. "... thing. I'm sure that she'll love it," spoke a disturbingly happy voice. "I mean, who in their right mind doesn't like chocolate? It's just too super-yummy to turn down... unless your mom has an allergy! Oh, I can't imagine not being able to eat chocolate! Please, tell me she isn't allergic to chocolate!"

A soft giggle sounded from beyond the door. "Don't worry, she isn't. Now I'd better get this cake to her," a second voice said. The sound of hoofsteps grew louder to the eavesdropping unicorn's ears. Trixie panicked, wondering how they would take the disgraced unicorn hovering over the door like some sort of scavenger waiting for a meal. However, before she could move, the door swung open, revealing the mare behind the door. Her coat was soft lavender, and her eyes were purple enough to rival Trixie's. Her horn positively shone in the halo of light streaming out.

Trixie felt her jaw drop to the floor, backing up instinctively in fear and

intimidation at the sudden appearance of... HER! It all made sense now! No wonder this place looked so familiar... it was the town that ruined her life! "T...Trixie!? Is... is that you!?" the mare beyond spoke, utterly aghast over the appearance of the azure pony. She needed to run... she needed to get out of this place as soon as possible, before her life could be ruined any worse than it already was!

Pony instinct kicked in, causing the unicorn to back up from the imposing silhouette more. "N...no... no... NOOO!" Trixie screamed. She turned around as fast as she could, making a mad dash to somewhere... anywhere but here, but this town. How could she have possibly lost her bearings so much... to arrive in PONYVILLE!? The mare cringed as the very name crossed her waking mind.

"Trixie! Wait! Come back!" the lavender unicorn called to her, hoofsteps indicating she was in hot pursuit. Trixie did not care... it was probably just a trick for her to be paraded around like the weak, stupid foal that she was! She had to run and never come back... her possessions would have to wait a couple of days before she could get them thou-

BAM!

In her haste to escape, The Great and Powerful Trixie did not bother to look ahead and see the lamp post suddenly emerge from the dense fog. Stars danced in front of her eyes as she slumped onto the ground. Her ears rung uncomfortably as she dropped onto her side, completely and utterly helpless. Darkness surrounded her vision, making her fight to stay conscious... but it was a battle she was quickly losing. A soft, lavender hoof clopped against the cobblestone in front of her eyes, the darkness quickly wrapping her in its cold embrace.

Chapter 2

Prisoner of Kindness

An endless field of blackness, yawning out in all directions; be it left, right, up or down, rested before the world-weary unicorn. Trixie floated in the void, trying to move, to call out... to do anything at all. Yet try as she might, she just could not seem to do anything in the cold darkness. Sometimes, usually without warning, an echo would graze across her ear, usually whispering her name back to the sca- upset unicorn.

Where was she? Was this the afterlife? How did she get here in the first place? Why could she not move or speak? These questions, and dozens more, drifted across her mind as the mare considered her position. Trying with all her might, she dredged up what she could remember before entering the enigmatic realm. There was... there was a bakery... and two mares inside talking. One of them had... a disturbingly familiar voice... and the other was cheerful and blathering on about... a cake and allergies.

Did this mean anything? Did they find out she was snooping, figure out who she was and have her killed? Or was Trixie merely unconscious, passed out from her incredible hunger? *This is way too confusing for Trixie*, she thought. *Either I am dead, or something happened... something that I can't remember. But what could have possibly occurred, and... why do I feel warm now?*

During her musings, Trixie slowly felt the oppressive cold lift, and become replaced by a tickling and pleasant warmth that swept over her entire being. It was far more kind than the cold, but for the most brief of seconds, she panicked at the very real possibility that the head injury she sustained had killed her. Wait a minute... how did she know she had a head injury? Was it the dull throbbing of her skull? That had not been there just a second ago! She could not feel anything for the longest time, but now rolling torrents of pain washed over her body, like waves upon the beach.

She moaned, she actually moaned! The Great and Powerful Trixie moaned again to prove it was not a hoax before slowly moving a hoof to her pained head. What else could she control? Slowly, but surely, the darkness began

to lift as she fluttered her eyes open... was the darkness really just the inside of her eyelids? Everything was a dull, brown blur as Trixie forced herself to sit up, revealing the warmth to be the covers of a soft bed.

Somepony actually took pity on her, and brought her into their home! An enticing aroma wafted across her muzzle, leading her to a tray of food that lay at her bedside. Despite being half-blind, the azure mare felt the porcelain plate, with a few simple sandwiches upon it. Trixie inhaled the hay and daisy meal greedily, her stomach purring in satisfaction as the food impacted her gut. She did not particularly like hay and daisies, but any port would do in a storm.

Downing a glass of water also on the tray, Trixie rolled onto her side, reasonably full for the first time in days! She wanted nothing more than to drift off to sleep again. However, no matter how she tossed and turned on the comfortable (by contrast to the ground) bed, sleep would not come to her. Defeated, the magician rolled out of the bed and stood, wobbling a little from the sudden weight.

Blinking her eyes a couple of times, the mare found her vision returned to its usual perfection, allowing her to drink in the room around her. It was massive, almost unreasonably so. Beyond the table that once held the food, a large library of books rested on the floor below the loft. Another, smaller bed sat directly opposite of the one Trixie slept on, right before the stairs leading down.

Curiosity overwhelmed Trixie to nigh the point of insanity. This place looked far too big to fit anywhere in the bakery she remembered, so just where was she? Obviously, they did not know or recognize her, or else she would be grazing in The Great Plains. Just like... no... she could not think about that. She looked under the beds instead, hoping to find a diary, journal, or something else that would lead her to the identity of her saviour. Indeed, she saw a box lying directly under the bed. She had to stretch to reach it, but soon enough the box was in her possession.

Slowly, the mystery of her saviour was revealing itself before the azure mare's eyes. The simple, cardboard box had a spell on it, she could feel as much. However, it was not to ward off anypony who might dare disturb it. It felt more like a spell to expand the number of items that could fit inside, at least to Trixie. Opening the flaps with her muzzle, she dug into the box,

feeling around with her hoof.

Immediately, she came across an item that tickled her curiosity; it felt cold, like metal. Upon withdrawing it, she found it was a large tiara. A massive, purple star of amethyst sat as the crown jewel, supported by spiralling tendrils of gold, securing it to the wide-brimmed base. Trixie recoiled in disgust. "Ew," she breathed. "What sort of pony wears something so... so... GAUDY!?" She simply could not resist putting the offending little tiara on her head mockingly.

Giggling, Trixie trotted over to the mirror above a vanity that sat on the loft. Aside from the white bandage and the lame tiara on her head, she looked exactly as she remembered. "Look at me," she scoffed. "I'm a pretty little princess with a totally lame tiara. Aren't I special? Fah!" However, she was quickly drawn to something else in the mirror... something that disgusted her even more, if it was possible. For the first time in months, the azure unicorn got a good look at herself. Her eyes were sunken and dark and worst of all, she could count the number of ribs she possessed.

"Stupid tiara," she scolded the headdress. "How dare you make Trixie see how... how ugly she has become!" Trixie flipped the tiara off and threw it to the ground, hoping to break the stupid, tacky garment. However, as soon as it contacted the floor at her hooves, a shockwave rippled through the air, causing the mare to tingle from head to hoof. It was the most curious sensation ever, but she ignored it and flinched when she saw it was undamaged.

"Must be enchanted to be unbreakable," she huffed, kicking it across the floor. "Back to the box!" In a flash, she began rooting through it once more, pulling out a variety of weird paraphernalia, which only got weirder the deeper she went. Among the items scattered about the floor were a large, yellow reptilian scale, a fashion magazine with a yellow Pegasus with a pink mane on the cover and a silver, star-shaped mane clip that was missing one of the points.

None of these items held any clues to the identity of the pony in question, but it was undeniable to Trixie that they were, at least, a unicorn. Perhaps they were a bit of a bookworm, or an egghead, but a unicorn nonetheless. Reaching the bottom of the box, she found several magazines and movies of colts and stallions being classy, or at least pretending to be so. Out of

curiosity, she flipped open the cover of a magazine to a random page... only to quickly shut it once more.

Now, Trixie was not one to judge on a ponies... 'special interests'... but that was just plain WEIRD. Like, really weird; so weird that it stunned her for a couple of minutes before she gathered the courage to resume digging. Her search narrowed significantly when she retrieved... well... the kind thing would be to call it 'a long purple device of an intimate nature.'

"Okay, so my saviour is obviously a mare," Trixie voiced, stuffing the... item... back into the box.

"Either that, or..." she continued before pausing that train of thought. Trixie gave her head a liberal shake, quickly regretting that decision as stars danced in front of her eyes. Taking a breath, she walked down the stairs and over to a perch she had not noticed before. On it sat a large brown owl, head tucked under its wings to allow it to sleep despite the sunlight pouring into the room from the window.

The azure magician, walking around the bird, opened the door to the room and started down the main stairs. As she did, however, voices from the first floor filtered up. It was that ludicrously familiar voice, and that of another... also familiar, but not in any way that she could remember. She paused just short of revealing her hoof and stood there to listen.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" the first, more familiar voice spoke. "She obviously doesn't like me, and from the rumours I've heard about her, I can see why."

"Just show her some kindness, dear," the second spoke. "She will come around in her own time. Just give her a chance to grow. I'm sure your lovely friends will be happy to help."

There was an uncomfortable silence hanging in the air for a while. Trixie knew they were talking about somepony, but she had no clue about whom. "Well... what if she tries to run away? Also, how is the princess? Have you... spoken recently?"

"We have," the older female voice replied. "I know that you know, dear, and it doesn't change a thing to me. I still love you, Twilight."

"Twilight!?" the blue unicorn spoke aloud, forgetting she was spying. Did she mean Twilight as in...? As in Twilight SPARKLE, Twilight!? It just could not be possible! How could a pony like that save her when she was the one to ruin her in the first place!? Her head swam, hoping beyond hope that it was not true. She took some tentative steps down to see the two mares and instantly regretted it.

There, looking at her, stood two unicorns, both with eyes as purple as hers, yet different in tone. The older one was a white mare with a two-tone mane of white and purple. She had three purple stars on her flank and a strange twinkle in her eyes when they looked at each other. Meanwhile, the insidious purple mare she knew all too well stood beside her... the one she loathed more than anything else in this world. Neither spoke before Trixie made it safely to the ground floor, the mare spotting something green in a crack in the door at the landing before it swiftly shut.

"Oh good, you're awake, Trixie," Twilight Sparkle smiled. "We were really, really worried about you... especially when you popped out of nowhere... looking as... well... bad as you do. Did you eat those sandwiches? Please tell me you did! You must have been starving!"

"Yes," Trixie replied curtly, looking at the other mare. "... And who are you supposed to be?"

"My name is Shimmer Tail," the older unicorn replied. "I'm just here visiting my filly Twilight for the week. I've only been here a day or so, though. It's nice to finally meet you, Trixie." The strange mare smiled at her warmly. It disturbed the blue mare a little, especially since she did not know her. Still, she was of little consequence, since the only pony that concerned her stood right in front of her.

Twilight shrunk a little at her gaze, and rightly so as the hatred that seeped from her eyes could only be described as 'intense.' The purple mare lowered her head and scuffed at the floor with a front hoof, intimidated. "Um... listen," she started. "I know you're mad... I would be too if half the things I heard about you were true. But please... please don't run away again. If you do... well... you were half dead that night anyway and I would never forgive myself if you died and I could have stopped it."

"Where is Trixie's cart?" she replied. "The Great and Powerful Trixie refuses to accept your... your CHARITY, Twilight Sparkle! She is a grown mare and can make it on her OWN! You know what? Don't tell Trixie. She can find it easily, and be out of this WRETCHED hick town as soon as possible!"

All of a sudden, Trixie felt a warm tingle wrap around her neck like the new scarves her mom would knit for her every fall. However, her eyes widened when she saw Twilight's horn shimmer with magic, and then suddenly stop... at the same time the tingle stopped. Did she really just cast... some sort of spell upon the magician? "Wh...What spell did you cast on Trixie!?" the azure mare cried out, demanding an answer. A hoof reached up to her throat and felt something soft, yet at the same time rough.

"I'm sorry, Trixie... but," Twilight started. "Well... I don't want you to die and... you have every right to be mad at me, but... I'm sorry."

"What is this!? What did you do to Trixie!?"

"It's a magical collar that will... that will shock you if you get too far from me. I promise, as soon as you are well, I will take it off and let you free."

"YOU MADE TRIXIE A PRISONER!? LIKE A COMMON PET!? HOW **DARE** YOU!?"

"I will admit," spoke the older unicorn with a small measure of disappointment in her voice. "That I do not endorse this solution... but you are a grown mare, and I am but a guest... so I will not challenge your decision, Twilight. Just know that I don't like it." Although she was blinded with rage, the azure mare could not help but appreciate that the older unicorn did not like this either.

Trixie still wanted nothing more than to give in to her instincts... to charge the lavender unicorn and take out an eye with her horn. She wanted to rip, tear and destroy her like she did that stallion those months ago. The purple pony's eyes began to glisten with tears, but she would have nothing of it. Her pitiful display could not make Trixie less mad, yet she did not charge and give in like she had before.

"Maybe," Twilight started, pausing before she continued. "Maybe I can give

you something... to cheer you up a little? I found it when you were last here... in the ruins of your cart." She turned her back on the azure mare and opened up a closet, floating out a wide-brimmed hat and cloak painted in fields of stars on a blue canvas. Trixie's eyes widened as she saw her beloved hat and cape float over to her and land, taking their rightful places on her body.

A regal blue hoof felt the material as it touched her, caressing her skin in a warm embrace, like an old, dear friend hugging her tightly. If she were not so mad at Twilight, she would have cried at the memories such simple items possessed. Instead, she looked up at the lavender mare, without any hate or malice. "Thank you," she whispered sincerely.

"It's the least I could do, Trixie... I'm so sorry... about everything."

"...the Great and Powerful Trixie will forbear from punishing you for now. But you have not yet earned her forgiveness!"

"Will you at least sit down to lunch with us?" the lavender mare continued.

Trixie had to ponder on the proposition... before the fill of the sandwiches from earlier left her stomach, causing it to grumble in protest once more. "Fine," she reluctantly agreed.

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Lunch, for the most part, was an uneventful affair between the three mares (plus a baby dragon, which explained the sliver of green Trixie saw earlier.) Although the other two only had tomato soup, Trixie was treated to a small feast of sandwiches, salads, juice and a couple of chocolates. Even though she ate everything in front of her, she felt a little guilty about how much she had eaten... not that she would ever say that, of course.

Eventually, the three mares went their separate ways. They left Spike, the baby dragon, to look over the library while they were out. Trixie silently mused why Ponyville had such a large library if they were as big a hick town as she thought. Perhaps they used the books for something other than reading: perhaps toiletries? At any rate, Shimmer Tail said she would meet up with the other two mares a little bit later at some place called 'Sugar Cube Corner.'

Relieved of the one sensible mare in town, Trixie had to endure an agonizing walk through it. Granted, it was not particularly hot out, so nopony batted an eye at the azure mare in her cloak and hat. Well, no more than usual, anyway. At first, she pondered why Twilight Sparkle had returned her trademark attire... but looking in a store window made it clear. The shadow of her hat hid the blackness around her eyes, masking it as shadow. As well, her cape smartly hid her exposed and withered frame. Not to mention the gem on the ties drew eyes away from the shock collar on her throat, which also matched the colour of her coat near perfectly.

All things considered, if you did not know just how bad in shape she was, with a little makeup Trixie would look as stunning and radiant as ever! Perhaps... just perhaps, mind you... Twilight Sparkle was not as bad as she first thought? Granted, she was still livid over having to stay within twenty feet of her, and the lavender unicorn would simply not stop talking about where they were going. It was some sort of farm with some stubborn mule of a mare in charge of it. Other than that, it all sailed right over her head.

The two mares soon left the limits of town and were on a dirt road leading out into the woods. It was strangely calm and serene here, especially now that she knew how close the Everfree Forest was. Little birds would fly from tree to tree, perch on branches overhanging the road (thankfully not dropping their... droppings on Trixie's head), or sing happily to one another. Trixie still did not trust the sneaky little creatures, though.

Not more than five or ten minutes of walking later, they found themselves facing a large, wooden gate in a fence. Above the opening, there was a sign covered in drawings of apples, which read, "Welcome to Sweet Apple Acres." Trixie silently scoffed at the cheesy sign, rolling her eyes instead of going into a tirade about how tacky it was. Now, she really had nothing against it, but she was just tired of Twilight being the only one to do the talking.

Before she could open her mouth to complain, Twilight stopped walking suddenly and turned to the blue mare, looking her in the eyes. "Now, listen, Trixie," she spoke, no hint of mirth in her voice. "Some ponies around here... namely the ones you humiliated... are going to be antagonistic towards you. Just... keep quiet and try not to offend them more."

"Trixie won't, if they won't," she replied, looking over the purple pony's shoulder to see that orange hayseed she tied up during the show before the Ursa. Twilight bit her lower lip nervously and nodded her head once, suddenly moving quickly, as if she wanted to get what needed done fast so they could leave.

"Hey, AJ," Twilight spoke, gaining her attention. "I came to pick up those apples for the pie my mom wants to bake for dinner tomorrow. You're all invited over, of course." Trixie, meanwhile, hung back as far as she could from her without setting the collar off. She only left the range once before and boy did it STING.

"Why sure," spoke the orange pony. "I'd love ta sample some of yer momma's cook..." she trailed off as she saw the azure mare. "Wut is SHE doin' here, Sugar Cube!?" Her eyes narrowed as she walked over, quickly becoming uncomfortably close to Trixie, who did not dare move back, as Twilight had not moved either. The azure mare did her part to stand her ground, unaware of the strength the farmer possessed.

"AJ, please don't be mean to her. She's... she's had a really rough time ever since she left."

"Serves you RIGHT, ya egotistical horse! Reckon you can come back here and make our Twilight feel sorry with yer sob story? Well, it ain't gonna fly with this here workhorse, you yella-bellied varmint!"

Trixie could have gotten mad, and she could have become sad. Instead, she stood there, calm and collected, much to her benefit. In fact, Twilight almost began to think that perhaps she would apologize... at least until her sister opened her big mouth. "Does she come with subtitles?" Trixie asked. "I can only understand... maybe every third word that comes out of her mouth. How do you DO that? Is it some kind of special redneck language?"

"How'd you like yer jaw wired shut, you prissy little bi-"

"OKAY!" Twilight shouted to cover over the last word, "Um, I'll just take those apples now and we'll be out of your mane, okay, AJ?" The orange pony paced around the blue one before her lavender friend interrupted. Trixie tried to shuffle away, closer to Twilight, but found her hooves rooted to the ground and the farmer in a dangerous position with her hind legs

facing her weakened side.

"You go on an' get them apples, Twi," she replied, "I gotta stick around here and make sure the blue herrin' don't go stealing none of MAH apples. An' if she does... well, we got a barn around here that'll do nicely fer teachin' her a lesson."

"Applejack, before you get yourself worked up, you have to know that Trixie i-"

"It's RED herring, you idiot," Trixie corrected, "Secondly, a red herring is a false clue used in detective stories. I'm not even going to start on the implications of the barn."

"Okay, THAT DOES IT!" the pony known as Applejack screamed. It all happened so quickly. One second, the orange pony pushed herself onto her forward hooves, rear ones tucked in for a massive buck. Trixie knew the impact coming would be powerful, and aimed square at her fragile ribs. However, just as the thought crossed her mind, there was a sudden flash, finding her shoved to the ground as a small pop sounded in her ears.

Time sped up again, allowing Trixie to push herself up to find a sight she never expected. Twilight Sparkle had thrust herself into the line of fire and took the full brunt of the attack. She lay on the ground, pained, but pulling herself up nonetheless, glaring at the orange filly. "Twilight!" the farmer started, "Why did you do something so stupid!? You could have broken a rib!"

"Well, you could have killed her!" the lavender one yelled, wincing in pain immediately after. Without warning, she trotted over to Trixie and lifted up her cape, exposing her deathly figure to the farmer, whose jaw dropped. Trixie quickly knocked the lavender hooves away, embarrassed.

"Well... yeah, but... but you could've just tackled me instead of takin' the hit for yerself!"

"I could have hurt you, and I'd never want to hurt my friends, but..." she trailed, "But I have to protect my little sister too!" Everything suddenly went silent. As if saying a word would bring the world over the precipice of disaster. It was a silence Trixie only experienced once before... concerning

the exact subject matter no less. Applejack tried several times to break the silence, only to make a small noise before shutting her trap again.

"That's... that's an awful big story to use on a pony like her," she finally said. "Ah know you can't help but see the good in ponies, but callin' her yer SISTER? Isn't that a little overboard, Twi?"

"I would never lie about such a thing, Applejack," Twilight replied in an authoritative voice that would have made the princess proud.

"Oh... Ah... Ah..." the orange pony stuttered with her head lowered, kicking at some dirt. "Ah'm sorry, Twilight... If I knew her state, or that she were your sister, I never would have..."

"It's okay, AJ." The lavender mare walked forward and gave her friend a hug, wincing in pain from the point-blank strike of her powerful hooves. They stayed like that for a long time, leaving Trixie to ponder exactly what had happened. For the second time in a week, Twilight Sparkle had saved her life. If that farmer had kicked her, she would have snapped her ribs like twigs, caused severe internal bleeding and... She did not want to think about it anymore.

Unnoticed by Trixie, the farmer had bucked into one of the apple trees and walked right in front of her, face-to-face. "Ah'm sorry about that, Trixie... here. An apple a day keeps the doctor away... Well, in yer cause, the mortician." She could not help but crack a smile at that, and happily took the apple from the farmer before eating the whole thing.

"Thank you, Applejack. Trixie... Trixie is... sorry too." It took all of her will power to say the rest of that. She was not really sorry, but if it meant one less pony on her back, the better. At least, that is what she told herself.

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"I'm really proud of you, Trixie," Twilight Sparkle spoke as they walked down the streets of Ponyville once more, "It takes a lot of courage to apologize like that, and I think Applejack was impressed." After getting the apples from the farmer, the two mares walked back to the library, deposited them with Spike, and continued on their way to the bakery to meet another friend of the purple unicorn.

Sadly, the bakery would not be the last stop on the itinerary for the day. Afterwards, Twilight planned for them to stop by another friend's place and pick up some food for the bookworm's pet owl. Then, they had to go to the tailors to see about fixing a few holes in Trixie's cloak. According to her captor, they would finish all of these errands by dinner time.

Trixie did not respond to her comment, seeking to keep the silence between them. Although she could feign forgiveness for the hayseed, she could not for what Twilight pulled on her. Being denied her freedom made her livid. She wanted nothing more than to get far away from the other mare as soon as possible. Until then, she would need to be patient.

However, she would later learn that she would need all of her patience for the day ahead, especially as they descended upon the dwelling of the town's resident party pony: Pinkie Pie. Stepping inside with a jingle of the bell, the magician looked over to a side table and saw the older mare, Shimmer Tail, talking with a yellow earth pony stallion and a blue earth pony mare. "Ah, Twilight, Trixie, there you are. How was the farm?"

"It went better than expected, actually," the lavender pony replied before trotting over. While she went to entertain the older ponies, Trixie set about poking around the sweet shop, finding it a little unfair they had to come to a bakery, and she could not sample some of the wares. Not that she was particularly hungry, but everything looked just so good... too good to not want to take a nibble of some of the baked delights.

"I know! I feel exactly the same way!" chirped a voice directly behind her. Trixie jumped instinctively and nearly hit the ceiling with her concussed head. "Although I would call them simply scrumptious yummy-cakes, but 'baked delights' will do too, I suppose!" How did she know what she was saying in her inner dialogue? Could she read minds? A million questions, mostly how she had not noticed her, buzzed in her skull and threatened to make her light headed.

"It's best not to think about it," she smiled, placing a pink hoof on Trixie's shoulder. "Oh! Where are my manners? I'm Pinkie Pie! We actually met before, but you were unconscious and I helped carry you to the library, so it wasn't like we actually met and it was more carrying you than anything else. So anyway, I was carrying you to the library and I got to thinking

about how you got looking as bad as you do, 'cause you looked really, really hungry, so I got an idea!

"I figured you would appreciate a chance to get up and close to some of the goods I bake here, so would you like to learn how? Okay, well, I don't do most of the baking, since I'm just the hired hoof. Mr. and Mrs. Cake can bake ANYTHING though and are, like, the best bakers in town... but Applejack is pretty good too... except for the time she poisoned half the town with baked bads. I know it wasn't her fault, but ponies were throwing up all over the place and..."

Trixie sat in awe of the pink pony blathering on in front of her. If she thought Twilight was a talker, she had NOTHING on this pony. She sat and blinked, unable to form any words, or get in any edge-wise even if she wanted. Instead, she elected to do the wise thing and just let her rant. It soon became apparent that it was not as wise a decision as she thought, since the pink pony just. Kept. GOING!

"Pinkie," interrupted the yellow stallion Trixie assumed was Mr Cake. "I think she would like to go back and help you now."

"Okie dokie lokie!" she chirped, nudging the blue unicorn into the kitchen. Trixie tried to plead that she had no interest in baking, but the pink earth pony started up again, drowning out her weak pleas for help. Eventually, she found herself in the kitchen of the bakery, her hat and cape hanging on the coat rack. She did not even remember being touched, never mind taking them off!

"How did you DO that?" Trixie asked in genuine awe. The last time she was awed like this was at the hoof of her master. However, she swiftly remembered the incessant buzzing in her head the last time she overthought that mare and wisely decided to just stop. "Never mind, Trixie has a feeling she doesn't want to know."

"Don't worry about it, Trixie," she smiled. "Your big sis... Twilight tried to figure me out too, but it didn't go too well for her, so don't feel bad." The blue mare was about to chew her out for calling her the s-word to Twilight Sparkle, but thankfully the pink one could see the anger building up in her eyes and backtracked. "Now, let's stop shaking, it's time to get baking!"

Thankfully for Trixie, she soon found out that when inside, the range of the shock collar changed automatically to fit the hoofprint of the building. This allowed her to move around the kitchen freely without fear of a painful zap. As she would later find out, with rapidly rising dough all around her, this would be a great asset. With Pinkie Pie in the kitchen, mobility was life.

Okay, maybe that was a bit of an overstatement, but that hour in the kitchen proved to be one of the messiest, if informative, hours of her existence. There was some measure of disappointment, not much mind you, when Twilight came to collect her for their next chore. Pinkie Pie... had a unique energy about her... almost as if that void that sucked in her positive emotions was plugged in her presence. No, it had to be a figment of her imagination, since her anger at the lavender unicorn rekindled when she paused at the door just a second too long, resulting in a shock.

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With her hat and cape on once more, Trixie braved the streets of Ponyville again. Thankfully, the citizens of the town were either incredibly secretive about their gossip, or they did not remember her and the Ursa incident. Or... perhaps they knew not to speak of her around the lavender mare, as ponies tended to shy away as she approached. The azure pony could tell there was a trace amount of fear around her, although she did not know why. It could have just been her imagination though.

"Hey there, Scootaloo!" Twilight cheerfully called out to an orange Pegasus filly that just rounded the corner. To say that she was surprised by the sudden greeting was an understatement.

"Oh... hello, Twilight," she smiled. "L-lovely day we're having right?"

"Still upset?" the mare asked as Trixie walked up beside her, still fuming a little with lingering smoke from the shock wafting off of her coat. The filly nodded her head a little, ears pinned to her head. "There's nothing I can say to make what I did better, Scootaloo. But I am sincerely sorry that you had to see it first hoof."

"I know," the filly replied solemnly. "I gotta get going... my mom is expecting me home by now."

"All right. Bye Scoots."

The little filly raced off, leaving Trixie to ponder a little on their exchange before she remembered the shock collar and started moving. "So, what was that about, Twilight Sparkle?" she asked. "Did you lose a fan when you botched a show? Oh, please tell me what you did to make her so SCARED of you!" She was practically giddy with excitement, unaware of the actions and events of that day almost one year ago.

Yet Twilight kept walking, ignoring her with her head held low. "Stop holding out on Trixie! Don't make her guess what you did to that poor little filly. Um... did you burn her favourite toy, or... or maybe you turned it into a rabbit and it hopped away? Oh! I know! You locked her in an iron-maiden box and forgot how to get her out!"

"I beat her idol bloody, hurt my friends, and I burned down almost a quarter of the town all because I got overly stressed," Twilight replied lowly and in a monotone. Trixie could tell that the memories hurt to recall, causing her endless delight. If she would be forced to wear that stupid collar, then she would pay Twilight Sparkle back by being as annoying as possible, and then hopefully get her to remove it sooner.

"Well," Trixie started with a certain measure of pomp in her voice. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has never had that problem. You know WHY, Twilight Sparkle? Because that stupid incident with the Ursa was a FLUKE! You hear that? You never would have vanquished it if The Great and Powerful Trixie, had not softened him up for you!"

"You're not even close, Trixie," she replied with a measure of sadness in her voice.

"Hey, Twilight, what's going on?" spoke a sudden voice from above. A sky blue Pegasus pony hovered in front of the two unicorns, her mane stained in all the colours of the rainbow. Her rosy red eyes suddenly narrowed as they fell upon the blue one of the pair, glaring at her in anger. "...And what the hay is SHE doing here!?"

Silence filtered through the streets as ponies watching decided they had better things to do and cleared out from the impending doom. Trixie did not expect Twilight Sparkle to defend her after she clearly offended her, so she

decided to take things into her own hooves. "Well, Trixie isn't here by her own choice," she started, "She was on her way to another town, any other town when she stumbled upon your Ponyville and hit her head in her headlong flight from your miserable hovel of a village. If it were not for Trixie's mild concussion and her pounding head, she would be long gone by now, Rainbow Dash."

"Flight? You're not a Pegasus!" The ignorance in that sentence made Trixie place her hoof against her face.

"It also means to run away, to travel, or to escape, you idiot!"

"Oh. Well, look who's talking! You're the one who ended up here after what you pulled! I'm surprised Applejack... that's the pony you called a hayseed by the way, hasn't had you tarred and feathered yet!"

Twilight just stood there, looking at a point on the horizon blankly. Trixie turned to look her in the eye and waved a hoof in front of her face. Was that how she looked when she spaced out? Could spacing out like that be a genetic trait? Could she actually be... no, it just could not be true. "Hey! I'm talking to you, Inferior and Weak Trixie! Yeah, that's right: I saw the whole thing with the Ursa. You couldn't do jack about it, and you know it! The only reason you even tried was because of that huge ego of yours!"

"Look who's talking, Rainbow Dash," Trixie replied. "Don't you dare preach about another pony's ego! Trixie heard you the day of her show, saying how nopony needed to worry since you were already better than everypony else. At least Trixie's ego is only for the sake of her show! Or were you too STUPID to realize that it was all just an act?"

"Horse feathers! The way you talked about defeating that Ursa was just you boosting your ego! You said so yourself!" Rainbow countered.

"So what? Trixie is a travelling magician. She needs to make up stories like that to incite interest, or she doesn't eat. Rainbow Dash, you are a complete, insufferable moron if you can't see that!"

"I'm not a moron!"

"I'm not a moron!" Trixie copied mockingly.

"Stop copying me!" The childish back-and-forth of parroting continued for a few minutes, both unrelenting in their repetition. Twilight snapped herself out of her stupor to find herself in the middle of the verbal tennis match. No pony gained ground and the whole thing was beginning to give her a headache. Sure, Trixie touched a nerve when she brought up... the incident, but she had no way of knowing... and she did not want her to know, for fear that she would... well, fear her.

"I SMELL LIKE PONY PLOP!" Rainbow Dash screamed in an attempt to corner Trixie.

"Well," she replied matter-of-factly, "I wasn't going to SAY anything, but now that you mention it..."

"GAH! I'LL KILL YOU, YOU LITTLE-!" Laughter filled the air that did not come from either of the combatants, but from the lavender pony that stood to the sides.

"I'm sorry, Rainbow," Twilight wiped a tear from her eye, "... But I've been having a rough day, and that was pretty funny how she countered your counter. Please, don't take any offence. I'd love to see you for dinner tomorrow at my place. I promise, Trixie will behave... or ELSE."

The Great and Powerful Trixie blinked in disbelief. Did Twilight just threaten to keep her in line? How was she planning on doing that? Her rapier wit and mind like a steel trap simply could not be contained. If a pony deserved it, she would belittle and humiliate them. But... it was not always like this. It used to be that only performers competing for her title would face the point of her sword. The blue mare lowered her head slightly, barely noticeable to any pony present. She did not hear the beat of wings as the Pegasus retreated, convinced to let Trixie be.

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An uneasy silence followed the two mares as they journeyed from the streets of town and back out into the wilderness. She probably did not do herself any favours by outwitting the Pegasus, but what was Trixie going to do? She was honour-bound to defend herself and her profession from the likes of the aerial nuisance, even if she won the most prestigious award for

a young civilian Pegasus in the country.

Maybe Twilight Sparkle was finally beginning to snap herself out of her delusions that the two of them were more than bitter rivals, at best? If it was not obvious to her just how much Trixie hated her, then she had to be about as thick as the earlier mentioned Pegasus. That or her blatant bookworm disposition made her so naive that it was not even funny. Not even to a pony who hated her as much as Trixie did.

Soon enough, the pair found themselves at the strangest house Trixie had ever seen. It, more or less, looked like an above ground burrow. Sure, it had four walls, plenty of windows and a door, but the roof was not thatched like most of the others in town. Believe it or not, the idiotic pony that lived there made their roof out of SOD! Did they not know that it would leak in a rainstorm... or was it simply decoration?

Only when they crossed a tiny bridge over a little stream that Trixie noticed an obscene number of holes scattered about her lawn, and the astronomical number of birdhouses that filled up any remaining space. Twilight swiftly moved up to the door and knocked her hoof gently on the wooden frame, the upper half already open to let some air inside. "Fluttershy?" she called out. "I'm here to pick up Owlowsious' food."

"I'll be right there," sounded a soft, nigh inaudible voice from inside the house. "Just let me take care of something first... oh, Angel, please come down!" Trixie tapped her hoof impatiently. The sooner they could get these stupid chores done, the sooner they could get back to the library and not interact with anypony. She wanted nothing more to do with the town or the ponies in it so she could get back on the road as soon as possible.

After a couple of minutes of irritating waiting later, a disturbingly familiar yellow Pegasus with a pink mane appeared at the door. Trixie could not place her hoof on where, but she had seen her before and recently at that. If it had not been for the earlier events, she would have pinned it in a heartbeat. "Please, come inside. I have some tea boiling if you would like some."

"We'd love some," Twilight replied, much to Trixie's anger.

"Do not speak for The Great and Powerful Trixie, Twilight Sparkle! She has

no interest in tea!"

"Oh... um... well, I have some milk, or soda, or water, or juice... and you can have some cookies and other treats too... um... t-that is unless you don't want to..." She wanted to be mad at the yellow pony for making her stay out longer than she wanted, but as she followed her captor inside, the anger just... evaporated.

Maybe it was the sight of all the critters and the ramps, holes and perches littered throughout the living room? Or, perhaps it was the gentle nature of the pony that clashed with her desire to chew her out. Somehow, the idea of making her cry gnawed at her soul; tantalizing, yet far too cruel for her to even try. "Fine," she relented. "Trixie will have some tea and snacks if only for lack of anything better to do."

Walking into the kitchen, the three mares sat at a small, wooden table designed to accommodate only one pony. Yet somehow, the three managed to squeeze together, even if the fit was a little on the tight side. Trixie twitched a little when Twilight pulled out a box of 'Krispy Treats' from the cupboard. Her dad owned the successful company that made them. She could feel herself slipping off into her own mind again, remembering all the tea parties she attended as a little filly and how she was expected to take over the company one day.

"Trixie?" Twilight called, waving her hoof in front of the catatonic mare. This prompted an uncharacteristic giggle from the quiet Pegasus. "Uh... Can I ask what's so funny, Fluttershy?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she quietly giggled. "It's just... she looks like you. I mean... when you space out in thought. It just... um... looks adorable... on you both." Fluttershy blushed; embarrassed that she had used the word 'adorable' to describe one of her friends. "Um... I'm sorry if I'm prying, but... is she... related to you?"

"She's my little sister," Twilight sighed in a mix of resignation and embarrassment. Somehow, the word managed to filter through the blue unicorn, causing her to blink her eyes and look around, a little confused and disoriented for a second. Trixie found a warm cup of lemon tea and a couple of Krispy Treats on her plate.

"Oh, I can see the resemblance," the yellow Pegasus smiled, confusing the magician a little more.

"What did Trixie miss?" she asked with another confused blink.

"Oh, you didn't miss anything, Trixie. My name is Fluttershy, by the way. Twilight introduced us while you... um... spaced out. It's... it's a pleasure to meet you." A simple bat of her eyelashes sent Trixie reeling from the residual anger she felt toward Twilight. It was utterly impossible for her to stay mad around the Pegasus, and it slightly disturbed her.

A white rabbit hopped onto the table rather suddenly beside Fluttershy. Trixie looked at him, and he looked right back at her with a deathly glare, as if trying to tell the unicorn that if she uttered one mean word, he would ruin her. Of course, Trixie would not be intimidated by such vermin and shot him back an equally acidic stare. His face crumpled up dangerously, the little bunny bending his legs to hop at her and attack. That is, until a pair of yellow hooves wrapped around him, cuddling him tight.

"Oh Angel," Fluttershy crooned happily. "Did you want to join us for tea? I'm so happy you finally decided to come down." Either the Pegasus was oblivious to the desperate struggling of the rabbit, or she knew what he was about to do and stopped him with real kindness and love. Not the fake kind of kindness that led Twilight Sparkle to put a shock collar on her!

"Well, thank you so much for the tea, Fluttershy, but we have to get going now. Can I help you clean up?" Twilight asked her friend, half an hour after the little tea party began.

"Of course you can. Thank you so much for staying, and for offering to help clean up, Twilight." As soon as the two other mares turned away, the rabbit known as Angel glared at Trixie. She still had a little bit of tea and another biscuit to finish, so she did not get up to help. The rabbit, much against the implication of his name, picked up a butter knife from the table and pointed it at her in lieu of something sharp.

Although he could not speak, the gestures of the white bunny made themselves clear of their meaning. He pointed at his eye, then at the blue unicorn before taking the knife to his throat and made a tiny slitting sound as he slowly pulled it across. Trixie could almost hear his voice warning

her, "If you're mean to that pony, I'll mess you up so badly, that they'll never find all the pieces!"

The Great and Powerful Trixie slunk into her chair a little bit, well and truly intimidated by the little white rabbit. He seemed to understand that she received the message, as he hopped down and left the terrified unicorn to her own devices. Was this how ponies felt when she was mean to them? Did they feel as angry, intimidated and scared as this? Maybe she was a little hard on Applejack and Rainbow Dash, but they deserved it for disrespecting her... did they not?

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The two siblings were on the road once again. But this time, it was the invigorated Trixie on a tirade about that obnoxious little rabbit and his macabre threats. For the most part, Twilight Sparkle shrugged it off and dismissed her and her ravings as simply a figment of her overactive imagination. That would not deter the azure mare though. She was convinced that rabbit was evil; much how like the other mare was certain something else was evil too.

Thankfully, the pair swiftly approached the door of their destination. It was a tall, towering building much like the town hall, but it was white with subtle hints of purple. On the upper tier, mareaquins on poles circled the shop over the neat cursive writing that spelled out 'Carousel Boutique.' *The name fits to a tee*, Trixie mused as the lavender mare leading her went inside.

When she saw the white unicorn mare inside the shop, Trixie was not overly surprised. The whole day seemed to have a theme to it anyway, and the prissy unicorn who insulted her fashion sense the day of the Ursa incident would serve as the final act of the play. The usual greetings were made between the lavender and white unicorn before the latter took notice of her, eyes narrowing dangerously at the performer.

"Well, I suppose I could do... something," the white one spoke, "Can you be a dear and get me the royal blue thread from the back room please?"

"Sure thing, Rarity... and please behave, you two," Twilight replied, disappearing further into the shop. Trixie glared at the white mare just as

she did, the two circling each other as soon as Twilight left, both ready for a fight.

"Well, well," the pony known to her now as Rarity started, her eyes going over Trixie from hoof to the top of her hat. "You look like you hit every branch when you fell out of the ugly tree. It serves you right. Great and Powerful? The only thing great and powerful about you, Trixie, is the odour that you exude, like some rotten trash heap!"

"Look who's talking," Trixie replied. "I nearly gagged the moment I walked into this store from all the perfume you wear. What are you trying to do? Lure a colt... or a mare? Either way, it's a big sign that you're desperate. Must be because you're so old."

The white unicorn looked simply aghast at her rather vicious retort. Ah well, it was not like Trixie had been the one to start it. She would have been content keeping the silence, but the sinister mare wanted to dance with her, so she would dance. She would not go down without a fight!

All of a sudden, the azure mare felt her cloak and hat rip themselves from her body, caught up in the magic of the other unicorn, who then smirked when she saw how fragile she was. "I might be a little older than you, but at least I'm not in danger of blowing away in a light breeze. I knew you were jealous of my beauty, but anorexia isn't the answer, darling."

"Trixie is not anorexic!" she replied indignantly. "Now shut your trap, you little bi-ahhhh!" A shock ripped through her body from the collar strapped to her neck. Unbeknownst to her, Twilight added another feature to the collar when she was not looking. Simply, when she would step out of line in an insult, it would zap her as well. This prompted the alabaster mare to giggle in delight.

"Look at you, Trixie," she said. "You call me that word when you are the perfect picture of an old hound dog! Twilight has you wrapped around her hoof, and there is nothing you can do about it. If you ask me, that doesn't make you great or powerful at all. You insulted my mane, you humiliated me and my friends, and now you are paying for it, Trixie. Yet... I can see now that you are genuinely in need, and I'm sorry for starting this whole petty argument. If you don't insult me again, I won't insult you. Deal?"

"Trixie doesn't have a choice," she muttered angrily. "If she insults you, she gets shocked. So, yes, you have a deal, but know that Trixie doesn't like it." Silence fell on the room as the white unicorn bought her hat and cape over, to her as she sat at a table and scrutinized on every detail.

"Have these been damaged before?" she asked, looking at Trixie, who gave her a quick nod, "I could barely tell. Whoever you got to fix it did an excellent job."

"Actually..." the azure unicorn muttered, "It was Trixie who fixed them. She's been on her own for years now, but she learned before she started traveling alone. She traveled with... another magician for a few years, and he would have her fix up his costumes and other behind the scenes work."

"You sew, darling!? Then why are you here? Surely you could have asked Twilight to just get you the thread. I know she can't colour coordinate, but she knows her reds from her blues... at least, I hope so."

At that very instant, the lavender mare emerged from the back rooms with a box of spools filled with blue thread. She trotted over to the desk with the sewing machine on it and gently placed the box beside her friend. "I couldn't figure out which one was 'royal blue' so I just took all the blue ones I could find and put them into a basket," Twilight explained, causing Rarity to groan and apply a hoof to her face.

A flash of sudden gratitude washed over Trixie, directed towards Twilight Sparkle. If she had not thrown off Rarity, who now ranted about how she was surprised about her not knowing indigo from mauve, then she would have to answer why she did not fix her hat and cloak herself. The whole encounter only served to remind her just how far she had fallen from her once lofty perch... the she no longer deserved her title or her memories of her master.

Trixie remained silent through the rest of her time at the tailor's shop, and even into dinner. At several points, the two unicorns discussed magic and spells. Each time, she had to fight back her tears to stop from showing her weakness right there at the table. It came as a tremendous relief when the meal ended, allowing her to escape to the bedroom. The azure mare threw herself onto the spare bed and buried her head into the pillow, bawling at

her pitiful state. How could she tell those strange ponies, or even Twilight...
how could she tell them that she had lost her magic?

Chapter 3

An End and a Beginning

Trixie stood alone on the large, elegant stage while wearing her trademark hat and cape. A bright spotlight shone in her eyes, obscuring the theatre and the occupants from view. She squinted and put a hoof in front of her face before realizing she was in the middle of a show. The mare let out a soft gasp, swiftly lowering her hoof to put on her Great and Powerful Trixie persona. "Welcome, fillies and gentlecolts! Foals of all ages! The Great and Powerful Trixie is here to dazzle and AMAZE you with feats of awesome magic!"

Stifled giggles from a few inconsiderate fillies echoed through the cavernous, infinite theatre, causing Trixie to stumble upon her words a little. However, years of experience had given the showmare the ability to bounce back easily. She ignored their heckling and resumed her show, more giggles sounding from beyond. Soon after she started, the giggling evolved into full-on laughter, no matter what awesome feats of magic she performed.

"Okay!" Trixie shouted, "The Great and Powerful Trixie demands that somepony turn off that irritating and blinding spotlight this instant!" After a couple of seconds of delay, the bright offending light turned off, casting the theatre into darkness as her eyes tried to adjust. Meanwhile, the laughter had grown to absurd and obnoxious levels, echoing off the endless walls of the venue.

The magician felt a chill run across her entire body: the entire theatre was empty save for six seats near the front. "Why are you laughing at Trixie, you inferior KNAVES!?" All six of the ponies she met in that wretched Ponyville, even the pink and yellow ones who had not insulted her before, chortled and roared with laughter.

"Ya ain't great and powerful," snorted the orange hayseed.

"You certainly don't LOOK it anyway. I mean, you're nothing more than skin and bones," the white unicorn continued. Trixie looked down at herself

to find her cloak missing, revealing her malnourished figure and skinny legs. She blushed in embarrassment and shrunk a little on the stage, forgetting she was in the middle of a show, before everything vanished completely into darkness.

"Not to mention... that you... I can't finish! It's just TOO funny!" The annoying rainbow-maned Pegasus giggled in fits between her words, tearing up in laughter.

"I'll say it for you, FRIEND," that insidious lavender one smiled, "You've got no magic, Trixie." Twilight giggled a little at first before it quickly rose into a disturbing crescendo that she did not hear outside of cartoons. "Well, on the bright side, you don't have to worry about me calling you my sister anymore. There's no WAY I'd associate myself with a unicorn as WEAK and PATHETIC as you, Trixie."

She felt her lower lip tremble as tears welled in her eyes for no apparent reason. Trixie hated that mare the most out of the group: so why did her comments sting more than the others? More laughter rang out through the vast expanse of blackness, causing her to weld her eyes shut and turn away from the audience. The shame overwhelmed her fury, tossing her into a melting pot of swirling emotions. Her world spun as the laughter echoed, eventually overpowering her senses.

Trixie woke with a start, nearly tossing herself out of the bed and onto the wooden floor below. Her covers lay askew in the soft morning light, barely covering her azure form. She sighed as she realized it was all a dream, then noticed an indigo tail sticking up from the opposite side of the bed. Cautiously, the magician dragged herself out from the tangle of blankets and over to where her fellow unicorn bent.

"What are you doing, Twilight Sparkle?" she asked impatiently. Trixie smirked when the lavender pony jumped and hit her head on the bottom of the bed: a small consolation prize to start off the day. She pulled herself out from under it, her head in that box the magician dug through the day before.

"Oh! Trixie! Good morning!" her voice sounded, muffled from inside the box. Twilight pulled her head out and looked at the glaring mare, shrinking a bit. "Um... have you, by any chance, seen a... a tiara with a large, purple

star on it?"

"You mean the tacky one with the amethyst jewel? Yeah, Trixie saw it. Kicked it somewhere, so it's probably under a bed or dresser or something with the other disturbing knick-knacks," she answered.

"You went through my box!?" Twilight raised her voice, her expression rapidly going from betrayal to fear before finally settling on embarrassment, "I guess I deserved it... after the collar... I'm sorry about that, Trixie... it's just... when I get stressed out I stop thinking straight and with you injured and our mo- Shimmer Tail here... I just---"

"Words are cheap, Twilight Sparkle," Trixie huffed, pointing her snout skyward. A wave of warmth suddenly washed over her neck, tickling her a little. Looking in the vanity beside her, the showmare saw the collar glow a soft lavender before finally disappearing. She blinked, feeling the spot where it once snugly fit to feel nothing but her coat at her hoof.

"I'm going to trust you, Trixie, like I should have right at the beginning. I've got no right to chain you up... Shimmer Tail chewed me out last night for it after you went to bed and I told her about the second feature. I've never felt more... well... ashamed in my entire life. Can you ever forgive me?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie can never forgive you for what you have done to her! However, she believes she possesses enough mercy to delay your well-deserved punishment until later. You will not know where, when, or how, but it is coming, Twilight Sparkle. Trixie can promise you that!"

Free once more, the livid magician marched down the loft, through the door, and down the stairs. At the bottom stood the white unicorn mare with the two-tone mane of purple and white, looking upon her with that... sparkle in her eyes. "Trixie," she spoke softly, "I can guess where you're going now, but before you do, may I have a word with you? Please? It would mean the world to me."

Trixie paused about halfway down the stairs and starred at the unicorn. She had actually asked her to do something, as opposed to the purple one ordering her around, meaning she could refuse if she wanted to. However, the showmare owed her freedom to her, so she would show the gratitude she earned. The azure pony nodded her head and replied, "The Great and

Powerful Trixie does owe you for setting her free and she never forgets favours. So yes, you may have a word with her before she departs."

"Please, follow me to the basement," the older mare started, "These walls have ears." Sure enough, after a nonchalant kick of her back-right hoof, the door opened to find Spike hiding behind it. He grinned sheepishly, knowing his cover had been blown before retreating, citing something along the lines of re-sorting in the crawlspace under the floor.

Silently, the azure magician followed the white pony into the kitchen and through a door that lead into the basement of the library. Despite being made of wood, it was not as dank down there as she expected, although it was a little on the dark side. After reaching the bottom of the stairs, and dodging the various stacks of books and electronic equipment, Shimmer Tail turned around to face Trixie, the sparkle back in her eyes.

"What is it you wanted to say to The Great and Powerful Trixie? Are you going to beg her to stay?" she asked.

"No, Trixie. You are a grown mare, so it is not my right to boss you around... not anymore. I know Twilight has told you that she is your older sister."

"Trixie has no siblings," the azure mare spoke bluntly.

"She wasn't lying when she told you that, but she is wrong for trying to MAKE you feel the same way towards her. I'm going to be blunt with you, Trixie. Twilight and you are both my daughters. However, unlike Twilight, I'm not telling you this to seek your approval. I just wanted you to know that I exist, and that I'll be here for a while yet in case you ever need a helping hoof. You're old and mature enough to form your own opinions about me."

"Well," Trixie started, "Trixie is grateful that you're not going to force anything upon her, unlike that insipid Twilight Sparkle. But Trixie has heard too many tales of the like to believe you. Trixie will not accept forged documents: only the truth will do for her."

"How about this?" Shimmer Tail asked, "If I can tell you a couple of things you have never told anypony before, will you at least acknowledge that I am not lying to you about this?"

"Trixie will consider it, but not acknowledge anything, Shimmer Tail."

"That's all I ask," the elder mare replied, "For one, you and Twilight both have stuffed unicorn dolls. Yours is purple with an indigo mane and tail. Hers is sky blue with a white mane and tail. However, they both have something in common: on the tags of each are three purple stars that look exactly like my cutie mark. Furthermore, you have a birthmark in the shape of a diamond on your left flank. Finally, like Shimmer Tail, you have little trouble speaking in the third-pony perspective, although unlike her, you do so almost exclusively."

Gears turned and groaned inside of Trixie's skull as this new, disturbing information processed in her mind. It was doubtful she could know all of that without knowing where to look, so coming across such details was unlikely. The azure mare's eyes narrowed as new questions buzzed around in her mind. "If you're really The Great and Powerful Trixie's mother, then answer this: Why did you give her up? How come you never looked for her!?"

Shimmer Tail looked toward the ground in a mixture of shame and pity, scuffing the stone floor with a hoof. After a couple of seconds, she looked back up at her, shadows of tears building in her eyes. "When your father died," she said, "Shimmer couldn't support herself and a foal. Twilight was off at Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, so she didn't need to worry about her. Shimmer tried to get a better job, but she simply couldn't without betraying a promise she made to the princess years before."

"So, with no other option, Shimmer had to give you up, Trixie. It was the hardest decision she ever made... but if she could go back in time, she would do it all over again. Do you know why? Because no matter how hard it was, she did it because she loves you and only wants the best for you... Trixie... you did have a good foalhood, right?"

The azure mare thought on that for what seemed like for ages. She could see weekends in the park with her dad, tea with her mom, and all the other fillies and colts she was friends with back in the day dancing in front of her waking mind, like some old home movie. Trixie closed her eyes and nodded, "Yes, Trixie did have a good foalhood."

"Now, as for why she hasn't tried to find you," the elder mare continued, "Shimmer had to work constantly to support herself, and only just managed to get by, since she could not do what she was best at until recently. So, she gave Twilight Sparkle the task of finding you, which she succeeded at... to mixed results as you know. Shim- ... I can never apologize enough for separating you... for destroying your relationship like I did."

"What do you mean?" Trixie asked, curious.

"Oh, you two were so precious as foals. Twilight would be reading her books and you'd be sitting there, watching her read while begging her to play. After a while, she'd take pity on you and would take a break from her studies. It's a shame she has so many problems. I'm sure she told you about the stress, but she also has... long-term memory issues too. It's not her fault... she was... born that way."

The Great and Powerful Trixie sighed. There was only so much she could take of sappy stuff like that before she cracked, and she was right on the threshold. "Trixie supposes that perhaps a departure right now might be... premature... if only because she still looks like a candidate for a position as a casket jockey. So, she will grudgingly stay here in... Ponyville."

Suddenly, the older, white unicorn stepped forward and wrapped her neck around the azure mare in a hug. She quickly broke off and smiled at the filly softly. "Would you like to help me make the apple pie for tonight?" she asked. Trixie had to take a step back to consider the offer. Of course, she had helped her mom... her adoptive mother... in the kitchen before. Perhaps she could learn something from cooking with... with her birth mother.

"All right, sure," she replied before following the white pony up the stairs. Although she would admit she and Shimmer Tail shared some common traits, The Great and Powerful Trixie could never accept that insufferable Twilight Sparkle as her sister. Not until there were some massive changes, at least.

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Hours melted into what felt like mere minutes as the trio of mares (plus one baby dragon) got preparations for that night underway. It would be the

first time the lavender mare ever hosted all of her friends at that library for a formal dinner, rather than a Pinkie-Pie influenced party. More often than not, the parties were usually to celebrate some sort of adventure, not for visiting family.

While Twilight and Spike got around to setting the table and putting the main room of the library in order, Trixie and Shimmer Tail tackled the food. The extra set of hooves really helped, but the purple pony could not help but feel something was... amiss around Trixie. As far as she could see, there was nothing out of the ordinary, yet she could not shake this feeling, like it was just out of her reach of understanding. It did not matter though: they needed to finish setting up, with only thirty minutes until their friends arrived.

Closing her eyes, the librarian shook her head with a sigh. The feeling she had about the blue unicorn probably came from the fact that she nearly starved to death. Or perhaps it came with the fact that Trixie seemed to hate her more than anything she had ever seen before. Anything else had to be simply a figment of her imagination... yet it still gnawed at her enough to voice her concerns. "Spike, have you noticed... anything odd about Trixie?"

"You mean besides the fact that she's a jerk?" he replied, earning him a stern look from his caretaker. "...What? Why are you giving me 'the look': it's true!"

"She's not a jerk. Spike," she retorted, "It's just that... well, she DOES act like one, but only if a pony insults her, or starts an argument with her first. I mean, yesterday she was quite civil around Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie."

"Yeah, but Pinkie doesn't even react when someone spits in her face, and Fluttershy is so timid that ponies can't HELP but be nice around her unless they're a bully like that Gilda. So, your argument isn't really the best one, Twi."

"Have you spoken to her since she got here? I'm sure if you're nice to her, she'll be nice back."

"Well," the baby dragon trailed, "No, I haven't talked to her... How about I fix that by sitting beside her at dinner? Then, if she's a jerk, you won't be

able to say I haven't seen it."

Twilight let out a frustrated sigh at the attitude of her number one assistant. Just because they had a bad first impression of her was no reason to assume Trixie was, well, boastful ALL the time. If she had condemned any of her friends the same way, then she would not have any of them in her life. She would probably be back at Canterlot, that very minute, with her nose deep in another unfeeling tome older than her. Actually, thinking back on it, she did condemn them all and the very idea of friendship before they became her friends... even Derpy.

Sadly, her friends seemed unable to see the poor starving filly she saw, and instead saw the same braggart from the Usra Minor incident. Hopefully, this dinner would allow them all the chance to let their manes down and get to know Trixie the unicorn as opposed to The Great and Powerful Trixie: the loudmouthed and obnoxious magician. Meanwhile, she did not notice how much time had passed as she stood musing in the middle of the room.

"Twilight Sparkle? Equestria to Twilight, come in Twilight!" A blue hoof waved across her vision, snapping her out of her stupor. The lavender mare blinked her eyes and looked around in confusion: the table was fully set and the food was all ready upon it. All that remained were their five other guests to complete the set of eight diners.

"Oh, Trixie!" she realized, "I'm sorry about that! I was setting the table, and then I just sort of drifted off in thought. I didn't mean to leave you, Spike and mo-... Shimmer holding the bag. I'm really, really sorry!"

"Trixie understands, just don't let it happen again or else she'll have to ship you off to a mental hospital," she replied. The purple pony could not help but notice a little bit of mirth in her eyes as she gave her deadpan delivery. Had Trixie become more comfortable with her? She had little time to muse on this, however, as a rapping on the door shook her from diving in again.

"I'll get it," the librarian piped up as she trotted over to the door. "Hey girls, so glad to see you could all make it!" Twilight stepped to the side to let in her closest friends. Pinkie bounced in first, followed by a streak of rainbow and the three slower ponies in their wake. Thankfully, there were

no sudden exclamations of 'you!' from either side of the room. Foresight allowed the lavender pony to anticipate that event and counter it by telling them all that Trixie would be there.

One by one, the guests walked over to the table and began to chat with one another, including the elder unicorn that they all met the day before yesterday. *So far, so good*, the scholar thought as she too joined in the festivities. Meanwhile, Trixie decided to tactically seat herself in the best position: on her left sat Shimmer Tail, and Spike on her right. By the time Twilight seated herself at the round table, the only spot left was the chair directly in front of her.

Trixie's plan for the evening was a simple one: all she had to do was keep quiet, not look at anypony and there would be no altercations. However, about ten minutes into the meal, she completely forgot about the sky-blue Pegasus, who had obviously grown bored. "So, Trixie," she started loud enough to silence all over conversation, "How is it that you've been asked five times to pass something, but you've ignored it? That seems pretty RUDE, if you ask me."

"Trixie isn't trying to be rude, Rainbow Dash... unlike you." the azure mare responded, doing her best for Shimmer Tail's sake.

"She ain't bein' rude. She's askin' a simple question... but yeah, that there last sentence was NOT needed," Applejack chimed in, glaring at Rainbow.

"So, what does everypony think of the weather?" Twilight asked in hopes of diffusing the situation, "Pretty mild, don't you think?"

"I'm just saying you haven't been very helpful tonight is all. I mean, you ask anypony else to pass something and they do it in a heartbeat. But you, Trixie, you just look blankly into space until somepony else does it!"

"That's not true: Trixie has been very helpful tonight. She helped me prepare the food and the pie," Shimmer Tail countered, only to be ignored.

"Trixie simply has her head in the clouds, Rainbow. Again, that is just a figure of speech, in case you couldn't understand."

"Why, you little!" the Pegasus started, placing her front hooves on the

table to stand on her hind ones, "I know that's a figure of speech! I'm not an idiot, unlike YOU."

"Trixie," started the farmer, "Just stop now, before ya get hurt. You couldn't win in a fight with this one, considering how weak and fragile you are now."

"Indeed," Rarity joined, "We don't really want to take you to the hospital for being abrasive to Rainbow Dash."

Enough was enough! The Great and Powerful Trixie refused to take any more of those baseless accusations and back-hooved attempts to stop the confrontation any more. It quickly became obvious to her that Rainbow started this intentionally, if only to try and make her look worse! That vermin! How DARE she!? "What do you all have against The Great and Powerful Trixie!?" she rose her voice, standing up at the table, "Sure, she humiliated you all on stage, but how long ago was that? A year? A year and a half, perhaps? You three act as if she killed a member of your families! If anypony here is being coarse, it's you three!" She swept her hoof across the offending Pegasus, hayseed, and unicorn.

"Trixie, stop this!" Twilight shouted unexpectedly, standing as well, "Sure, they're wrong for being overly hostile to you, but you can't fight fire with fire. It will only make you look worse and lead to nothing but trouble. Just calm down, maybe go into the other room for a few minutes, and then come back and try to talk about this."

"Don't be a hypocrite, Twilight Sparkle! Yesterday, instead of talking to Trixie, you slapped a SHOCK COLLAR on her!" Several of the ponies, including the shy Pegasus and the party pony gasped, little realizing what happened the day before, "What kind of a pony DOES something like that? I don't care if you weren't thinking straight from stress! If you REALLY cared for Trixie like you keep saying, then you wouldn't have done something so... so barbaric... so soulless!"

Although she could see the lavender mare's eyes widen and glisten with tears, she did not care. At that instant, it felt too good airing her dirty laundry to care for the feelings of such an insignificant pest. "Trixie!" gasped Shimmer Tail in shock. Yet the magician did not hear her and continued on her rant.

"You dare to keep calling Trixie your sister, even after you've demonstrated just how LITTLE you actually care for her! A real sister would not have been so willing to do harm to her sibling! Stop playing Trixie for the fool she obviously isn't. Sure, you probably feel bad that YOU destroyed The GREAT and POWERFUL Trixie's life, but you can never be related to her! Not after how pointlessly cruel you have been to her!"

"I...I... I just... that's not... did you... did you WANT to die, Trixie? I never spread those rumours about you! I tried to tell of how brave you were that night for even standing up to it! You... you call the others unrefined for holding a grudge, so what about YOU!? I only did what I had to do, but you keep going on about how you're going to punish me for ruining you? You brought this upon YOURSELF, Trixie! If... if you want to leave and kill yourself... then by all means, go! I'm sick of dealing with you... you... you JERK!"

Without another word, the purple scholar ran for the door, escaping the library before slamming it behind her. Soft sobs filtered through the door for a brief second before they vanished into the uncomfortable silence. After an uneasy minute, a voice suddenly piped up, breaking it once and for all. "Get out," muttered the orange hayseed in controlled rage, "Get out 'fore we skin ya alive, you no good, talentless HACK!"

Looking over the table, the three insidious mares she humiliated, plus the baby dragon, looked at her with unbridled fury. The only thing keeping them from an all-out brawl was but a single word. Fluttershy hid under the table, while Pinkie and Shimmer just sat there in shock, neither looking at the magician. "Fine!" Trixie shouted, "You don't need to ask The Great and Powerful Trixie twice!" Without another word, she stormed out of the library.

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Twili--- dusk settled upon the sleepy town a little faster than she anticipated, but she did not mind, since it would make her harder to spot. Trixie did not bother with her cart yet: she would wait until about midnight, when everypony had left or gone to sleep, before she would take her leave. For the moment, however, blind rage coursed through her, leaving deep hoofprints in the dirt road on the outskirts.

It took all of her willpower to restrain herself from jumping across the table at those stupid, hate-filled ponies and beating the living snot out of them like she did to countless hecklers before. She needed something to hit, to kick and tear, something inanimate to take her abuse. It was a shame that the egghead was not around: she would have made a wonderful outlet for her indignation, but Trixie doubted she would last long enough to satisfy her need for revenge.

Trixie sighed as the thought crossed her mind. Revenge: the dish best served cold. Every time she sought revenge against somepony, it usually came back to bite her in the flank. Usually, it happened sooner rather than later, but it would happen nonetheless. Still, as the azure mare left Ponyville behind her, the rage would not leave. Everypony there hated her for her OBVIOUS superiority! So what if a couple of them may have liked her before?

None of it mattered anyway. The Great and Powerful Trixie did not need anything as silly or useless as friends. Why, she could make her own friends with her powerful and awe-inspiring magic. At least... she could have, once upon a time. Thankfully, no pony was around to see the sudden, albeit very brief, look of sorrow that crept onto her muzzle before being replaced by anger once more.

Now in the Whitetail Woods, the azure mare walked over to the nearest tree and bored holes into it with her deathly glare. If only she still had magic, she would have set the thing on fire. Her anger boiled over at the idea, causing her to let out a feral scream and leap at the tree. The failed magician kicked, bucked and rammed the tree with her useless horn, not caring how badly she bloodied her hooves on the bark.

Unseen by the raging pony, however, was a pair of happy little fillies walking down the road. One was a purplish-gray unicorn, and her friend was an orange Pegasus filly about the same age. As they rounded the last turn, the grunts and cries of the mare echoed through the trees, bringing fearful speculation on whether it was a monster.

"Aw, it's not a monster," the Pegasus filly huffed as they drew closer, "Well, see you later. I've got to get going home now." The two fillies split at a fork in the road just before the raging azure pony. While the Pegasus trotted away, the unicorn drew closer, curious about why she was mad at a

tree like that.

"Hi there! My name is Dinky! What are you doing out here kicking a tree, miss?" she asked.

"Trixie is upset," The Great and Powerful Trixie replied through gritted teeth, trying to fight back her anger and tears for the sake of the innocent filly, "So, she is out here kicking this tree because there are no ponies around for her to beat up instead!"

"Well, why are you so mad, Miss Trixie? Maybe talking about it will help?"

"You wouldn't understand, little filly. Trixie doubts it would help to talk about it. Never mind the fact that it is none of your business!"

"Please? I promise not to tell! Please, please, please, please, pleeeeeeeeeeease!" the filly begged incessantly.

There was only so much whining that she could take before she caved, even though, much to her credit, she managed to resist for a few minutes. Inevitably she took a deep breath and sighed before looking down to the small unicorn. "Fine, Trixie will tell you," she conceded, "To make a long story short, The Great and Powerful Trixie performed here some time ago, everypony took it the wrong way, a giant bea... Ursa showed up. Then, Twilight Sparkle arrived and chased it away, so Trixie fled to save face after trying to vanquish it herself..."

The azure mare had no idea why she was telling her long, sad story to the tiny filly. As if she had any idea what true pain and hardship was. Still, she had a point about it helping her feel better to get all of the misery off of her back. Naturally, the filly would gasp and look sad at the appropriate places, making her inner storyteller happy that she had evoked such an emotional response. "... and then I came here to kick at this tree."

"Oh wow," spoke the tiny filly in awe, "So, you're THAT Trixie! As in, Aunt Twilight's sister Trixie!" She smiled and jumped up to hug the azure mare, which stunned the elder unicorn to no end.

"Aunt Twilight!?" Trixie gasped in disbelief.

"Well, she's not really my aunt, but she did help my mommy get me back from some bad people. Well, she's not really my mommy because my mommy and daddy died about a year ago, but she adopted me with help from Twilight, so I call her 'Aunt Twilight' to show how grateful I am. Just because Mommy isn't my real mommy doesn't mean she isn't, like how I know Twilight is only friends with my mommy, but that doesn't mean I can't call her my aunt."

"That still doesn't excuse her from doing what she did to Trixie... Dinky, was it?" The little filly nodded in reply, the gesture still visible despite the encroaching darkness of the rapidly setting sun, "It's obvious to Trixie that she doesn't really see her as her sister, but was just saying that so that her insipid friends would lay off on Trixie a little so SHE could get to make her look like a fool!"

"That's not true, Miss Trixie! Her ways of doing stuff is a bit funny, but Aunt Twilight only means only the best for every pony she meets! I think you hurt her feelings a lot because you were being very mean to her. I'm not saying her friends weren't mean, but you were mean for taking it out on her when she only wanted to help you. So, even if you don't think of her as your sis, she thinks of you as hers, and she sounds really, really hurt, so you should go apologize, or you might feel sorry about it for the rest of your life!"

As much as Trixie did not want to admit it, the filly had a point that deep down somewhere, she regretted hurting Twilight's feelings like she did. Yet, her Great and Powerful persona would not have any of the mushy stuff like that for anything. She was... conflicted at best about if she should really go back and apol... apologize... talk to her about what happened. "Trixie will think about it as she escorts you back to town," she replied.

"Okay, sounds fair to me!"

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Stars blanketed the velvet sky, painted soft indigo by the light of the moon that drifted in the eastern skies. Ever since she was a filly, the lavender unicorn loved to look up to the stars and figure out the deeper meanings of the universe. Memories floated to mind of her lying beside the princess in the observatory tower of Canterlot, asking her the name of

every star and the stories they told together. They would stay up so late some nights that she would fall asleep beside her only to wake up in her bed the next morning with her doll resting beside her head.

It was a doll she now knew represented her sister: a mare that would rather see her dead than have anything to do with her ever again. Twilight knew that she needed to be firm with her, but she felt like she had overdone things again, like she had with that collar. She gave such a pitiable look when she called her a jerk... or that could have been when she told her that she no longer cared if she lived or died. The purple unicorn sighed and cast her gaze skyward once more, blocking out everything else. However, the sound of soft hoofsteps on the grass rustled in her ears, though she would not act upon this new stimulus.

After searching the town high and low for the past hour and a half, she had finally found her on a grassy knoll in the park on the border of the Everfree Forest. Trixie approached the lavender pony and quietly sat beside her, searching for the words to start the impossible task before her. It took her a few dozen false starts before anything of meaning could come out of her mouth, the silence making her wonder if she would even acknowledge her.

"Trixie... may have gone overboard back at the dinner," she started, "She could have handled the situation a lot better than she did, but she should not have flown off the handle like that. Still, Trixie knows that is no excuse for solidifying your friends opinions about her and for making you cry, Twilight. She doesn't care if you don't accept this, but she wants you to know this is how she feels."

A long silence passed between the two mares after the words faded into the night sky. Neither moved, except for when the elder of the two decided to sit up instead of lie down. She took a deep breath and then sighed. "Do you want to know why I think you constantly speak in the third-pony, Trixie?" she asked, waiting for the answer that would never come, "I think that, subconsciously, you're ashamed of yourself. So, you disconnect from your actions by speaking as if you're not the one doing them."

"Trixie is perfectly capable of speaking in the first-pony! She only does so, however, when she is explicitly serious about something," the azure mare replied.

"Trixie... you're no picnic. You're selfish, obnoxious, and arrogant as all outdoors. By all rights, I should hate you as much as you say you hate me. Yet, no matter how I look at it, I can't see you as anything other than misguided and lonely. But, I have always been serious with you, Trixie. The least you could do is be serious with me. If you're really, honestly sorry about what happened at the dinner."

The Great and Powerful Trixie sighed and closed her eyes. She had not dropped her stage persona in so long that she was afraid to now. Trixie was not anywhere near as strong as the performer and she was far more sensitive. The obnoxious magician urged her to stop, telling her that all that would happen would be pain and regret. She did not need Twilight... she did not need anyone at all! She would have been fine, if she had not been pitied by that frustrating serf! That argument was what settled it for her, for she could not deny just how closely she flirted with death that night.

"Twilight Sparkle," she started, "Trix-... The Grea-... This is really hard. Trixie hasn't dropped her stage persona in years. Not since... well, that can wait. Twilight... I'm sorry for my atrocious behaviour at dinner tonight. Rainbow Dash may have antagonized me, but I should have just been the better pony and ignored her." Suddenly, a pair of hooves wrapped around her as the elder unicorn pressed their bodies together in a hug.

"Trixie, I'm so happy to hear that! I still feel awful about that collar, personally. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me." Silence stretched between the pair once more, the younger unicorn nodding her head in reply, looking to the stars herself. Twilight broke off the hug soon after, trying to find a topic to break the ice with. "So... you're a performer, right, Trixie? Who is your favourite... other than yourself?"

"The Great Hoofdini," she replied almost immediately.

Twilight felt her jaw drop, a foal-like excitement coursing through her veins. "Really!?" she nearly shouted, "Mine too! The pr... My teacher would take me to his shows in Canterlot all the time! Oh, I was such a big fan of him before..." That oppressive silence came back as she saw the tears beginning to well in her sister's eyes. "So, what trick of his did you like the most? Personally, I loved the Casket of Catastrophe! I could never willingly get into an iron maiden, and then be buried under a hoof of dirt!"

"I liked the Sultan Surprise," she answered in a suddenly sombre tone. "That one was always the most fun to set up, since I got to go high onto the catwalks to secure the ropes. I don't mention this a lot, but I was sort of his... his protégé."

"What!?" Twilight gasped in surprise, "No way! Are you really telling me that YOU are the fabled Heir of Hoofdini!? Can you do a trick for me, Trixie? Pleeeeease?" The purple pony looked at her pleadingly, like a schoolfilly meeting her idol for the first time. In a way, it was adorable, but in another it was slightly disturbing to see her lose her composure so quickly.

Trixie bit her lower lip and looked at Twilight apprehensively. She needed an excuse for why she could not do even a simple trick taught to her by her master, when suddenly an opportunity presented itself to her. "No... I can't. I mean, I could do a trick for you, but... well... it would bring back... too many unpleasant memories... mostly about... that day. You, as a fan, know of the day I speak of."

"I cried like a little filly for two days straight, no matter how my teacher consoled me," the lavender mare confessed, lowering her head sadly as her own memories of that day surfaced. "I can only imagine how hard it was for you, his apprentice."

"I've never told this story to anypony before," Trixie confessed, "Forgive me if I break down while telling it. I'll try my best to get through." Already, tears began to well up.

"If it's really that hard for you, then don---"

"I want to, Twilight."

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Five years before, in the revered Pegasus Theatre in the metropolis of Manehattan, a middle-aged unicorn stallion sat in his dressing room, combing his mane while looking into the large mirror. The Great Hoofdini always kept himself immaculately groomed, unless the show called for him to get a little dirty. Tonight, however, his mind wandered to other things,

taking his attention away from his greying mane. Was he really ready to perform this trick? What would happen to his student if he should fail?

A knock rapped upon his chamber door, reminding him to resume his confident airs. "The Great Hoofdini allows you entry," he spoke to the pony beyond. The door to the room opened, ponies beyond pushing behind the azure mare that stood upon the threshold. A clipboard levitated beside her as she walked in and shut the door with a soft purple glow of her horn. "Salutations, Trixie, my young apprentice! How are things going under your watchful and attentive gaze?"

Trixie bit her lower lip, not quite sure how to voice her concerns about the finale for his show. "Everything's going fine, Sir," she replied respectfully, "Although, we couldn't find any Mango-cream Pies, so we had to settle for Lemon Twist, and the riggers had to replace a pulley..."

"It's about the Rainbow Faint, isn't it?" he sighed. Trixie looked to the floor and nodded her head, knowing the aging stallion rarely missed a trick around her. "I know it's dangerous, but that's why I'm doing it. Show business is a siren: beautiful, but often lures ponies to their doom. I know my limits, Trixie, and I would never do anything more dangerous than this. If I may confide in you, I am a little nervous."

"Then don't do it!" Trixie cried, "Cut it from the show! Say something came up and you had to cancel it! Save it for another day, another month, another year, if you can!"

Hoofdini smiled, turning in his chair to face his precious student: one of the very few ponies he felt comfortable being himself around. "That's the problem, Trixie. If I don't do it now, I'll become too old and stiff to ever dare try it. Consider this my magnum opus: my last and greatest solo act." He smiled and walked over to the distraught mare, gently placing a hoof on her shoulder. She looked up at him with the shadow of tears forming in her eyes.

"I don't know what I would do without you, Sir. That is... if you... I mean..."

"You are a strong, proud mare, Trixie. You seep confidence now that I never possessed at your tender age. You might not think so, but... I think you're ready to stand on the stage now. Trixie, I want you to perform with

me for the shows after this one. It would be just the two of us dazzling the audience with our combined magical prowess. All I ask is that you have a little faith in me."

The azure mare looked to the floor, trying not to cry at the fear of losing her master. Still, the idea of standing on the stage with him, her idol... her friend... steeled her against the possibility. She looked up into his smiling face and nodded her head. "I believe in you, Sir," she spoke sincerely. He suddenly leaned forward and gave her a soft, tender hug, gently stroking the back of her mane to calm her down.

"Now," he said after breaking off the embrace, "If you're going to be on stage with me, we're going to need a stage name for you, kiddo. I've actually been pondering on this for quite a while, and only one name seems to fit your prowess and your wonderful showmareship. From now on, whenever you go upon the stage... you are The Great and Powerful Trixie!"

"Th-thank you, Sir!" the newly minted magician stammered. "Y-you're far too kind to me."

"Not at all, Trixie. You deserve every letter," he smiled, holding her cheek warmly with a hoof, "Also, you've never really had the chance to see any of my shows. How about you take the night off and enjoy it for once? Consider it a long-overdue gift."

"Y-yes Sir!" she smiled, "Thank you, Sir!" Trixie happily trotted to the door, tail happily swishing back and forth as the door opened. She paused, however, continuing, "... for everything." Hoofdini smiled at her as the door shut, thankful she accepted the invitation. If anything did happen to him... well, he did not want her to feel like it was her fault as the stage manager. He took a deep breath and walked over to his desk to write a letter.

Meanwhile, Trixie received her pass and found the assistant stage manager to take over for her for the night. Not only was she over the moon about her new title, but the idea of seeing one of his shows as a member of the audience thrilled her to no end. Usually, she would be far too busy backstage to enjoy what she could see of the show for much longer than a few scant seconds.

With just a couple of minutes left until it began, she picked up some

popcorn at the concession stand with some of the few bits she had. From there, she proceeded to her seat, in the middle of the lower level of the Pegasus Theatre. Ponies from all walks of life filed in, from rich debutantes in the private balconies down to common ponies who could only afford tickets in the nosebleed sections. For a few hours, they would all be joined in the magic of the theatre, temporarily dissolving class like no other spell could.

Suddenly, the house lights dimmed as the spotlights pointed to a blank spot in the stage. "Welcome, fillies and gentlecolts, foals of all ages!" boomed the voice of her mentor. "Prepare yourselves for the magical might of the one, the only, The Great Hoofdini!" Magical fireworks screamed forth as the aging unicorn appeared in a puff of smoke. As usual, he made a perfect entrance, his black cape (and trademarked handlebar moustache) billowing in a magical wind he conjured.

Although she knew the ins and outs of the show like the bottom of her hoof, Trixie still found herself captivated in giddy foalhood delight. For the first time, she was able to see her mentor from the perspective of the audience as she munched happily on her popcorn. He commanded the stage with unparalleled grace and power: something she herself could never hope to accomplish.

However, she could not help but notice some changes to the queue that night. A couple of the tricks scheduled were scrapped in favour of some of her favourites, like the Sultan Surprise and the Dauntless Descent. Trixie smiled as she caught on to his subtle way of trying to sooth her nerves over the finale. It made her relax just a little more, but did not quite vanquish the nagging thoughts from the more macabre side of her imagination.

Before she even knew it, Trixie saw the set for the finale roll onto the stage. Hoofdini would lock himself upside-down, while in a straitjacket, in a large, steel crate. It would then be hoisted to the level of the catwalk, a deadly sixty hoof drop down to the stage below. Once free and out of the box, he would then land on a hidden mat to break the fall and vanish in a puff of rainbow smoke all in one instant before appearing in the aisles... if all went well, anyway.

Trixie bit her lower lip as he trotted into the box, his rear legs shackled to the ceiling of it so he hung upside-down. The box clanged shut before the

massive lock was clasped over the rings and the whole thing sent skyward. He had but two minutes to escape before the combined weight of the stallion and the box would snap the line and send him plummeting to his doom.

Like the rest of the audience, she sat upon the edge of her seat in anticipation, uttering silent prayers to the creators to help him escape unharmed. The box creaked and groaned on its only support wire high above the stage, each one making Trixie panic just a little more. Thankfully, after about sixty seconds, the door opened to wild applause from the audience, who then gasped as he swan-dived to the safety of the mat. However, right where he was supposed to erupt in rainbow smoke, there only sounded a meaty crack that filled the air and silenced the theatre.

Medics rushed forwards from behind the scenes, tears instantly beginning to well in Trixie's eyes. Something had gone horribly wrong with the act. She got out of her seat and rushed out of the theatre, waving her backstage pass in the face of the bouncer to let her past. By the time she got there, several ponies and paramedics huddled around him. A white Pegasus she knew as Snowbell came up to her to stop her from getting close.

"I'm so sorry, Trixie," she said, tears staining her cheeks, "He's... he's gone... landed funny... s-s-snapped his neck... f-felt no pain." Her world crashed all around her. The azure mare could feel nothing but cold sweep over her body, tears flowing freely from her eyes. She tried in desperation to call out to him, thinking it was some sort of sick prank. The Pegasus had to restrain the unicorn and drag her back into his dressing room before she could batter the corpse in a foalish attempt to wake him.

In the privacy of the room, the young mare cried like she had never cried before. It was so unfair! She was going to have the chance to perform with him, the legendary magician and escape artist! How dare he die on her like that, after he PROMISED! Trixie rolled around the floor in a sick mixture of pain, sorrow and anger, sobbing loud enough to be audible in the hushed halls behind the stage. "It's not FAIR!" she screamed over and over, pounding on his emotionless possessions all the while.

Minutes dragged on into hours, leaving the azure mare alone in her misery. After expending her energy on smashing some of his old worthless

things, she curled up into a tight ball on the floor and sobbed quietly to herself. A quiet knock filled the room. "Trixie?" called the voice of Snowbell, "I... found something for you... from him... I'll just leave it by the door." The dressing room door opened, a plain brown package sliding inside before it shut.

Despite her extreme sorrow, the blue mare pulled herself off the floor, driven by curiosity, and slowly walked over towards the package, pulling a small card from the top before sitting down to read it.

Dear Trixie, it started.

If you are reading this note, it means I failed you. Words cannot express how sorry I am. I wanted to give you a little something after the show, to truly mark you as a bona-fide magician. Alas, now you will have to open it without me there to smile cheerfully at you. Before you go tearing into the package, I just want you to know something very important, Trixie. For the past couple of years now, I haven't really seen you as my assistant, or my protégé.

Now, before you get upset (even more so), this is because you've become closer to me than such an impersonal relationship. I'm sorry I never got the chance to say this while I was alive, but Trixie... you are like the daughter I never had. I realize this is of little consolation in regards to the circumstances, but I have always been proud of you, and will always be proud of you. Even if my untimely death has turned you off from show business, you will always be the Heir of Hoofdini.

No matter what path your life takes, I will always be with you. Even as my body decays, I live on in your heart... yeah, it's cheesy as all sorrel hells, but it's true nonetheless. So, chin up, kiddo! Go out there, and make me even more proud of you! You truly are 'The Great and Powerful Trixie!'

Sincerely,

Hairy R. Hoofdini.

The azure mare wiped her tears off on her leg before ripping the wrapping to shreds with her magic. Brown paper floated around the room like dirty snow, revealing the white box underneath. Trixie cautiously

opened the folds in the package to take in a sight that took her breath away. Sitting in the box, stitched in fields of blue, dotted with dozens of beautiful and colourful stars was a magician's hat and cape.

She sobbed once more as her magic gently lifted the hat and placed it upon her head, hiding her horn and most of her snowy white and light blue mane. The fabric felt so warm and gentle, almost like the stallion who gave them to her. Tears flowed freely from her eyes once more: in one night, she had been given a title and attire befitting of a magician... but she had also lost her master. She snuggled up against the cape like a blanket before her emotional exhaustion finally took hold, coaxing her into a dreamless sleep.

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Back in the present, new tears filled the azure magician's eyes, even as the lavender unicorn held her in a tight embrace. It had been so hard to keep her composure while telling the sad tale, yet she managed to do so nonetheless. Trixie sobbed quietly as the memories continued to play out in her mind, the funeral that was held a couple of days later. She had tried to be brave that day, but she just could not keep her composure, babbling through the speech she prepared.

It was all in the past though. At present, she was in the embrace of a unicorn whom she previously blamed for destroying her career, for making a mockery of her magical abilities. Only the brief time outside of her stage persona, coupled with reliving the sore memory, made her realize how her bitterness and pain twisted and distanced her from others. She had become the Great and Powerful Trixie, not to honor her mentor's memory like she told herself, but to run away from the crying filly inside. Cut off from everypony else by her hubris, her sneering mask, she now had no friends left, which led to her currently powerless state. After all, friendship was magic, or so the old saying went.

"Oh, Trixie," the other mare started, "I'm so sorry that I made you relive such a horrible day! I was... I was just curious and I disregarded your feelings and I..."

"It is okay, Twilight," the magician countered, "By making me break my character and... and share something heart-breaking... I realized that... well... perhaps The Great and Powerful Trixie has a bit too much of an ego

for her own good. Perhaps... perhaps I should just... just be Trixie. I would keep my title, but... not resort to all the useless bragging. I mean, a little is okay because otherwise I'm not interesting, but nothing like saying I conquered an Ursa Major."

Twilight Sparkle only squeezed tighter at that realization, beginning to cry a little herself, swept up in a tidal wave of emotions. "That sounds great! I'm sure everypony would love to get to know the real Trixie and not that obnoxious persona you built to hide from your own survivors' guilt." A look of surprise on the azure pony prompted her to add, "Trust me: I know what you're going through. I've... done things I'm not proud of. Let's just leave it at that."

A look of shame crept across the purple scholar's face at her own worst day ever, only to suddenly find herself being patted on the back by the other unicorn. "Come on, Twilight," Trixie spoke, "It's getting late out." Indeed, the moon hung high in the sky, telling the learned mare that midnight would soon be upon them. Being that close to the Everfree that late at night never boded well.

As the two ponies walked down the hill and into the deserted streets, Trixie could not help but feel as if a massive weight had lifted from her back, allowing her to nearly float on a cloud of relief-born euphoria. She knew that she would have to do a lot to make up to Twilight's friends, but it was a task she felt ready to tackle. Sure, they all loathed and despised The Great and Powerful Trixie, but they had never met Trixie Treats before.

The blue unicorn smirked at her situation. It was almost like a classical tale of redemption and forgiveness. Well, she was not about to become completely sugary and happy-go-lucky. At best, she would probably give more hints in her snide remarks to show they were in jest, but she was not about to change who she was completely for anypony. Not for her birth mother, not for Hoofdini, and not even for her 'sister.'

Still, it felt nice to let her mane down and just... be Trixie again, for the first time in a very long while. It was almost like stepping out of an old, stuffy room and back out into a fresh evergreen forest after years of confinement. Eventually, the blue mare snapped herself out of her musings, as the duo had walked all the way to the library.

A shiver ran down the blue pony's spine as the events of a few hours ago came back. Would Shimmer and Spike still let her stay, or would they be so angry that they would kick her out? Unfortunately, Twilight held no such reservations about coming home and opened the door immediately, beckoning her to follow suit. Trixie stalled for a couple of seconds, "Well, come on!" the purple pony prompted.

"Twilight! Trixie! Thank goodness you're both safe!" Shimmer Tail shouted before trotting over and hugging them both. "I was so worried when you both stormed out of here!" The room had been cleaned up so well that there was no trace of the table, or any of the food left. It only made the blue mare feel worse how she had spoiled things. It also reminded her of how she hardly ate anything, causing a quiet growl of protest to come from her stomach.

"So... you're not mad at Trixie?" the magician inquired.

"Oh, I didn't say THAT, young lady. I just meant I was worried about you two being out on your own... but I'm glad you managed to find each other and make amends... I think."

"We did, Mom, don't worry," Twilight added, "How's Spike holding up? He's asleep by now, I hope?" While the two other mares chatted about the baby dragon, and how he was handling the events of the night, Trixie began to ponder. It would only be a matter of time before they figured out her lack of magic, so perhaps it would be best to just get it over with and put it out into the open.

After the moment they shared on the hill, Trixie could not help but feel that Twilight would not berate her or parade her inabilities around town. She would take a risk and show her some of the trust placed in her. "Shimmer Tail... Twilight Sparkle... Trixie has... a small confession to make," she spoke, taking a deep breath, interrupting them suddenly, "There's a reason I didn't... or couldn't show Twilight a trick I learned from my master when she asked, and it wasn't because of the sore memories about losing him... at least, not completely. Please, promise to not laugh, but... but I... I can't do magic anymore." She looked to the floor and scuffed it with a hoof, utterly ashamed with herself.

"What!?" breathed both of the other unicorns in shock. This might be a tougher nut to crack than Trixie thought.

Chapter 4

Penance of the Pompous Performer

Despite everything that happened so far, nothing made the azure mare quite as livid or as embarrassed as what was going on around her at that moment. Not even spilling her dark secret (her lack of magic) made her feel quite the way she felt at that moment. Sure, it had been awkward, but at least after the initial shock the two other ponies calmed down. That could not be said, however, of the situation at hoof.

Trixie sat in her chair at the kitchen table the next morning, slumped over it with her hooves covering her face. Shimmer Tail had just finished regaling their guests with the tale of how filly Twilight reacted when she and her father first brought Trixie home from the hospital. If there was one eternal constant in the world, Trixie suspected it would be mothers embarrassing their foals, no matter how hard they tried to remain composed.

Ah well, at least she was doing better than Twilight Sparkle, who had become catatonic, her ears pinned to her skull and her mouth hanging open, as though under some terrible spell. Normally, Trixie would be joining in on the fun they would have at the stunned librarian's expense. Unfortunately, they were a sporting bunch and decided to focus on her instead of the purple mare.

A soft groan of frustrated pain filtered through her crossed legs, hiding her beet-red cheeks in a quiet desperation to save face. "Oh, come on, Trixie," giggled Pinkie Pie. "This was your idea on how to make it up to us for last night! I mean, I would have forgiven you anyway, because you seem nice enough, but you insisted!"

"And yet, here I find myself regretting every syllable," the blue pony replied, muffled through her crossed legs. By that time, she had accepted Shimmer Tail as her birth mother as they seemed to have an instant rapport anyway. So, to make up the events of the dinner to Pinkie and Fluttershy, she foolishly suggested that Shimmer tell some stories about her as a young foal.

"So, girls, do you have any requests?" asked the mother happily. "I'm afraid I can only take one or two more stories before Twilight and Trixie have to go. They said something about settling some things that came up at dinner." Silence fell over the kitchen (except for the continued chortles of the baby dragon who laughed at their combined embarrassment), as the two guests considered their options for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Um... I have one," Fluttershy squeaked. "I'd... kind of like to know... what their first words were... that is, um... if you feel like talking about it, I mean." Fluttershy sunk in her chair a little, hoping she had not overstepped her bounds with her request. Although she knew she could trust the older unicorn, she still felt a little timid and introverted around her, without really being able to explain why.

"Oh, don't worry about it," she started, "I'm sure you'll both find this absolutely adorable. I know I did, even if I was a little disappointed at the time, especially for Twilight's. You see, me and my husband had Twilight sitting in her highchair in the kitchen. For the past couple of days, we had been coaxing her into saying either 'mommy' or 'daddy' as her first word. It was a friendly little competition we had, just because we hadn't had a more... um... physical one... not since Trixie was born, at least."

The two friends giggled among themselves at the implications of that last sentence, causing no reaction from the unresponsive librarian, and a slight groan from the showmare as she slid in her chair just a little bit more. *Oh creators*, Trixie plead in silent prayer, *just kill me now and get this over with!*

"Anyway, we had Twilight in her little high chair, and we were trying to get her to talk: you know, asking 'Can you say 'mommy,' and stuff like that. Poor dear had no clue what we were talking about. Oh, the confusion in those purple eyes: it was so sweet. Eventually, Trixie woke up in the other room and started crying. A couple of seconds later, you would never guess, but she said, 'Twixie!' with the most precious smile you could ever see. Oh, I wish I had taken a picture of it! Sadly, the story about Trixie's first word is far less interesting. I offered her some spinach, and she said 'no!' It was cute, but not as cute as her older sister's first word"

"Awwww, that's so sweet!" Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy chimed in unison.

The blue unicorn shuddered, feeling herself on the verge of being sick from all the fawning over something that may well have happened in a different life for all she cared. Just when she thought she had enough of the embarrassment, the older mare started on a story about how Trixie had cried at one of Twilight's birthday parties after a clown 'stole her nose.' Having enough of all the stories, she nosily pushed away from the table and made for the door.

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," she muttered as she opened the door.

"Okay, feel better soon... TWIXIE," Pinkie jabbed before erupting into another fit of giggles. Unlike The Great and Powerful Trixie, the Normal Trixie knew that the pink pony was only jesting and that she should not take any offence. The powerless unicorn wandered out into the main room of the library, ignoring the continued mirth from the kitchen. It was late morning, the sun shining in the eastern windows.

Just the night before, she and the two other unicorns stood in that room, discussing how she could have lost her magical powers so completely. Eventually, they settled upon the fact that she was not physically ill, as she had seen a doctor about it shortly after her powers began to short out. That only left one possible cause: a block caused by a lack of emotional stability which in itself was brought on by a lack of social contact. In turn, that left her cut off from the largest and most potent source of magic. In other words, she lost her magic because she had no friends.

Naturally, this gave Twilight the idea of taking her on the town to try and find the three ponies most aggressive towards her and try and make amends. Trixie could see several small... or rather massive holes in that plan, considering her track record, but the lavender librarian replied with, "All I ask is that you have faith in me." Normally, that would not mean squat, but she just HAD to quote her master! She was quickly beginning to regret telling her that story.

Trixie shook her head to remove herself from her musings once more, and trotted over to a book she started reading earlier that morning. The three conscious ponies in the kitchen continued to chatter for several minutes, until the door opened. "You ready to go?" asked the previously catatonic Twilight Sparkle. Somehow, the three mares managed to bring her out of it and send her on her way.

"Yes, Trixie supposes she's ready to face the music," the blue mare answered before reluctantly following her hostess out the door.

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Twilight had a very tactical approach to the events of the day, timed down to the minute of where they had to go and what had to be done. First, they would spend a planned forty-two minutes searching for the first and hardest pony for the blue mare to deal with: Rainbow Dash. Then, with any luck, they would finish in thirty minutes so they could intercept Applejack and Rarity when their paths would cross for all of four minutes. Trixie had doubts the plan would work, never mind go on schedule.

Still, she could not deny that walking around town had become far easier than it was just two days ago. It also did not hurt that she had eaten enough food to feed a small army, filling out her figure considerably since her arrival. Instead of looking ready to collapse into a pile of bones, Trixie merely looked a little too skinny. Plus, there were less hushed whispers surrounding her, but she still could not tell if this was a positive change, or not.

Either way, tracking down the sky blue Pegasus (who Trixie would later learn was the head weathermare of the town) proved to be a magic trick in of itself. Of course, this was a good way to get to know Ponyville. Like most small towns, it felt relaxed, yet busy in its own subtle way.

"Is this really such a good idea?" Trixie asked for the fourth time that morning as they walked down the street, away from the town square. "I mean, you know how I get when a pony challenges me, and Rainbow Dash seems to like nothing better than pushing my buttons: so how do you expect me to get along with her instead of bucking that little blue rump of hers?"

"That's why we're going to see her first," Twilight replied, "If you can handle being around her, then everypony else will be easy as pie. It's important that you make peace with those three so that you can go about making friends without them actively trying to rile you up. I'm not saying you have to make friends with my friends, but it would be a good place to start since... well... they're a forgiving bunch, most of the time."

"Could have fooled me," the azure mare remarked under her breath, recalling the events of the previous night. The two ponies turned down the open main street, filled with vendors and their carts and onto a smaller side-street. "Why are we going down there? Won't that irritating Pegasus be shopping on the main streets today... or does she prefer more back-alley shenanigans?" Trixie could almost smell the rainbow juice wafting off of the athlete.

"Well, she likes to nap and practice her stunts. You see, she aspires to join the Wonderbolts one day and has to keep herself in top physical shape. So, she usually goes to a nice, open spot away from ponies to practice, which means she might be at the park. This is just a shortcut I picked up in my time living here. Hard to believe it has been almost two years since I moved from Canterlot!"

Once more, the irritating purple mare started on another lecture. This time it was about all she had learned since moving to Ponyville. Time with Pinkie Pie had sharpened her skill for tuning out such annoyances, and she was only getting better at it the longer she stuck around. The two ponies trotted down the street, allowing Trixie to get a chance to glimpse another side of the town she had never seen. Beyond the pastel and cheery buildings on the main streets, filled with flower and candy shops and the like, there was another world.

Granted, it was a small town, and ponies did get bored quite easily without any hustle or bustle. However, down the small side-street, peppered between houses, Trixie saw what she assumed to be some sort of rave club, a filly-fooler bar, and a small theatre. Perhaps Ponyville was not exactly the hick town the azure pony first assumed? After all, she only maybe ever saw the road in, the town square, and the small streets she and Twilight walked down to avoid the crowds.

Eventually, Trixie decided to tune back in to the ramblings of the lavender mare, just on an off-hoof chance she decided they should split up. By the time she became aware of the words that spewed forth from her irritating mouth, they had already arrived at the entrance to the park. "...so we should really start scanning the sky for her," the blue mare tuned in to hear. However, casting her gaze skyward, the traveling magician could see nothing but a couple of lazy clouds floating idly.

"I don't see anything," Trixie spat, annoyed by the search for the stupid blue Pegasus.

"Well, we only just started looking," Twilight replied, trying to be patient with the blue pony. "I mean, I didn't figure we would find her for some time, and we only just started searching. Don't get your mane in a knot, we'll find her event---" However, she could not finish her sentence as she suddenly became blindsided by a streak of rainbow in the sky, vanishing from her spot in an instant, only to appear at the base of a tree with the Pegasus they sought jammed into her.

"I said, 'look out,' Twilight," she spoke to her lavender friend, ignoring the other mare for the moment. "But thanks for softening my landing a bit." She chuckled a little before her rosy eyes finally settled upon the blue unicorn, narrowing as she stepped off of her friend. "What the hay are YOU still doing in town? If you've come to push my buttons, then just shove off! You know what? I'm out of here, before you even start. I don't have time for lame-o's like you!" The Pegasus spread her wings, about to take to the skies once more.

"Wait!" Twilight shouted. "Please, Rainbow, just hear her out! We had a chat last night, and I forgave her for what she said. Please, just give her a chance to talk... for me?" Trixie saw the athletic Pegasus visibly shake as she grunted in frustration.

"Fine, only for you, Twilight," she replied, slumping as she folded in her wings. "Well? Out with it, you jerk!"

Trixie took a deep breath to calm down, reminding herself that she should let the comments the rainbow Pegasus made just slide off her back. "Before we go into what happened last night, let's look at the genesis of all this hostility. I can see that my performance all those months ago made the biggest impact on you and your fragile ego, so we'll talk about that first. You see, Rainbow Dash, as a traveling magician I HAVE to overstate my abilities and boast, or else I don't get to eat and this happens," she gestured to her slender form.

"What about that stupid Ursa lie you told everypony!? Sure, making yourself look good is fine, but you don't have to be so obnoxious about it!"

"I didn't expect an Ursa to waltz up the street, I can tell you that much. However, my usual levels of boasting did not seem to impress anypony here, so I fatefully swung wild. I will admit that it was not the best idea, given the over zealousness of those two foolish unicorns. It's called 'selling yourself,' Rainbow: I have to do it in order to make a living. Twilight tells me you want to be a Wonderbolt, right? Well, like all entertainers, you will have to sell yourself to them. Being confident is a big step, but it just isn't enough, understand?"

"So..." the Pegasus trailed, "...you're telling me all the annoying boasting you did was all a part of the act? That you made up the Ursa story just so you could get ponies to pay to see your weak and pitiful magic?"

Trixie bit her lip and simply nodded her head in reply. "Although, once upon a time I did deserve my title, but that is neither here, nor there. As for my behaviour at dinner last night, I get really defensive when a pony insults me. The Great and Powerful Trixie has a sense of honour that is easily threatened, since underneath... Trixie is... well... far more sensitive then she lets on. I am sorry if I hurt anypony's feelings, but I am willing to start anew if you are willing to give me the chance to do so. Just one chance is all I ask of you."

"Fine," the Pegasus sighed after pausing to think about it for a few minutes. "However, if you put so much as a HOOOF out of line, I'll kick your flank so hard that your parents will feel it! See you later, Twi." With that, the pony zoomed off into the sky once more, leaving a trail of rainbow in her wake. Considering the pony, it was about the best response she could ever hope for; which lent some promise that perhaps Twilight knew what she was doing after all.

"One down, two to go," the lavender mare chirped as she walked away from the tree and towards the magician.

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Since they had managed to find Rainbow Dash, and got her to agree to give Trixie a second chance in record time, the purple mare decided that they had a little while to relax. To that end, she took the recovering unicorn to her favourite shop in Ponyville (and second favourite of all time, after

Pony Joe's Doughnut Emporium): Mr. Shake's Shake Shop. "Can I get a Vanilla one, please?" she asked of the shopkeeper, producing her bits. "What would you like to order, Trix?"

"Trix?" the azure mare quoted with a measure of loathing at the moniker, "TRIXIE would like a Strawberry and Hay Smoothie, with extra hay, please." She glared at the purple mare. The nickname reminded her of a time before she discovered her love of performing and her cutie mark. As a filly, her parents would often have her in ads for the snack company and was even put on a cereal box once. It was more... embarrassing than aggravating to her though, since her folks would often call her that while on the set.

Once their order had arrived, the purple pony levitated both the glasses with her magic, leading the younger unicorn outside to dine on their treats. It only served to remind her just how useless she felt without her powers: almost like she was three years old again. "I'm sorry if that upset you, Trixie," Twilight apologized, "If he called you that before, then I can see why."

"No, you just reminded Trixie of how..." she almost added 'useless' to that sentence, but decided against it before continuing, "... of how her parents called her that when I was little. You know... we've actually met... once before. That was how I knew your name without being properly introduced."

"You did?" the lavender mare asked inquisitively as they drank their drinks. "When was this? I don't remember ever meeting you."

"I'm not surprised. As the protégé to Princess Celestia, I'm sure you have met FAR more ponies than you even CARE to remember."

"Oh... so... you know?" The blue unicorn nodded her head slowly in reply. "I... I didn't want tell you because I thought that would make you madder at me. You know, since I'm so privileged and you've had to struggle. It's not that I don't trust you, but I have to keep a lot of secrets around the princess, so I'm used to it... but not when it means seeing friends suffer, as I found out."

"Oh please," Trixie scoffed, "It would be so foalish to get even madder at you over something beyond my control. Besides, I figured it out MONTHS

ago. Yes, I was pissed off at first, just as you said, but I took time to think about it and I realized something: it was better to be bested by the student of a goddess than by just a random pony. Not by a significant amount, mind you. Anyway, can I just tell the story here?"

"I'm sorry. Go right ahead."

"Well, to begin, my full name is Trixie Treats. Yes, as in 'The Treat family who owns Equestria Mills' so don't get your mane in a knot. When I was little... maybe about seven or eight, my parents were invited to the castle for tea with Princess Celestia. I didn't want to go, of course, since it was boring (especially at that age), but I had no choice since my nanny was on vacation. When we arrived, we were seated as soon as the Princess came in and had a little filly of her own trotting behind her." Twilight blushed visibly at that, for a reason the blue mare would not know.

"I was excited at first that I didn't have to suffer alone, but instead of interacting, she just... sat at the table and read books the whole time! Even as she snacked and sipped the tea, she kept reading. When the princess tried to introduce us, YOU just gave an automatic answer and left me to fend for myself. Of course, I expected as much as soon as I saw you crack open that book."

"I'm sorry about that, Trixie," the scholar frowned. "I didn't get out much then and... and I had no interest in making friends. I thought I could do just fine with only my books."

"Whatever," she replied with a measure of spite. It was so far back in the past that the pony did not care in the slightest how sorry she said she was. After finishing their drinks and conversing a little further, Twilight returned the glasses to the shop owner before coming back outside to lead her on. Their new target was the small plaza where the farmer would set up an apple stand and sell some surplus produce they had leftover from winter.

Generally speaking, the cart did a fair sum of business, but not as well as after the height of Applebucking Season, or so Twilight droned. Sadly, the distance they needed to travel was so short that she did not have the time to tune her out before they arrived at the stand to find the orange hayse--- farmer and the white bi--- unicorn standing around. "Hey, Applejack! Rarity!" cried out the librarian as they drew close, prompting a small groan

form the anxious blue mare.

"Howdy, Twilight," she spoke cheerfully before adding in a deadpan, yet irritated tone, "Trixie." Meanwhile, the other unicorn proceeded to ignore the blue one as she addressed the librarian. She did not pay much attention as the learned pony tried to convince them to at least hear her out. It was a verbal tennis match that she would rather not spectate, or else it might rile her up.

"Well, Trixie, do you have anything to say?" Twilight eventually asked.

"I suppose I do," she answered. "First, let me apologize for that show I did where I humiliated you. What you have to understand is that, as a performer, I HAVE to boast to make myself interesting. I had no intention as coming off as a braggart, but that happened anyway. As for my claim of defeating an Ursa Major, that was just because my normal levels of self-promotion were not cutting it. Now, about last night's dinner, I get rather defens---"

"Trixie," Applejack interrupted, "Shut up. We figured out as much on our own, didn't we, Rarity?" The white unicorn nodded her head in reply. "Ah mean, we had some time ta think 'bout what you said last night... an' we both realized that ya had a point. Especially when ya said that we were treatin' you like you killed one of our kin."

"Indeed," continued the white pony. "We have been most unfair to you and we can never apologize enough. All you did was bruise our egos just a little bit: it's nothing to start a vendetta over. That point aside, at least you tried to stop that horrible Ursa, even if it might have been only to protect your image. It takes courage to do something like that regardless and we failed to see that until now."

"So, if ya quit bein' such a loudmouthed braggart, ah reckon we can get past all this like it never happened."

"That and all of the useless bickering frazzles my mane to no end and I'm busy enough without having to brush it five times a day. So, do we have an accord, Trixie?" The blue mare had to think on it... for all of two seconds. If it would mean having everypony off of her back, then of course she could shelve the stupid bragging. Around them, at the very least.

"Of course, and to show you I am sincere, I would like to re-introduce myself," she spoke calmly, altering the tone of her voice so that it would not sound as smug as usual. "My name is Trixie Treats. It is a pleasure to make both of your acquaintances." With that, she stepped forward with all the grace and class she could muster and shook both set of hooves, prompting a double wave of shock to wash over the faces of all ponies present. "What?" she continued in her usual smug tone. "I'm just being polite. Did you WANT me to be rude, because I can do that at the drop of a hat, if you'd prefer!"

"Shoot, ya didn' have to be all hoity-toity about it," breathed the farmer.

"Hmm... I just had an idea!" Rarity spoke in delight after surveying the unicorn. "Fluttershy had to cancel our weekly spa visit with me, so you should come, Trixie! I mean, your mane has split ends, you have BAGS under your eyes and your coat looks tattered and unkempt! Not flattering at all, darling. I'm afraid I can't let such a crisis continue unabated!"

"I don't... really think that's the best idea... I'm flattered, but..."

"I won't take no for an answer! Don't worry, Twilight, I'll escort her home so you can have some time alone with your mother. Come along!" Try as she might to escape her alabaster clutches, Trixie was dragged down the street by her tail with a pleading look on her face. However, Twilight just stood there, dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events... before remembering to think nothing less of the Element of Generosity.

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Two hours later, after a marathon session at the Clear Waters Spa, two unicorn mares walked outside of the door, happily chatting back and forth. Trixie had to admit to herself that the spa left her feeling like a million bits. Her blue coat sparkled in the light of the sun and her mane bounced healthily as she gaited down the street. The spa ponies even threw in a free horn sharpening and buff that felt better than she could say in decent company.

Initially, she wrote off Rarity as a shallow fashion sheep. However, that was before she actually got to talk to her one-on-one. As their time inside

marched on, she came to realize that she was actually a trend setter in her own right. Not to mention that she was THE Rarity that all of the fashion magazines swooned over, leaving a distinct tinge of red upon her white cheeks when she heard the news.

A lot of misconceptions were banished in that short time frame, allowing the two mares to draw close rather quickly. While Trixie learned just how creative and deep the white mare could be, Rarity learned that her spa buddy was far more meek than she ever thought possible. Even as they walked down the street with the white mare regaling her with a story, a lesson bestowed upon the blue mare came back to her.

"Inner beauty IS the most important thing in the world, darling, but if one doesn't have outer beauty as well and goes around like a tramp, then no pony will ever respect them. I mean, you wouldn't hire a pony if they looked like filth, now would you? Besides, I like to help bring out the inner charm and character of every pony I meet. It makes them feel better about themselves. You can't tell me that you don't feel a little better then when we first stated, now can you, Trixie?"

As well, they talked about Rarity's friends, and the showmare could draw some parallels between herself and each one of them. For example, both she and Applejack were stubborn, but hard workers while both she and Rainbow were confident as all outdoors. "... and that is how I and Applejack got over our differences when our friendship first budded," she finished her story about Twilight's first sleepover, bringing the azure mare back to the present, although she hung on every word.

"I can just imagine Twilight reading that stupid book while that massive branch sat in the bedroom. I wondered where all the pine needles under the vanity came from," she giggled quietly as the mental image flashed across her mind. It may have been the scented candles, or the full-body massage, or even that strange leaf they made her eat to help her relax, but she felt as if she could sprout wings and fly off at any moment.

"Don't you feel much better by taking my advice now, darling?" The white unicorn smiled as her new friend nodded her head vigorously in reply. "Although, I think they may have given you a bit too much Blueshade since you seem a tad... giddy. Ah well, it will wear off in an hour or two and is thankfully not addictive. I must remember to give Aloe and Lotus a better tip

next week."

"Okie doki lokie," she quoted Pinkie, causing a couple of giggles to escape from Rarity as well. Eventually, the two arrived back at the library, separating to go their own ways, since the fashionable mare had put off some orders just to go to the spa. In the back of her mind, Trixie could not help but feel guilty about it all, yet she felt just too good at that moment to really care.

"Hey there, looks like that spa trip did you a world of good, Trixie," Twilight smiled as the younger mare entered the building. She and Shimmer sat at a small table while they sipped on some tea and ate some cupcakes and various light cookies. The blue unicorn practically skipped over to the table and sat down, causing them to glance at each other. "Well, you just missed mom telling me the best work story ever!"

"Oh yes, but I can re-tell it," replied the older mare. "You see, I work as a bodyguard for the Prime Minister. About late November, he was asked to see Princess Celestia. Well, when we arrived at the gate, we saw a whole slew of balloons fly out of the window. We did our best, but Princess Luna still managed to nail him in the face. After that, apparently, she glued Princess Celestia to her office chair while they discussed the situation."

Trixie giggled airily at the story, still under the influence of the herb. If the effects only lasted an hour or two, then she was going to enjoy the endless optimism and mirth while she could. The rest of the afternoon was spent with Shimmer Tail in the library, allowing the two ponies to catch up with the occasional interruption from other friends of the librarian. The azure pony happily greeted each visitor and quickly developed a minor rapport with them, thanks to the plant.

It wore off all too quickly: leaving the azure mare melancholy over her powerlessness as she sat at the dinner table just a few hours later. If Twilight noticed, she probably chalked it up to the possible side-effects since she did not say a word, even as the unicorn picked at her food. Eventually, she gave up on eating and excused herself, slowly walking upstairs and onto the balcony, having to use her muzzle to open the latch: another reminder of how pathetic she was.

The crisp evening air sent a shiver down her spine. She let out a loud

sigh, blanketing herself in a fog of her own breath. Looking up into the failing light of the day, Trixie could see the first, brightest stars begin to shine through the deep indigo of the late twilight hour. Why was she still alive? As a unicorn without a speck of magic, she had nothing to live for! She could not entertain; she could not even open most doors since she lacked practice with her hooves or teeth.

Tears began to stream from her eyes as she saw how pitiful, how helpless she was and how she imagined her master would react to seeing her this way. *"What a foal,"* the dark side of her imagination made him speak. *"You can't do any magic? None at all? How DARE you call yourself a magician, my heir... or even a unicorn at all! You might as well saw that useless horn off and live as an earth pony!"* A soft sob passed her muzzle as her spiral into a fit of depression began. That was the reason she rarely left her Great and Powerful persona: sooner or later, she would become depressed over how she failed him.

"Hey, Trixie!" called out a voice from inside. "I found that tiara I asked you about yesterday! It was... Trixie?" Twilight stepped out onto the balcony, her magic gently gripping the head dress as she heard her sob softly. "Are... are you okay?"

"Leave me alone in my misery, Twilight Sparkle," the failed magician croaked, lying on the deck with her front legs covering her face. Instead, the nosy mare walked out further onto the deck, dropping her Element of Harmony as she went to comfort the sobbing pony.

"No. Tell me what's wrong. I want to help you. If there's anything you want to get off of your back, I promise you have my ear to chew on." She expected Trixie to push her away: to tell her to mind her own business and leave her to sort things out on her own. It came as a great surprise, however, when the blue mare latched onto her and cried hard into her coat. Despite her surprise, the lavender mare wrapped a hoof gently around the sobbing pony and brought her close, to keep her warm from the early night's chill.

"I failed him!" she wailed softly into her shoulder. "I'm no magician! I'm not even a real unicorn anymore! Even if he was alive, he'd never talk to me again! I've hurt ponies instead of making them happy! I've done nothing right ever since he died! I'm just a useless waste of space that shouldn't be

alive! I don't deserve kindness, laughter or generosity towards me! I don't deserve any magic at all! I wish I was dead!"

"Shhh," the older mare soothed, gently stroking her mane with a hoof. "I once thought my life was worthless as well. However, a very wise pony told me that if I was meant to die, I would have done so already. Think of all the ponies that would miss you if you killed yourself! Surely your mom and dad love you no matter what. Then you have Pinkie and Fluttershy: they like you a lot, you know. I'm sure you also made a splash with Rarity today. Not to mention me. I could never live with myself if I let you do anything so stupid."

Trixie refused to comment; electing to remain affixed to Twilight and sob her aching heart out. It still hurt, his death, even after all those years. "He was my... he was my idol... my role model... my master... my best friend... he thought of me like a daughter... but I failed him! Not just... because I can't do... magic anymore but... because I... because I made everypony hate me... instead of fall in love with my magic!"

"Everypony makes mistakes," Twilight spoke softly, "You, Hoofdini, our mom, me... even Princess Celestia has made horrible, terrible mistakes. The... the trick is... is learning how to put that behind you... and move on. It's never too late to right a wrong. You just need to be given some love, and a chance to prove yourself. I know you refuse to see me as your sister... and I respect that decision... but I love you like a sister anyway, Trixie. Now, let's go back inside, before we catch something."

All she could do was nod at the suggestion, still crying her eyes out even as they walked back inside. She saw a shape of green in the doorway as they turned, Spike spying on them, obviously, but she was in no mood to care. "How about you tell me a story, Trixie? I'd love to learn about folklore of different towns. I've only ever been to Canterlot, here, and Appleloosa."

"Well... Trixie does know a few..."

"Can you please tell me one? It will get your mind off of how sad you are, I promise! I know a good book always does the same for me," she pleaded as they climbed up to the loft, their mom electing to sleep on a fold-out couch she had downstairs.

"Well... okay. It's worth a shot," she replied as she sat herself on the bed by the stairs, wiping the remaining tears from her eyes. "This is a story I heard in the small village of Coltsberg, on the other side of the Everfree Forest. You see... some ponies and little foals started disappearing... and they blamed a pony... a pony taller than Celestia herself... a pony who lacked a face... named Slendermane..." a small, almost invisible, smile crept upon her face as she started telling the scary story to the purple pony.

Over the course of the tale, the mare's coat turned from distinct lavender to the pale shade of her mother's coat. She clutched at the covers of her bed, eyes wide in gut-wrenching horror at her graphic depictions of the protagonist's brutal spiral into insanity. By the end of the story, she whimpered and shook in fright as the azure mare finished, "... and the very next morning, after a frantic search of the village... she was gone. Never to be heard from again. They say that if you go out into those woods, you will see ponies wearing masks just on the edges of your vision... all of them matching the descriptions... of the ponies that were taken. The End. Well, I must admit that really did the trick... good night, Twilight."

Without another word, the smirking mare blew out the candle, casting the room into darkness. She had a point, about how a good story could help her take her mind off the bad things. Trixie just hoped she had not scared her too much; little knowing the purple mare would not sleep that night. Of course, the next morning, she would make fun of the unicorn for being frightened of such a ridiculous story. Storytelling was a magic all its own.

Chapter 5

The Heir of Hoofdini

Later the next day, a curious sight presented itself to anypony who looked up into the early afternoon sky over Ponyville. It was a massive sphere with tiny wings, bobbing up and down on an erratic flight path across the breadth of the town. "Twilight?" Trixie called as she stood outside of the library, just about to go out with the others and enjoy a picnic in the park. "What the Sorrel Hells is THAT thing?"

The purple mare stepped outside and squinted her eyes to cut through the glare, trained on the object the blue unicorn pointed to. "That's Derpy Hooves. She's a mailpony and it's not very nice to call her a thing... unless you're talking about the object she's carrying."

"Well, of COURSE that is what I was talking about, you idiot!" she sighed. "Honestly, you NEED to get out more. Just the fact that you did not know immediately what I was talking about is... vexing, at best"

"Hmm," Shimmer Tail mused as she stepped outside to join her two fillies, followed by Spike who pulled a little wagon with a picnic basket and chequered blanket in it. "Looks like a cauldron to me."

"It must be going to Zecora. That would explain why she's heading for the Everfree Forest with it," Twilight reasoned before diving into yet another lecture: this time on who Zecora was and how she and her friends first met her. Trixie found it humorous how xenophobic the townsponies could be if they branded a Zebra as some sort of evil enchantress. She had encountered Zebras before in her travels and aside from the quirk of their constant rhyming she found them all quite hospitable.

Meanwhile, high in the sky overhead, the gray Pegasus wondered just how she got herself into her current predicament. Had it been stubborn pride, or was it sheer determination to show that she could be just as physical as anypony else? Either way, she felt like the mythical pony Atlas, trying to carry the universe upon her shoulders. Except, in this case it was a five hundred pound cauldron and she was struggling desperately to keep it from

slipping from her hooves.

"Derpy!" called the voice of her boss earlier that afternoon. "We have a package here for Ms Zecora. Do you think you can take it over?" The gray Pegasus gave a salute and nodded her head before trotting into the backroom for the parcel. However, her jaw hit the ground when she saw the massive, black cauldron sitting in the middle of the room. Shaking her head, the mare trotted over and sized up the item.

Eventually, a plan of attack formed. The mailmare flew up to the lip of the tub and splayed herself over it so all four of her hooves gripped it tight. Straining her wings, she picked up the wrought-iron cauldron and fluttered over to the door, only for the width of the item to impact the sides. The sudden stop made her lose her grip, causing her to fall into the huge container with a resounding 'blong.'

"Use the carriage doors, you feather brain!" her boss exclaimed after applying a hoof to his face. "Any damage on that door comes out of your pay, so move it!" Putting herself into position once more, the addled Pegasus carried the cauldron out the other door and into the wild blue yonder.

Back in the present, sweat dripped profusely from her brow, all six of her limbs aching and desperate for release from this borderline form of torture. She did not dare drop her cargo, especially over town where it could cause severe damage, or even kill somepony if it landed on top of them.

"Groundhog... cakes!" she muttered as she strained to keep aloft. The mailmare had already stopped twice to regain her strength. Besides, she had just flown over the border of the forest, meaning that her destination was only half a mile away at best.

Oh no, she thought after about ten more minutes of flying above the forest, almost at her destination. *Oh no, no, no, no, no, no! Don't Slip! Don't Slip! Don't Slip!* Her legs were slick with sweat from the exertion she put herself through, causing the smooth black iron of the huge pot to succumb to gravity despite how hard she tried to grasp it. A terrifying sound, like a hoof on a window sounded in her ears, meaning that the quarter-ton parcel was about to leave her grip.

All of a sudden, the amber-eyed Pegasus shot into the air before she could collect herself. A massive thud on the ground told her that she had lost her cargo. On the ground, a wild Manticore sat in a clearing in the woods, grooming itself after a tasty meal. Suddenly, something heavy fell on its scorpion tail, causing the appendage to lunge forward in reflex. The beast roared in agony from both the initial pain, and from the sting of its own tail.

Sure, Manticores were immune to their own poison; they would sting themselves all the time. However, the beast still became enraged beyond all rational (as far as a wild beast could go, at any rate) thought. Whatever had caused it pain was going to die! Looking up, he saw a flying pony looking down: obviously the one to hurt it.

"Uh-oh," muttered the Pegasus as she realized just what happened. The Manticore below let out a terrible, bone-chilling roar of agony and anger. It flexed its terrible, bat-like wings and focused only on the pony. Retribution would be swift and in the most primal, brutal way possible. The beast clawed at the cauldron and swatted it off with a single strike before bending his legs and springing into the air with terrible speed. Derpy Hooves was no Rainbow Dash, but she could have easily set a new record for the hundred-hoof sprint for town as the beast charged.

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"There you are, Rainbow. What took you so long?" Twilight asked as the Pegasus descended from the sky. The group had decided to meet in the town square before continuing on to the park. That meant Trixie had to stand out in the open with all of those judgmental ponies for well over ten minutes before the rest of the lavender mare's troupe of friends could meet.

The town square brought back a lot of unpleasant memories for Trixie, mostly about that night with the Ursa. Every little bit of her caravan had been swept up, and all the damage done by the beast repaired: it was as if nothing ever happened. Then again, the showmare reminded herself that the town had suffered a massive fire that was reported in most of the newspapers in the country, so most of the damage from her... episode... probably burned away.

"I took a nap after my morning stunt routine and lost track of the time. Sorry

if I left you hanging, Twi," she replied. "So are we going or not? Come on, I'm hungry!"

"Well, we all have to save room for tonight. I'm throwing Shimmer a farewell party since she has to go back to Canterlot tomorrow morning and that makes me really sad because I never really got a chance to talk much with her and she seems like a really nice pony and all, so I might ask for her address so I could send a letter an-"

"PINKIE PIE!" Rainbow shouted, annoyed by her ramblings. Trixie could not help but nod in silent gratitude, since the chromatic Pegasus seemed to be the only pony that could get the pink mare to actually shut up on command. "We know this already: you don't need to tell us again!"

"But the reader doesn't know that!" Pinkie whined.

"Pinkie," Applejack started, "Ya know we all love ya somethin' fierce, but when in the hay are you going to stop going on about that there 'reader' pony ya keep bringing up? Every time you do we get nothin' but bad news, sugarcube."

"Well, I can't help it! I'm just doing what the author says. Besides, the reader isn't a pony at all... they're some sort of hairless monkey in clothes," she chirped happily.

"Oh great, now there's another one," sighed Rarity as she held a hoof to her head. "This is getting old. Can we just move along with our picnic?" The rest of the ponies present decided to ignore Pinkie as she went on a ridiculous rambling rant. She did not seem to notice, so no harm, no foul.

Just as they were about to grab the pink party pony and move out, a grey Pegasus shot overhead, yelling about something distressing, judging by the tone. "Woo! Look at her go!" cried Rainbow in a light sense of pride and surprise at the speeding mare. "Way to go, Derpy! You show that mail who's the boss!" However, shortly after she flew over head, ponies cried out and started to stampede into the square.

"MANTICORE!" a red pony with a lily in her mane cried out as she darted past, just one of dozens screaming and running for their lives. Dust from the fleeing ponies kicked up all around them, sending the assembled

ponies (and baby dragon) into a fit of coughing. When it settled, they found themselves alone in the square, no sound other than the approaching steps of the beast present.

"Oh great!" Twilight exclaimed. "Well, considering that it's a Friday, we shouldn't be surprised. Strange stuff happens to me and my friends around Friday," she added, sensing the confusion present on Trixie's face.

"Fluttershy, can you go and try to calm it down please? Your way with animals will probably save the day without a problem, and then we can continue with our picnic."

"Oh...okay, Twilight," the Pegasus with the strawberry mane replied. "I hope it's the one we met when we went to save Equestria from Nightmare Moon. He was such a cutie and---" she cut herself short, noticing the glares from her other friends. In an instant, she knew she had said too much and continued, "I'll just... get going then."

However, she did not have far to travel as the enraged monster stomped into the square, knocking over merchant carts with every swap of his pony-sized paws. Seeing ponies in its line of sight angered it more, especially since it could not find the Pegasus that first hurt it. Other ponies had tried to stop the creature as it advanced: a wing hung limply at his side, broken. The yellow pony of the group bravely walked forward with a soothing smile plastered upon her face.

Trixie stood at the sidelines, watching in awe as the gentle Pegasus approached the horrible monster more readily than she approached the azure mare herself. Did this pony have no fear, or was it simply because the creature was not a pony, which lead to a sudden, exponential growth in confidence? She had said something about dealing with them before, and something about Nightmare Moon, but that was just some old mare's tale. It could not actually be true, could it?

At first, the creature was confused: this pony did not charge, nor did she flee from it. However, anger overrode the curiosity as a fresh wave of pain from his injured tail, backside (where the stinger struck) and wing returned two-fold. He roared fiercely, yet it would not deter the pony. "Aw, you poor thing," she spoke softly, wings flared as she approached the Manticore. "It's no wonder why you're so cranky. Now, if you'll just calm down and let me have a tiny little look, I promise that I can help make the pain go away."

The Manticore did not listen. He loosed another loud roar into her face as a final warning. The monster was not particularly hungry, but that would not stop it from biting off the stupid pony's head. Still, she kept moving towards it in spite of the obvious danger.

In the flash of an eye, the horrible Manticore raised one of its massive front paws; claws extended, and administered a sudden, powerful swipe at the yellow mare. She flew through the air, out of her own control and landed in a heap after crashing into a cart, instantly knocked unconscious from the blow to her head. Everypony gasped and cried out her name, seeing her lying in a wreck, a hoof at an odd angle with small trails of blood coming from her nose.

"Mom!" Twilight called out, suddenly realizing the situation would hardly be shrugged off. "Get Spike and Trixie out of here, now! Find some place safe for them to hide while we deal with this beast!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Trixie voiced in indignation. "Why are you tossing me into the same boat as Spike? Surely I could do something! Maybe serve as a distraction? Please! I want to assist! I want to show that I meant all I said!"

"No time to argue!" she shouted in reply as the rainbow Pegasus rushed forward in defence of her felled friend. "Besides, you don't have any magic, and you'd just get in the way!" The rest of the ponies (mostly Rarity, as she was a fellow unicorn) gasped in surprise at the revelation. This only served to aggravate the blue unicorn.

"Twilight! You promised not to tell!" the failed magician cried with some measure of hurt. "How DARE you say that I would just get in your way! I know my limits, and I wouldn't push myself more than I know I can handle!" However, as the two unicorns argued, the rainbow Pegasus had already started circling the monster at full speed, creating a tornado of rainbow to obscure its vision. She would not make the same mistake as the last time, and kept her eyes constantly glued on the beast's tail, little knowing that the appendage was not likely to flail at her.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't risk it! Now hurry up and go find them!" In the short gap of time, Shimmer Tail had done her duty and grabbed the

mischievous baby dragon by the tail before galloping away from the scene, much to his disdain.

"No! I refuse to be babysat by you anymore, Twilight Sparkle!" she spat. "I don't care how many Manticores there are! You are NOT going to shrug me off like a little foal and you will just have to accept it! As you said, we don't have TIME to argue, so I'm staying and there is NOTHING you can do about it!"

Twilight made to start an argument about how wrong and stupid she was being, but a sudden yelp and cry of "GANGWAY!!!" from Rainbow was their only warning to move, or be mowed down by the speeding pony. They all managed to avoid her just in time as she slammed into the base of the fountain; cracking it just enough to let tiny streams of water gush out and wash down her mane. The Pegasus moaned and raised a hoof to her aching head, eyes spinning in their sockets. "I think I'm going to be sick," she moaned.

In a matter of seconds, the rainbow tornado she conjured vanished from existence, revealing the very dizzy (and far angrier) Manticore behind it. As soon as it figured out what happened, it roared again, spraying saliva from beyond the sharp teeth it possessed. The ponies quickly scattered from their place as it charged. "We'll have to work together!" cried Twilight as she desperately tried to formulate a plan on the fly.

Meanwhile, the monster stopped dead in the middle of its charge, its eyes darted from pony to pony, trying to find the weakest of the group to attack first. All of a sudden, a weight hit the small of the creature's back, causing it to roar and buck wildly. The pony on its back let out a loud, "YEEHAW!" as she slipped a rope over its head. Applejack rode the beast like she would a bucking bronco at the rodeo: she figured the mythical beast would be easy pickings.

That assumption would quickly turn out to be a big mistake. The beast still had some tricks up its proverbial sleeve. It pushed through the pain and swatted at the orange filly with the stinger-tipped appendage, sending her flying off of its back and into a heap on the cobblestone street. "We got ourselves a live one!" Applejack smirked as she pulled herself up.

A soft lavender glow encased the snarling Manticore before gently lifting off

the ground. It flailed its legs in vain desperation to escape the telekinetic grasp of Twilight Sparkle and growled as it realized they had it cornered. Then Rainbow Dash, thinking their victory was assured, charged at the apparently helpless beast.

It saw its chance and capitalized on it, despite not being one of the brightest creatures around. The monster grabbed hold of her as she zoomed close, the force causing it to turn in the magical hold before releasing her, sending the Pegasus on a collision course with the mare who cast the spell. Even a Manticore could see the soft glow of working magic around a unicorn's horn.

Rainbow Dash slammed into the lavender mare, sending her flying into the fountain in the square. The sheer force of the strike cracked the base of the white-stone statue on top, making it wobble unsteadily before the loose head of the pony figure snapped off and impacted the unicorn on her skull. "Twilight!" the azure unicorn cried as the scholar slumped into the fountain. Trixie galloped across the square to find her in a small splotch of red water forming around her head, thankful her muzzle stayed above the surface of the water so she could breathe.

The Pegasus lay on her back beside Twilight, none the worse for wear besides the constant ache she felt all across her body. A soft moan sounded to her side, the lavender mare still conscious, if only just. "Come on, Pinkie! Looks like it's up to us!" cried a voice from beyond. In light of everything going on around her, the athletic flier decided at that very moment to never charge into something ever again... at least, until she forgot and did it anyway.

Pinkie Pie hopped around the attacking Manticore, defying logic (in her usual Pinkie Pie way) by not being where the monster had slammed its paws into the cobblestone. Every time it thought it squished the annoying pink pony, she popped up somewhere else, giggling. "You're not very good at this game, are you?" she asked with a sigh of disappointment after suddenly appearing on its head. "I really expected you to be a pro at this, since you guys eat moles, right? Whack-a-mole is my most favourite game EVER. Well... maybe after Pin the Tail on the Pony, or darts, but you know that I mean."

While the bubblegum mare continued to distract it, Rarity used her magic to

pull as much rope, twine and string to her as possible to make enough rope for the farmer to ensnare the rampaging monster. Everypony seemed able to contribute something to the effort, except for Trixie, who scuffed her hoof next to the fountain. They were giving their all to defend the town, but there she stood, about as useful as a woodpecker in a petrified forest.

However, the Manticore became bored with the pink pony and lunged forward like a rocket, swiping at the orange farmer. Applejack cried out in surprise before being batted into a store window, shattering all the glass and landing inside. "Hey! That wasn't very nice!" Pinkie cried before the monster seized its moment and bucked the pink pony off of its back. Her eyes spun as she lay flat by the edge of the fountain, hitting her head on the cobblestones.

All that stood between the raging monster and the rest of Ponyville at that moment was a duo of unicorn mares: one talented with precision and bringing the inner beauty out in things and the other a powerless waste of space. Trixie looked to Rarity, her eyes wild in desperation. "Well, now what do we do!?" the azure pony cried out.

"I have no idea, but we'd better do it fast!" she replied, the monster slowly approaching them.

Trixie bit her lip, trying desperately to think of something, anything, to get them out of the jam they found themselves in. She had experience in working her way out of tight spaces, but every plan required something she did not have: magic. Sure, Rarity had magic, but the blue mare did not think she could pull off any powerful illusions. It was all beginning to turn hopeless. Her mind quickly brought her back to the Ursa Incident: she could easily turn tail and abandon the town for the sake of self-preservation.

The alabaster unicorn took matters into her own hooves, as her light blue counterpart had taken the inopportune moment to space out. She turned the makeshift-rope she made for Applejack and thrust it at the approaching Manticore, hoping to tie up its legs and keep it immobile until Twilight could recover and teleport it somewhere else, or something of the like.

Ponies lay all around the failed magician, injured as they fought passionately to defend their businesses, their homes... their friends from

the rampaging beast. *"Always remember, Trixie,"* spoke an ethereal voice in the back of her mind. At first, it startled her until the foggy wisps of a memory played out in her mind.

The young mare stood on the stage of a small theatre in a town she had long-forgotten. Its stage creaked and groaned a little with each hoofstep, showing its age. Before her stood the magnificent stallion without his tophat or cape, looking down on her with a shadow of a smile. *"Always remember, Trixie,"* the stallion spoke to the tired filly. *"Magic is like any other substance in this world. It requires certain elements and conditions to run."*

"What are they, Sir?" the filly of about eleven inquired curiously.

He walked over to her, standing tall and proud over the submissive student. His soft green eyes bore holes into her, as if laying her soul bare before him. *"The first element is the easiest to acquire: imagination. If you can see it in your mind's eye, then you can make it so! But, you need some... oomph, some power behind it to get it to work: just like with anything else in life."*

"And... what is the second element?"

"It is known by many things, my young apprentice, but I prefer to call it 'The Spark. ' Other ponies call it The Spark of Friendship," he gently swatted the filly when she rolled her eyes. *"Friendship is the most powerful, most pure source of magic around. Sure, there are others, but having good friends makes a unicorn... no, anypony... more powerful than any arcane rituals or dark siphoning spells can ever hope. Do not scoff it or ignore it, or else you may find yourself faced with a challenge you cannot conquer because your magic has become so weak!"*

"All right, Sir, I won't," she replied with disinterest towards his wizened words.

"I'm being serious here, kid!" he added with a measure of annoyance in his voice. *"If you ever forget that, I swear by the creators that I'll tan your sorry hide from here to Cape Shetland!"* She winced at the sudden outburst and nodded her head more sincerely. *"Good, now let's go get some lunch. We*

have a hard evening of drills to run through."

By the time the memory finished playing out in her mind; Rarity was struggling to add more ropes and material to her restraints on the monster. It constantly bit and clawed at the bindings, becoming more enraged with every added fibre. Trixie felt tears well up in her eyes over how truly she failed her master. Even as stunned ponies around her began to stir and regain their composure, she could not see them as anything but broken and too hurt to carry on.

Despite everything she had done, these fillies extended the olive branch to her (eventually) and made Trixie feel like she belonged. Even if they did not particularly like her, since she knew she could be, well, irritating at times. Yet here they were, defending their town, each other, and even her. The azure mare had only known each of these ponies for a few days at best, but she found she wanted to help them in their plight, no matter the consequences she would incur for herself.

She had to help... her friends.

Suddenly, the azure mare's eyes went wide as a strange new feeling swept over her. It felt like a wave of pleasant warmth had washed over her cold body, like getting into a steaming bath on an icy winter's night. A fire, long dormant, ignited in her chest. It could only be 'The Spark' that he had told her about those many years ago. Trixie slowly walked over, ignoring the cries for her to turn back.

The beast had ripped away most of the restraints, the alabaster unicorn becoming too tired to maintain a decent hold on them. "Rarity," she spoke as she passed, "Let me handle this annoying little pest."

"Trixie?" moaned a slightly concussed Twilight, blood still seeping from her head wound, "What are you doing!? Get out of the---" However, looking at the younger unicorn, her jaw dropped. "No! Don't do it! This isn't worth it!" she cried out, struggling to vault over the fountain to stop the reckless magician. She had no magic, yet her horn was alight in a soft fuchsia glow.

"What's wrong?" Rainbow asked in confusion, pulling herself up to look.

"Isn't it a good thing she has her magic back?"

"Normally, yes, but I think she's using her LATENT magic!" Spying the confused look on the Pegasus, she elected to explain with the short version. "All ponies have latent magic, but only unicorns can tap it. Basically, she's using her... her soul, her spirit to fuel the spell!"

Trixie could hear her words, causing her to roll her eyes as she stood no more than five hooves from the now free monster. Twilight must have really doubted her if she thought she would do something so foalish. "I'm going to give you a single chance," she spoke to the beast, "Leave town right now, and never come back... or I'll throw you out myself!"

Naturally, the towering Manticore did not care about this new participant in the fray, for it had bested other unicorns before. The beast roared with all the ferocity and might it could muster in an attempt to make her shrink back and flee. Saliva rained forward, coating the azure mare in a thick layer of the fluid, but she did not even flinch.

The magician met the eyes of the beast, bored by the primal display of power. Still, if it wanted to play that way, then she could oblige. She puffed out her chest and took a deep breath, filling her lungs to capacity. Something big would be needed to properly scare the infuriating creature in front of her. Immediately, an idea sprung to mind, causing a jocular smirk to crack across her face just at the thought.

With her magic, she amplified and altered the pitch and tone of her voice letting out a bellowing howl that caused everypony around to drop their jaws in shock. If she were not so focused on the task at hoof, she would have joined them since it had been months since she had altered sounds. Even the beast looked a little taken aback, its face blank and eyes blinking in rapid succession. Yet, it was not properly scared. Not yet, anyway.

Trixie's body began to shimmer and cascade into an aura of soft lavender. Her matte coat began to sparkle and glisten as tiny points of light speckled her flank. Sky blue suddenly became a darker, transparent indigo, her mane and tail retreating into her body as her eyes turned red and yellow. She bubbled and twisted as she grew in size, hooves becoming paws, teeth becoming jagged, head rounding out as her horn disappeared into her head.

The magician growled to fit her new role in the play: going from the wiry thespian to the buff (okay, so it was more fat) star in one moment. She towered over the buildings of Ponyville, roaring once more in triumph over the success of her spell. In place of the small, weak little unicorn there stood a large, powerful, and angered Ursa Minor.

"Holy shoot!" exclaimed Applejack in surprise as she dragged herself out of the building, coat dotted with thin trails of blood. No pony else could move or speak at what they just bore witness to: even Twilight could never handle transformation magic on that scale!

The Manticore cast its gaze skyward at the giant Ursa, now directly under the beast's head. However, it would not go down without a fight! The foolish and injured monster jumped onto one of the tree-sized paws and started clawing and biting at the creature. The former mare casually shook the titanic appendage and sent the beast hurtling into a building, glass, stone and wood raining all around it.

Trixie rolled her eyes at the pitiful attempt to bring her down. Yet, she had to admit that maintaining the spell proved just a little more taxing than she realized. It did not matter to her in the slightest, but it might worry everypony else, so she decided she would end it quickly. After all, it had caused enough pain and bits in property damage for one day.

The blue bear reached into the ruined building and extracted the Manticore from it by the tail. She held the flailing monster up to her face and sent concussive blasts of sound hurtling towards the beast's frail form, nearly giving it a heart attack. It must have figured she was going to eat it, since it began to struggle more the closer she brought it to her drooling maw. Trixie snorted, humid breath curling its mane, and tossed the desperate creature a few hundred meters into the air.

Catching it once more by its tail, she began to twirl the beast like a flail, standing on her hind legs to give more height and distance to her throw. The creature howled and cried in desperation, blurred into a single incomprehensible noise by the forces of physics. Trixie gave a toothy smirk, the horrible Manticore reminding her of a foal's toy she used to have.

Then she let go, sending the monster flying towards the dark heart of the

Everfree Forest. It gave one final cry of fright as it flew off into the distance, becoming a speck on the horizon. Trixie gave one last roar in triumph as her body shrank and turned back into that of the pony they all knew. She reared on her hind legs, the forward ones kicking at the air as if she were running. "And DON'T you come back, lest you face The Great and Powerful Trixie once more!"

Silence permeated the square, ponies that hid themselves in their homes, or stayed on the edges of the battlefield chancing to come closer. Trixie fell forward, standing on four hooves once more as she shook some sweat from her brow. Only then did she become aware of all the eyes upon her, making the azure magician look around and blush. Twilight, the rest of the gang, and all the other ponies... even Shimmer Tail and Spike looked upon her with mouths agape.

Trixie bit her lip, unsure what would happen next. Would they hate her, dub her as evil, and chase her out of town? No normal pony could do what she had done, but they did not know it was all fake. "Um..." she trailed, looking for words, "That was a trick? I mean, it was an illusion. A very strong one, but it got rid of the Manticore. It shouldn't feel any pain... aside from what was inflicted on it before and... Um... that building is actually undamaged, so..."

Applause: thunderous, wondrous applause filled the square as everypony stamped their hooves upon the cobbled road, cheering in excitement and awe at the display of powerful magic. "Three cheers for The Great and Powerful Trixie!" shouted a colt somewhere in the crowd. "Hip-hip hooray! Hip-hip hooray! Hip-hip hooray!" everypony chimed in. It was the magician's turn to become speechless as the others came over, adding their own words of congratulations and excitement to the din.

As the crowd closed in on the azure pony, they broke out into song to the tune of 'For she's a jolly good filly.' *So that's what it takes to earn some respect around here?* she mused. *You just have to save this town, and you're considered as close as a life-long citizen.* There would be another time to ponder the phenomena. For now, she needed some rest, and her companions... her friends... needed their wounds treated.

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In the days following the fight, the azure mare felt more at home in the town of Ponyville than she did in her native Canterlot. Walking down the streets, she would get at least five ponies saying hello to her and wishing her a nice day before they moved on with their tasks. In fact, the party to send her birth mother off was twofold: to celebrate a wonderful visit and the return of Trixie's magic.

As much as she liked this new-found sense of belonging and kinship, the magician could not deny her calling. "What do you mean, you're not staying!?" Twilight cried three days after the incident. "The library is big enough to hold you... if it's because you don't want to stay here with me, we can go see the Mayor. I'm sure she'd be happy to find a place for you."

"It's not that simple," she calmly replied. "Your place is here with your books. I just... I'm not ready to be tied down to a single place. Maybe one day I'll come back to stay, but not for a long time yet. I'm a TRAVELING magician, Twilight. I can't deny my destiny."

It had been a struggle to convince her that she had to go, but eventually the learned mare caved and realized that she could not stop her, even if she tried. Trixie stood outside the edge of town the very next day, reflecting on her week and a half in the most horrible place in the world... and how it had become more precious to her than any other settlement she had ever known.

Never in her life had she felt more accepted and welcome. Sure, she always had her parents in Canterlot, but she was a grown mare and, well, the town seemed to resonate with her. So much so that the very idea of leaving tied a knot in her stomach: yet she had to move on and let the world gaze upon the NEW Great and Powerful Trixie, so they could bear witness to her awe-inspiring magic. Still, she could not deny that Ponyville had become her home.

"Are you sure you have to do this, Trixie?" Twilight asked once more as the rest of their friends arrived to see the magician off.

"Yes, Twilight. Like I said, you belong here, studying the magic of friendship for the princess. My place is upon the open road, dazzling the masses with Trixie's awesome magic!" she grinned as they groaned at her attitude.

"You just keep that ego o' yers in check, ya hear?" Applejack chided, still bandaged over her more serious wounds.

"Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!" the azure mare promised, going through the motions of the typical Pinkie Pie Swear. Speaking of the excitable mare, she swiftly appeared beside the unicorn and gave her a big hug, babbling on about something unrelated, of course.

"Now, darling," Rarity started over the din, "Just remember what I told you about inner beauty and I'm sure you won't have to worry one bit about becoming that obnoxious braggart again."

Trixie smiled and nodded her head. "None of you need to worry about Trixie. There will always be a piece of her here, so it's not like we're really parting ways."

"Well, that's good. If we hear otherwise, we're going to track you down and beat some sense into that thick skull of yours!" Rainbow added snidely. Trixie nodded her head and smiled at the rainbow Pegasus.

"I'd welcome that, actually. Creators know that The Great and Powerful Trixie needs the occasional reality check. If any of you spot my caravan during your travels, feel free to drop by. It gets... lonely out on the road sometimes. Oh, and could you all please STOP telling Trixie to watch her ego? She's not deaf and she doesn't have a memory problem. Stop squawking at her!" Most of the ponies present just rolled their eyes and shook the comment off, used to the blue mare's smugness by then.

Fluttershy nodded her head and shuffled some of the dirt around with her good front hoof. She had not spoken a word to Trixie since she heard about how she handled the Manticore, but the others had told her that they felt it might have been for the best. She just felt sorry she could not find it to tend to its injuries than anything else. "Have fun," she muttered quietly when everypony else stopped talking.

"Well... if you're really going through with this, then you forgot to pack something," Twilight spoke, pulling a purple unicorn doll out of her saddlebags. "I enchanted them with a spell I found in a book. If you whisper my name into her ear and then talk, I'll be able to hear you though mine."

She pulled out her own azure plush doll, handing off Trixie's Bella back in an exchange of telekinetic magic. "So... if you ever want to talk, we can keep in touch since you'll be moving around and the mail will have a tough time finding you."

"Thanks, Twilight," the blue unicorn spoke before gently stuffing her doll under the tarp of her wagon and inside the trunk.

"Just promise me one thing, Trixie," the lavender mare added sternly as Trixie hooked herself into the yoke of her cart, after shaking off Pinkie Pie, (quite literally) of course.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Promise me... Promise me that you'll keep safe. That... that you won't let your ego get out of hoof."

Trixie snorted, groaning in frustration over the overprotecting librarian. "Twilight, if you or anypony else mentions keeping my ego in check just one more time, I'll backhoof you from here to Canterlot!" she replied in mild annoyance. "Of course Trixie promises to keep safe. I'm not a daredevil like Rainbow and I'm not a foal either. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be going. Your suffocating kindness is making me tardy for my next performance!"

The lavender scholar nodded her head, remembering the show she had put on for the town as a way to thank them all for their new-found hospitality. The difference in quality between her performances at Ponyville was staggering. Everything seemed far more real and impressive. The azure mare wheeled her cart around, facing toward the woods down the path she came. She started slowly down the road, before deciding to speak again. "See you later... big sister."

Twilight and the rest of her friends stood at the edge of town, waving goodbye for several seconds. The lavender mare had almost not heard those last couple of words, as if she did not want anypony to hear them, but spoke them aloud anyway.

"Did she just..." Applejack voiced in recognition. However, before she could get the full thought out, the librarian interrupted her.

"Yes. Yes, she did." Twilight Sparkle smiled as she watched the magician walk off into forest. A feeling the likes of which she never experienced before flooded to the surface. For the first time, she had an idea of what it was like to have a sibling who shared a mutual respect and love for her. *I'll see you soon, little sister*, she thought as she reluctantly turned away.

Trixie trotted down the winding forest road, cart practically floating behind her as she whistled a tune she picked up in some town long ago. For the briefest of seconds, she thought she could see Hoofdini among the trees, nodding in approval over her new attitude. A smile crept upon her face as she took that as a sign she was doing the old coot proud again. For once, the future looked bright. For now she took up the title of 'The Great and Powerful Trixie' out of respect for the memory of her fallen mentor. Trixie did not need to hide anymore: not when she had ponies who thought of her as a friend. Not when she had a sister whom she loved more than anypony else in Equestria.

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## The End of The Reluctant Reunion of the Redoubtable Rabble-Rouser

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For Want of a Dawn

Chapter 1

The Pool of Midnight

A single light flickered in the encompassing blackness of the night, like an oasis of sight in a desert of blindness. Its soft orange glow bathed the small room, in defiance of the late hour. Luna's moon hung in the sky, so high that it could not be seen from the windows. However, this would not deter the soul who worked through the midnight hour, her owl's quill roughly scratching on parchment.

Indeed, it was rough work translating the book in front of her, but with every word salvaged from the fog of Old Equestrian, she found a rekindled passion for the work she started earlier that day. Twilight Sparkle had happened across the tome in question while sifting through the books that still laid under the floorboards of the Books and Branches Library. Granted, she was out of practice with the language, but with some concentration, she could tell it was an autobiography of a national hero: Stellar Stylus.

Some twelve-hundred years previous, Equestria was in conflict with Punda Milia: the Zebra nation. When neither side would listen to reason, he stepped in and brought the two sides to a mutually beneficial accord. Apparently, it was quite the achievement as one of the rulers (the actual name was censored by ages-old ink splotches) seemed hells-bent on wiping the other from the face of the planet. However, that was not nearly as exciting as the passage she found herself on.

As I slept that night, mine eyes beheld a grand vision. I remember it with more lucidity than I dare say, for it was profound, yet intimidating. In the beginning, there was naught but blackness. Not even the sound of my breath, nor the feel of mine beating heart. Yet, as I began to fear that some snake poisoned me in mine sleep, a voice strong and proud as lightning's

howl tore the oppressive blackness asunder in a tongue older than the mountains.

I became weighed down by an invisible force as a ball of light, more powerful than the sun, lit before mine eye. "Arise, my child and know me better," spake the voice unto me. I lay upon the floor as a young colt would cower from their angered parent. For, before mine eyes there was a terrible shape, wreathed in flames of pure gold. With great toil, I did rise before it; mine eyes sealed shut by the intense light.

As soon as I had done so, the shape exploded with gilded flames of power, for though I could not see, I felt the strong aura in mine very body. It startled even a heart as strong as mine with its raw clout. When it died down to brilliant embers, I opened mine eyes to find a fellow pony standing before me. He was an alicorn gilded in a glowing coat of gold, his eyes as dark as the abyss, standing tall and proud as the Princess herself. "Who are you?" I asked.

"I am the Alpha: the beginning of all things. With mine hoof, I did create the sun in the sky, and the ponies whom dwell beneath. I am Genesis," In that instance, I did know that a creator had presented themselves unto me.

"Oh exalted creator of sun and ponykind!" I cried, bowing before Him once more. "I am unworthy!"

"Thine praise is well-received, but mine time upon the Earth hath come and gone, as the tree grows and wilts. Thou doth not need place me on such a lofty dais. Yet, I have deigned fit to present myself, for thou must make an important choice. It is a choice that shall be of consequence to mine creation forevermore."

"Tell me thine will, and it shall be done, My Lord," I spoke with great respect.

"It is not my will that be done, my child," He replied, approaching where I stood. "For if it was, I would be commanding you, not offering thee a choice. Thine goal is to stop this conflict. In order to do so, thou must either betray thine values... or thine kingdom. For, you see, mine beloved Celestia has---

Twilight groaned as she flipped the page. It was dotted with ink splotches and stains over the centuries, obviously turning into a very controversial passage to warrant such blatant censoring. Sure, other pages had those marks of tampering too, but not on such a scale. The discovery railroaded any lingering motivation she had, closing the book with a shimmer of her horn. It had to be well past midnight anyway, so the librarian slowly trotted up the stairs as a memory of something she read filtered through the foggy depths of her sleepy brain.

"For the longest time, I was angry at her and the world. This led me to do unspeakable horrors and kill many innocent ponies," the phantom voice of Princess Celestia spoke. The distinct possibility that her teacher had been the one to censor the book gnawed at the back of her mind, causing her some distress. What did the book have to say about her that was so horrible as to warrant barring its knowledge to future generations?

Twilight shook the troublesome thought from her head as she slipped under the covers, leaving a window ajar so her owl friend could come inside at his leisure. She was looking too deep into things again and that only led to trouble, in her experience. Some things were better left unexplained or undiscovered. The lavender mare knew she would have been much happier, had she not delved too far into a certain book.

Still, what was done was done, or so she reminded herself as she tried to shut off her brain. Gentle wisps of sleep swept over her fatigued body, carrying her off to the world of dreams. It was pleasant at first, but slowly her dream of happy ponies and marshmallow clouds became blurry and disoriented. The pastel field she frolicked in became somber as dark clouds hung overhead.

A flash of lightning and a crack of thunder sounded, startling the mare into looking around the dreamscape in fear. The tall grass of the field bent over as the wind picked up, playing with her mane. "Why do you ignore me?" sounded an ethereal voice surrounding her. "Why do you hate me? Why are you CONVINCED that I am evil?"

"Get away from me!" Twilight cried before galloping out of the open field. Her heart pounded as she struggled to get away. No matter how fast she went, she could never quite seem to reach the edge of the forest, the clouds growing darker and the wind howling in protest.

"No," a shape appeared in front of the lavender mare, causing her to gasp in shock. "Not until I am heard!"

Suddenly, the ground lurched to a stop, the momentum of the unicorn hurtling her towards the figure as she screamed, the world going dark. The scholar awoke with a start, the moon hanging low in her window. She panted hard as cold sweat ran down her face to gather on her hoof as she wiped it away. Taking several deep breaths, the mare calmed herself down. "Stupid nightmares," she scolded into the darkness.

With a sigh, she collapsed back onto her bed, a grunt from the shadows telling her that she had accidentally disturbed her faithful assistant. She shut her eyes to try and return to the dream world, preparing her mind in advance, just in case SHE tried to interfere once more. Spike groaned, then a shuffling noise followed, telling her he was getting up to probably get a glass of water... until the sound of hooves on wood met her ears instead.

"Twilight Sparkle," quietly spoke a familiar voice. Twilight bolted upright in bed, looking to the corner of the room it came from. A pair of turquoise eyes glowed in the dark from an obscure corner as the tall, powerful form of the princess of the moon walked into the light of her domain. "I need your help."

"P-princess Luna!?" the mare gasped. She stood higher than she remembered, as tall as her teacher and just as regal. Her mane and tail wafted gently in the ethereal wind and was speckled with stars. The princess smiled and nodded her head, causing the lavender mare to lose her composure as a look of awe made itself present. However, she quickly gathered her wits and swiftly got out of bed to kneel.

"W-what are you doing here, Princess? Do you know what time it is?"

"I apologize, Twilight. I've been putting something off for far too long, and it's about time I did it. But, I can't do it alone and Tia--- Celestia is far too busy to assist. That leaves only you, as no commoner is allowed to set hoof where I need to go."

"What could I possibly do, Princess?" Twilight asked as she finally stood. "I mean, you can move the moon. I can't hope to measure up to that sort of

power."

Luna simply sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'll explain when we get there. I just need a little bit of your strength, since what needs to be done requires two of the royal bloodline."

"Well... what about Spike? How long will we be gone? Where are we going anyway?" Twilight asked, concerned that the whole situation might turn into something unexpected and drawn-out.

"We will be gone for about a day. If you need somepony to look after Spike, I will happily provide. Shadow Star?" A white Pegasus suddenly emerged from the darkness; her amber eyes sparkling as she drew closer before bowing her head in deep respect.

"What is your will, my quee--- Princess?"

Luna sighed at the moniker the Pegasus almost spoke, before gesturing for her to rise. "See that baby dragon in the basket?" she nodded in his direction. "He will need a caretaker in Twilight's absence." The unicorn gasped as the Pegasus shifted into a cloud of purple smoke, becoming a mirror-image of the librarian, down to imitating her very mannerisms. "That will not be necessary. Her friends are used to such occurrences, though you might have to be a little cautious around Rainbow Dash, for she might remember you."

"My most humble of apologies, your highness," she bowed as she shifted back into her old form. "I shall take good care of the baby dragon until your return."

"Come along, Twilight," Luna ushered her towards the door. "You need only bring yourself where we are going."

"At this time of night?" she replied in a wild tone. "My apologies, your highness, but are you CRAZY!?"

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Thankfully for Twilight, she was able to convince Luna that the whole thing, whatever it was, could wait until she had a full night's sleep. The

princess of the moon, although a touch eager to get the business out of the way, conceded to her and allowed her a night's rest. When the lavender librarian woke the next morning, the sun already beamed on her face, telling her that the hour had grown late.

After taking care of her usual morning chores, the mare trotted down the stairs to find Princess Luna, Spike, and the pony called Shadow Star seated to a late breakfast, although the third had no food in front of her place. She quirked an eye at the strange sight before seating herself and using her magic to pour some cereal into a bowl. "Twilight," Luna voiced. "Allow me to apologize for last night. As you might expect, I get a little... quick to jump into things, if only because I want to be useful."

"It's okay, your highness," the scholar yawned behind her hoof before she took her first bite of breakfast. "Still, if it could wait, why did you visit me so late last night?"

Luna lowered her head ever so slightly. "Uh... well... I asked Celestia if I could get this done... if we had the room for it in the Castle, and she said we did. In fact, she set aside a room for it and everything. So, since I'm feeling confident in my abilities again, I figured the time is right to bring it over. You see, we need to head to the old castle in the forest, since it was left behind when Celly moved the capital to Canterlot."

Twilight blushed a little at hearing her teacher be referenced to so casually before she remembered they were siblings. "So... what exactly do we need to get from the ruins, Princess?"

"I'm afraid that I can't say here. Only members of the Royal Family are to know. Normally, I'd ask Celestia to do this, but she is far too busy to take a day off, as I told you earlier."

"So why do you need Twilight if only the Royal Family can see it?" Spike inquired. The lavender mare had forgotten that she had not told ANY of her friends the news. It was not that she was ashamed of the fact that Princess Celestia was, more or less, her mother. She just did not want them to treat her differently because of it.

Princess Luna seemed to sense the conflict and worry in her eyes, swiftly coming up with a lie to cover for her. "Oh, well, we trust Twilight, Spike. She

has been my sister's student for so long and she has proven herself capable of keeping a secret. So, we agreed that she is the only other pony who can assist."

"Oh, okay," the baby dragon shrugged before continuing his breakfast, missing Twilight mouth a quick 'thank you' to the princess of the moon. She smiled slightly, but it was an uneasy smile. Luna hated lying to any pony or creature in the world, but knew that sometimes it could not be avoided. However, that was not what made her uneasy around the lavender unicorn.

After a filling breakfast, the two mares left Shadow Star and the baby dragon at the library. Walking out the door and down the street, the princess and the mare began the long trek to the ancient castle. Together, they drew a lot of interest from the other ponies in town, and even more as they all realized they were heading into the deep, dark recesses of the Everfree Forest.

Meanwhile, Twilight struggled to keep her curiosity in check over just what the princess hoped to do. Whatever it was that they were moving to Canterlot, it was obviously a very important (and quite possibly dangerous) magical object. Although, it was only one of many things buzzing around in the mare's mind as she dwelt on everything that had happened in the last twelve hours.

Even though she figured she would never say so, Twilight got the feeling that Luna was a little bit disappointed in her. Could she really be so upset just because she did not tell her friends about her relationship to the princess? Or, was there something a little bit deeper to this strange feeling? Perhaps it was something elusive, hidden just under the surface?

A nagging voice in the back of her head told her that it was only part of the issue, but that voice was one she refused to ever listen to again. Twilight shook her head discreetly, silencing the menacing phantom before she found herself at the precipice of the forest, lagging behind the regent of the moon by a considerable amount. She quickened her pace anxiously.

"Is it okay to come in here without any guards, Princess Luna?" she asked as they continued deeper into the woods.

"I am all the guard that we will require, Twilight," she answered plainly.

"However, I can understand your concern. Celestia told me that, pardon the pun, you ran afoul of a Cockatrice the last time you ventured here on your own."

"Yes," she nodded her head in reply. The silence between the two continued to fester the deeper they went in to the forest, going at a slow clip through the cursed and wicked woods. It was almost as if they were going for a pleasant stroll, rather than traversing the most dangerous part of Equestria. After many minutes of oppressive silence, she found she could take no more. "Um... Princess?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, Twilight?" the blue alicorn replied with a slight hint of impatience. A small chill ran down the purple mare's spine, as that tone of voice reminded her of the snide remarks Nightmare Moon once made. She bit her lip before braving the tension between them.

"Did I... did I do something wrong, your highness? If it's about not telling Spike... or any of my friends about my relationship with Celestia, then I'm sorry. I just... I just don't want them to treat me any differently." She bit her lip as the silence continued. At first, she thought it was because she said something wrong... until the shape of Zecroa's house came and went beyond the bushes.

"That is only a small part about what displeases me, Twilight," the regal pony finally answered after many tense minutes. "I thought you knew better than to think of your friends in such a way, but I was obviously mistaken. They like you for who YOU are, Twilight. Neither me, nor Celestia can ever claim that." It took several more minutes before the lavender librarian found the nerve to speak once more.

"It's because you were born royalty, isn't it?" she asked. "I mean, growing up, you always had the crown on your head, even if you never wore it, so ponies would still treat you as if you were better than them when you only wanted equality?"

"You are a very perceptive pony, Twilight," Luna spoke after a minute more of silence. "It does you a great service... and yet you are blinded to something far closer to you than anything else. That is why I am disappointed in you. I will not speak of this to Celestia, because I know you don't want to feel like you've failed her."

"W-what did I do?" she asked in desperation. "Just tell me, and I'll fix it! Please! I don't want to fail the princess... not again."

"Forgive me, but I saw your dreams last night. You looked troubled, and I did not want to wake you, so I took a peek. I... did not like what I saw. I won't tell you what you are doing is wrong, Twilight. It is not my place to do so. However, I will warn you... no good has ever come of a pony shunning their inner deity."

"Oh," the purple pony breathed quietly. She suddenly felt very small next to the towering alicorn, as if she were an ant next to an Ursa Major. A quiet voice in the back of her head spoke, *I told you so*. Taking a quiet breath, as if a single sound would result in divine punishment, she told the voice to shut up and go back into the depths of her brain, where it belonged.

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Talking with the princess of the night became nigh impossible, yet no matter how much she wanted to turn back in shame, she did not. Luna seemed to gather as much, as every so often, she would look back to see if Twilight had left, but she would not disappoint the princess again.

The unicorn sighed when the princess did it again, deciding to finally put an end to it. "Princess, I know you're upset with me, but I'm not going to abandon you after I promised to help you bring this thing back to Canterlot... whatever it is."

"Oh, no, it's not that, Twilight," she replied, almost chipper. "I'm just checking the local landmarks. You see, many years ago, when Equus was still the capital, there were many attempts by ponies to create villages within the confines of the forest. None were successful, as far as I can tell. Anyway, we're getting close to one of the earlier ones. I... had a lot of free time back in the day. Let's just leave it at that."

"Does this have to do with 'the dark times' as Celestia once put it?" the librarian asked.

"Yes," Luna answered simply.

"Was it really that bad?"

"There are some things better left unanswered, Twilight. All I know is that my dear sister would be VERY cross if anypony but she ever told you. Trust me, you NEVER want to see her angry. The last time she got angry at a pony, apparently fifty members of the staff needed extensive therapy in order to look at her again. Half of them quit after a year. Granted, that was about... one hundred years ago? I wouldn't know since I was..."

Silence returned between the two mares as they continued their trek to the ancient castle. Neither spoke a sound as their hooves silently made contact with the ground, the sun becoming dangerously low in the sky. It may have been the eternal night, but Twilight did not think it had taken her and her friends that long to reach the decaying ruins of the former capital. Then again, they were rushing to save Princess Celestia: not out for a leisurely stroll.

Eventually, the two mares came to a stop in the middle of the woods, no sign of anything around but trees and plants. "Sorry about the delay," Luna apologized. "My sister is beckoning me to start The Exchange. One moment please." The princess of the moon closed her eyes, her horn shimmering with a deep indigo glow that cascaded magical power all through her being.

Twilight felt the energies radiate through her, a tingle spreading from her horn all down her body. She had witnessed Princess Celestia do it on her own before, but never did she feel such a euphoric high. Time seemed to stand still for the purple mare as she was ripped from her body; waves of gentle warmth faded from the world to become a soothing chill that pierced her very core. One magical hoof raised the moon while another set the sun below the horizon. It was a subtle dance as the two magics entwined and played with the invisible fabrics of the universe.

"Twilight?" came a soft, wavy voice from beyond. It sounded anxious, yet in the haze, she could not discern who spoke to her. Eventually, she felt the need to blink, the frozen image of the standing princess replaced with her worried face, just inches from her muzzle. The librarian gave a yelp in surprise and moved back several paces, her face almost glowing red.

"Oh, good," Princess Luna smiled. "You worried me for a minute there. I

should have warned you that might happen. We could feel your presence, you know."

"I'm so sorry!" she panicked. "I couldn't help it! I just felt a strange feeling and it carried me away, but if I knew I was disturbing you I would have---" The indigo alicorn held up her hoof to silence the blabbering mare gently. A knowing smile crept upon her face, the first time she smiled at her since earlier that morning.

"It's nothing to be ashamed about. The pull of the Heavenly Wheel is quite strong if a pony doesn't expect it. Most ponies feel a little pleasant when in close proximity to us while we manipulate it, but you are not like most, dear Twilight. As a mare that has touched the Wheel herself, it is quite easy to get pulled in if you don't expect it. We did not mind, but if you don't want to succumb again, simply think about something else to distract your waking mind."

"I will, Princess," she nodded. The experience had frightened her more than she could ever imagine. For a brief instant, she felt as if she and the universe had become one. She shuddered before realizing the princess started down the forest path once more. Twilight trotted quickly to catch up, but hung back out of respect, and slight embarrassment over what just happened.

Luna sighed before another smile crept upon her face, invisible to the unicorn. "I remember," she started, "Celestia walked in on our parents while they were in the midst of The Exchange. She had the same reaction you did, except she begged for forgiveness for three days. They didn't really care about her intrusion either, but she refused to listen. I've never let her live it down." The two mares giggled softly together, the alicorn at the memory and the unicorn at the idea of her teacher being so disconcerted.

However, the mirth of the moment soon fell silent as the two passed under a blackened wooden arch. A chill ran down Twilight's spine, her breath suddenly visible in wisps of ghostly white steam. Luna could seem to sense her distress, as a wing draped over the mare's body protectively. "Do not worry. For as long as you are with me, you are safe. Try not to be scared."

A gurgling sound echoed all around them as they pushed deeper into the

thicket, the charred remains of buildings jutting out into the night sky. A clatter of unknown origin sounded in tandem with the moving of earth. A slight quiver of fear betrayed Twilight's stoic facade. Out of the blackness, shapes stirred and encircled them, drawing closer with every second. Yet, the princess seemed unafraid: she even seemed glad to see such a horrible sight! Yet, at the same time, she looked a little sad too.

"Princess Luna," spoke a deep, disturbing voice from beyond. "We are well met."

"And yet it is on such sad terms. Did the curse of the other village really extend this far?" Twilight shivered under her wing, eyes wide as the shapes approached. They were equine in appearance, yet tattered silhouettes of skinny, ratty haired ponies. What struck the most fear into her heart, however, were the eyes. They all possessed narrow slits of pure red like the hottest coals.

"Alas, it did, your highness," spoke one of the things. "For we did nothing to aid the poor filly despite being able to save her from her fate. For that, we have a share of the curse, yet we are not ignorant. Now, who is this Living you have brought into our midst?" The thing seemed to narrow its eyes at Twilight (even more so, which was saying something) in what seemed like anger.

"Oh, this is my beloved niece, Twilight Sparkle," Luna chirped. "Say hello, Twilight." The lavender mare opened her mouth to speak, but only a gurgle came from the depths of her throat as she noticed the creatures surround them. "Forgive her, Gentle Glen, for she is but a foal by our standards."

"Are you saying CELESTIA of all ponies... had a foal of her own?" breathed the creature named Gentle Glen. "I pity the stallion who courted her... or is she of illegitimate birth?"

"It's complicated," Luna replied simply with a smile and air of finality. "It is happy, but unfortunate, to see you again, my old friend. Alas, we have some business to take care of in the castle. Celestia moved the capital some nine hundred years ago, but she failed to remove an important item. Since she is still so busy, I have asked her daughter to assist."

"Very well, we wish you safe passage. Until next time, your highness,"

the pony shape bowed, the others following suit as Luna continued on, having to grip on to Twilight tightly with her wings in order to get her to move. The skeletal ponies cleared a path for the two of them, the blue alicorn not releasing her grip until they walked past all of the undead creatures. The lavender unicorn moved forward on her own, trying to push out the thought... but she could not deny it connected eerily to that one story Applebloom told her.

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"So she had an encounter with them?" Luna asked some minutes later as they neared the heart of the forest. In the time that passed, Twilight had managed to find her voice once more and told the alicorn about the time she and the filly got separated on their way back from Zecora's. "That is a most unfortunate thing: to be exposed to something so evil at such a young age."

"But... well, she said they looked normal, except for having no marks, until... until she found that one pony's body in the fireplace," the lavender mare stammered. "Why didn't they change before that? Was it really because they hoped to... to have her join their herd?"

"The Curse grants immortality, yet the ponies are forced to live the same day over and over, for all eternity. The cycle is only broken when somepony... spoils the party... yes, that's a good analogy for it. When Applebloom realized what they did to the poor filly, it shorted out the curse and revealed their true nature. The village we were in shared the same fate, until they realized their wrong. Now, they only need to wait for a chance at redemption. Of course, given how deep they are in the forest, and how typical your reaction is, that day is still far off."

Twilight looked to the dark ground, a new sense of shame drifting across her waking mind. She had judged a book by its cover again: something she swore to never do after what happened with Zecora and Derpy. Could she really be so shallow and quick to judge others, even herself? No, that was a completely different issue, for she had evidence to support her claim! That part of her was corrupt and evil: she could feel so in her heart.

"I... hate to sound like a foal, Princess," Twilight spoke some time later. "But... well, we've been walking for hours and I'm getting a little tired and

hungry. Are we there yet?"

"Actually," Luna replied with a hidden smirk. "We arrived about a minute ago. Well, within the confines of the city walls, at least. The castle is still a few minutes from here. Can you not see the ancient cobblestones under the layer of dirt, or the boulders that used to be segments of homes and businesses?" Looking around, the lavender pony could not see much of anything in the darkness of the night. Twilight shook her head in confusion.

"Oh yes, I forget that nopony has my level of night vision. Here," her horn lit with a soft yellow glow, a point of light flying from the tip to above their heads, bathing the area in a daytime glow. Twilight completely forgot about that spell: the princess created a miniature version of the sun. All of a sudden, she could see what the princess meant. Cracked stones stood row-on-row, soft moss clinging to them, anchored to the ground.

"I see them now," she replied. "I can only imagine what this place was like once upon a time." Twilight shivered a little as they walked past a tiny pond, this area of the forest vaguely familiar from the events almost a year previous. For a second, she almost considered asking the princess about the magical wings that sprouted on her body, only for the idea to be shaken from her as the alicorn spoke once more.

"Then allow me to show you how I remember it," the regent of the moon replied. A small, white and transparent bubble spread from the tip of her horn, quickly expanding past the alicorn and purple mare, before stopping some distance away. Although the forest was still visible beyond, Twilight found herself in awe of the sight before her eyes.

Soft music and cries of laughter echoed eerily through the bright streets, banners of pastel blues, reds, purples and yellows hung from wires in between buildings. The structures stood erect and proud once more within the confines of the spell, the streets immaculately groomed to be rid of even the most persistent weed. In many ways, it reminded the young mare of Canterlot, except more classical and aged.

Young fillies and colts would wander into the bubble, playing games with each other as they wove around the grown ponies. Cries of 'catch me' echoed as they blurred past, each with as much energy as three young fillies the unicorn knew quite well. Carts and shop owners sat on the main

street, trying to sell their ghostly wares, blurred by the hoof of time on the alicorn's memories.

"This place was beautiful," Twilight whispered as they walked into the town square. A large clock tower sat at the center, still keeping perfect time, even in Luna's memories. It looked remarkably familiar to the librarian, but she pushed the thought out of her mind. "Why did Princess Celestia ever move the capital to Canterlot? I mean, it's nice too, but this place is... was... quite homely."

"Canterlot represents a fresh start: an escape from the ghosts of a wicked past," Luna explained. "Although, at the time, it was merely an attempt to flush all memory of me from the mind of my sister and our subjects. She failed spectacularly, thankfully." The lavender pony nodded her head, the spell flickering from existence.

"Wait a minute," spoke the unicorn. "Where's the rope bridge? I thought the castle was on some sort of island across a crevasse?"

"You must have entered the back way from the gardens. We are going through the front door."

The once regal castle stood as a slate grey monument to another era, or like an open wound on the face of the world. Creeping vines lined the walls as the two mares pushed past the rotted doors, barely more than rusted hinges upon the stone. Any hints of a ceiling had collapsed into a moss-covered heap on the floor, grass beginning to grow from the rotted remains of wooden supports.

Luna led the way, her hooves taking her down a path she was familiar with as if it were only yesterday that she last walked the halls. Suits of armour and tapestries remained in the depths of the basement, yet to be touched by the elements. Twilight gasped in surprised as they passed by a torch that flickered to life, the magic still commanding it even in the castle's death.

Their hoof steps echoed off the hallowed walls, revealing more doors, left to hang open, or eaten away by pests like termites. It became clear to the lavender mare just how quickly the place became abandoned: as if they had to flee from a terrible threat. Eventually, the pair dove so deep into the

ruins that not even time could reach, the passages becoming more well-preserved as they went. If Twilight did not know any better, she could have sworn she was back in Canterlot, albeit in the basement, and at night.

After minutes of walking through several passages, they came before a solid wall, causing the princess to pause before it. If the young unicorn did not know any better, she would say the ancient alicorn was lost. However, the indigo glow of her horn sparkled on the wall ahead. Stone faded into steel as a door appeared before the ponies.

Actually, upon closer inspection, the door was not made of steel as the mare first thought. It carried a light blue sheen, the door itself decorated in intricate and delicate designs of flowers, leaves, ponies and the various heavenly bodies. Two large circles sat off centre, a semi circle above showing the sun and moon at forty-five degrees from vertical along the crack.

"Is... is that..." the lavender pony spoke with some trepidation. "Runite!?"

"Why yes, it is," Luna answered. "Sometimes the most elegant solutions are the simple ones, Twilight. In order to block common ponies, the creators needed a defence system to bar them entry. You see, one must get the sun and moon at their sunset position in order to open the door. To do this, a pony has to push in and twist these plates," she gestured to the two dials on the door.

"What makes the door so devilishly simple, yet effective, are three key facts. For one, the door, as you pointed out, it made of Runite, meaning a unicorn would be foolish to open the door with magic, lest they get shocked. Secondly, the plates are too high for an earth pony to reach. Finally, they require more force than a Pegasus can exert to push them in and twist them without letting go. They need to be moved in tandem, and at best, they could only move one with both hooves."

Twilight nodded in understanding, but still felt a little uneasy around the rare metal. Still, Luna smiled and reared up on her back hooves, pressing the front ones into the plates, causing a click to sound on the ancient door. Concentrating, the princess twisted her hooves in perfect unison, the figures of sun and moon moving in perfect tandem with one another as they took their positions for sunset. Clockwork inside the door ticked as the figures

and the plates moved, clinking like a well-oiled machine despite the long centuries.

As soon as the two metal representatives slid into place, the door clicked again, more gears coming to life as the door cracked open. A jet of dust and wind shot in their faces, causing the unicorn to cough and hack as the air hit her lungs. When the dust cleared, the door beyond revealed a flight of stairs leading further down, the princess standing at the threshold. "Come along, Twilight, we don't have all night."

Still rubbing some of the dust from her eyes, the pony trotted forward, past the princess who only stepped forward when the unicorn did, and with good reason, for the door slammed shut right behind her. Twilight nearly hit the ceiling in surprise, her heart beating faster than when she panicked earlier. After the younger mare finally calmed down, the two ponies descended the musty, cold steps, torches springing to life as they went.

At the bottom, there sat a small room, cracks in the ceiling revealing silvery moonlight to the relatively untouched stone. Vines, mosses and plants crept into the room, coating the ceiling in a thin layer of flora. "Hmm," Luna paused. "I thought this room would be more intact than this. I guess the preservation spell expired early. Ah well. I can see our quarry is undamaged."

There, sitting in the centre of the room was a pool of silvery liquid, sloshing about lazily of its own accord. It sat in the middle of a depression, gently sloping sides coming to an abrupt end at the edges of the liquid. It gave off a soft glow, illuminating the room completely, leaving no need for torches beyond the stairs. The pool was easily the size of the tub at Clear Waters Spa.

"This is what we are here to move. It is a mystical object made by the creators themselves to aid them in their rule, and the rule of all their descendants... including you, Twilight. This is The Pool of Midnight," Luna explained to the look of awe upon her face. A silence (aside from the occasional gurgle of the pool) filtered through the room as the obvious question dawned upon the lavender pony.

"What does it do?" asked the librarian. Never in her years had she even heard of such an object: a testament to how well the Royal Family could

keep a secret. The sheer magical power of the device seemed to radiate from the silvery and enigmatic liquid. It was not unlike the magic from the exchange, except more foreign in feel and less defined in purpose.

"This pool is... enigmatic. What it does is not clear, yet if you were to bathe in its waters, you would be washed over with an epiphany. It's hard to say how it would do this, since it changes tactics every time. Alas, we are here to move it, not to use it."

"Okay, fair enough, Princess," Twilight replied. "So, what do I need to do?" Luna dove into the explanation, going over Twilight's role in detail. Even without a shred of divinity, she could assist the proceedings. The princess would create a small pocket dimension in a bottle she brought while Twilight would slowly siphon the liquid from the pool into the container. It would be a long and painstaking process, but it had to be done this way, or else risk contaminating the magic.

Walking down the gentle slope to the edge of the pool, the purple pony felt overcome with curiosity. Luna had warned her not to touch the liquid while they worked, but she just had to understand it NOW, or she would never get another opportunity. While the princess distracted herself by creating the holding dimension in the tiny bottle, she stole a touch of the silvery liquid. It felt cool and refreshing as the tiniest part of her hoof made contact, a thin trail of the stuff still connected to the main body as she pulled away.

However, that tiny thread quickly thickened as the fluid traveled against gravity, spreading the cool sensation across her hoof. Panic gripped the unicorn as the slick mass of magic began to pick up speed, swiftly covering her whole leg. A sigh filled the room, causing the purple mare to twist her head to the alicorn, a look of weariness on her features. "I told you not to, you silly filly."

Twilight yelped as an invisible force pulled on her leg, bringing her closer to the now turbulent waters. It bubbled and groaned, splashing her with more of the liquid. "No! No! Help! Please! I'm sorry!" she cried as more tendrils of silver rushed up to her body. It was only a matter of time before the unicorn succumbed to the pull, emerging just a second later after falling in, blinded by the magical force. She let out a gurgled cry for help before being pulled under the surface once more.

Cold swept over her body, running through her like a torrent of the coldest winter breeze. She cried out in a silent scream as the liquid seemed to rip something out of her body, finding that she could no longer breathe, move or think. The darkness slowly gathered around her vision, the hopelessness of her situation crushing her resolve to remain alive. Twilight Sparkle resigned herself to her fate.

Chapter 2

The Crusaders

Everything was wrong. Her world was upside-down, backwards and inside out all at once. There was a feeling of emptiness in the pit of her stomach, as if a part of her had been stolen. She was on the verge of tears, yet they would not come. What had left her in such a sorry state? Was it her curiosity? Was this blackness her penance for meddling in the workings of the universe?

Alas, Twilight could not piece anything together. She was cold: so desperately cold, as if her bones had turned to stone and her blood into ice. Yet, she could not shiver, for the oppressing blackness squeezed her from all sides: both inside and out. She tried to scream, to call for aid: nothing happened. Was this how Luna felt on the moon? Did she feel this hopeless, alone and scared?

She floated in the void for an eternity, unable to move, speak, or breathe. All she could do was exist in the hellish dimension. A million questions flitted through her unconscious mind. Was she dead and sent to the Hells for her sins, or was she sealed in some sort of dimension by Luna for poking her nose in where it did not belong? The lavender mare tried to sob silently, reminded of the few torturous hours she spent petrified by the cockatrice. It only felt a little better than what she endured at the present.

However, in an instant, the crushing blackness was gone. Tears flowed freely from her eyes as audible sobs rocked her body. The cataract of emotions overcame the mare as she stood on wobbly hooves, her vision blurry. The beat of her heart and the ache of her lungs told her that she was not dead. Blinking, her vision returned, finding herself in the shallow basin the Pool of Midnight resided in.

Yet, it was empty. Pulling herself out of the depression in the floor, the lavender mare saw sunlight stream through the cracks in the ceiling. "Princess?" she called with a croak, for the alicorn was nowhere in sight. "Luna? W-where are you?" Twilight stumbled forwards, as if her hooves had not moved in a long time. She groaned as she picked herself up

again, barely able to stand.

With all the willpower she possessed, the unicorn pushed herself up the stairs of the room, finding a little more strength with every step, but it was still slow going. Reaching the top of the stairs, the lavender mare did a double take. The large Runite doors guarding the pool were gone, as if they had completely vanished from existence. Did Princess Luna do the job and take the doors back to Canterlot too?

But that question presented an unsettling notion. If Luna moved the pool on her own, or with Celestia's help, why did they abandon her like that? Did they think she had died and were too callous to move her body? A million more questions buzzed in her skull, each more disturbing than the last as she trudged up the stairs, trying to remember her way out of the ruins.

Progress was slow for the librarian as she walked down the ancient halls. Only then, moving at a snail's pace, did she notice just how long each segment was. Her body screamed at her from all angles: some parts in pain, others too tired to carry on, and others still screeching a need to eat and drink. Twilight licked her lips at the very thought of a bowl of cool, refreshing water, but it would have to wait until she got back to town.

At the rate she was going, she would be lucky if she did not drop dead in the middle of the forest before reaching home. Her survivalist skills were, frankly, non-existent and she did not see any body of water along the path they had taken to reach the castle. However, all thoughts of her present situation were drowned out by the most curious sound ever: laughter. It was not evil, or menacing but... mirthful and happy. The closer she got to the surface, the louder the noises became.

Granted, she needed to diverge from her memorized path, going left down a hall where she remembered going straight. However, her natural curiosity kicked into overdrive as she climbed one last flight of stairs. She could tell the laughter was coming from the other side of the door. Timidly, she wondered if being nosy was such a good idea, considering what happened the last time.

With the soft glow of her horn, the ancient door creaked open, the sight beyond causing her to gasp in shock. Beyond was the room she knew as the former resting place of the Elements of Harmony: however, there was

something different. Dozens of tents sat in the middle of the floor, camp fires all around as ponies of all types and colours wandered.

If Twilight did not know any better, she would have sworn she was sucked back in time... but it simply could not be, since the castle was still in ruins and the elements were no longer on the spindly pedestal. No pony seemed to pay her any mind as she wandered through the crowd, picking up accents from Manehattan, Trottingham, Fillydelphia and other Equestrian dialects.

Little fillies and colts played among the felled columns, buff stallions lining the walls looking out: obviously on guard for the monsters that roamed the woods. But why were they all here? How had they found this place, never mind set up some mass camping trip? The camp had the same feel as a small town, as if the ponies there had been around for a while. What was going on?

Some ponies stood in a line behind some box crates, calling out to others to peddle their wares. Some sold food stuffs like cupcakes and cookies while others offered textiles and blankets. There were even those who sold weapons like swords, flails and a strange stick with metal bits at the end. Twilight's head swam as she trotted down the worn down stones, several of the gathered ponies vaguely familiar while most others were complete strangers.

"Doughnuts! Get your tasty doughnuts here!" cried a voice she recognized over the din. What could he possibly be doing here in such a place? Twilight nearly galloped through the crowd, trying her best to not draw attention to herself, just in case she was mistaken. However, as she rounded a bend in the makeshift lane of stores, she could not deny the voice she heard.

It was Pony Joe, the owner of the best doughnut shop in Canterlot! Sure, he had a few wrinkles under his eyes and a couple of gray streaks in his mane, but there could be no denying the yellow pony. She approached cautiously, not letting excitement and curiosity get the best of her again. Another pony stopped by his box and dropped off a couple of bits for a dozen plain doughnuts, thanking him before trotting off.

"Pony Joe?" she meekly inquired as she made herself visible to him.

"Yes? What can I do for you my fine fil-" he started before stopping dead. His eyes widened and mouth dropped as he beheld the pony in front of him. "T-Twilight Sp-Sparkle?" he asked, almost begging a reply. Not knowing what else to do, she nodded her head, worried that perhaps talking to him was not the best idea. "D-do a spell. J-just one so I know for sure. Too many other unicorns have tried to coax me into giving them free doughnuts before."

"Um... okay?" she asked, backing away a little nervously. "H-how about that spell you taught me while I was in school?" Her horn glowed with a soft lavender aura as a doughnut emerged from a pack, some sugar from another cart nearby joining it. The sugar shimmered and glowed, turning a vivid pink with swirls of purple before coating itself on the pastry.

Pony Joe's eyes were as wide as saucers as he felt the magic the mare produced. Using that particular spell helped, but the feel of a unicorn's magic was unique to every pony, like their hoofprint, to put it in a perspective that an earth or Pegasus pony could understand. He had no doubts who the unicorn before him was. "Twilight Sparkle! It really IS you! Oh, Holy Celestia, be praised!"

The lavender mare yelped in surprise as the yellow unicorn lunged forward and gave her a strong, breath-stealing hug. Ponies all around them began to look and mutter between themselves. *Yep, this definitely was a mistake*, she thought as she struggled to get free of his deathly grip, making choking noises to try and accentuate her point. Thankfully, the others took notice and hurriedly pried her from his grip.

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"So... what is this place, Joe?" the curious unicorn asked. Ever since the little scene at his box, Twilight found that every pony looked upon her with a measure of awe and surprise, almost as if she was expected, yet not expected at the same time. In fact, there were even whispers that followed her as she walked with the proprietor of her favourite shop. "It looks like you're all on some sort of strange camping trip."

"Actually," he replied. "You're not far off the mark with that description, Twilight. You see, this is a refugee camp. Any pony who has decided to

flee Equestria stops by here before they continue their journeys through the forest. The army would be MAD to send ponies in here just to chase us."

"What!?" she gasped in surprise, startling a couple of other ponies. "Army? Refugee camp!? What the hay is all of this!?"

Pony Joe sighed, leading the lavender mare onward. "I can guess that you're heading back to Ponyville, right? You'll find out when you get there. I can't really say much, since I've been here since the camp opened." Twilight held a hoof to her head and moaned in pain. Now she was REALLY regretting opening that door, or touching that stupid pool in the first place.

"No! If you can, then tell me what's going on here! You owe me that much, Joe," she pleaded.

The yellow stallion bit his lower lip, not sure if telling her was the best option... until he saw the overpowering confusion in her eyes. "Well, you see, the nation is at war right now. Some ponies would rather not fight, so to avoid the penalties, they flee the country and stop here before moving on."

Hundreds of new questions flooded into her waking mind, causing the unicorn to groan as a small migraine began to overtake her. It felt as if her brain would pop if any more questions came to mind, so she restrained herself from asking how Princess Celestia and Luna could let a war happen. She dreaded hearing the answer anyway.

Thankfully, the stallion could see she was having a rough time digesting the information, so he kept every pony back as they made their way to a crude serving line that dished out wheat, hay, water, sandwiches and other food and drinks. The lavender pony's stomach purred in delight as she consumed the meal like she had not eaten a proper one in years. Looking around, however, she could tell that she was the centre of attention.

"Why is everypony staring at me?" she asked with a mild tone of annoyance. Several of them in earshot shivered visibly and others looked away quickly. In their eyes, she could see mixtures of anxiety, elation and even outright fear. Twilight put her front hooves to her head and shook it to relieve some of the pain she felt from the migraine. "I'm really confused

right now and this place isn't exactly helping. In fact, I think it's making things even worse."

"Then I suppose you should move on to Ponyville. Once you've had your fill, we'll go get an escort for you and they'll take you to town," Joe answered.

"I'd like that a lot, thank you, but..." she trailed. "I feel worn-out. Can I trouble somepony for a place to rest? I don't mind where. I just need to lie down for a while." The earlier fright from the pool was still paramount in her mind, even after all that was going on. She felt like she had died for a few minutes back there and was still spooked. The mounting confusion surrounding the existence of a refugee camp, a war and the fact that some ponies seemed to be scared, yet others happy to see her: that did not help matters.

"Sure, wait right there," Pony Joe replied, disappearing into the crowd. Twilight was exasperated and about ready to drop right then and there. Having ponies gawk at her did little to ease the foul mood she found herself in. Yet, she had the nagging suspicion that if she raised her voice, she would cause a panic. The tension around her was as thick as Applejack's patented Apple Molasses.

"Hey there!" chirped the voice of a mare. "Old Joey tells me you need a place to crash." Twilight looked up from her plate to see the pony talking to her. She was a yellow Pegasus with a mane of red and yellow flames, her eyes deep amber to compliment her coat. She looked vaguely familiar to the purple unicorn, but she just could not quite place her hoof on where.

"Yeah, but only if I'm not going to be a bother to you," she smiled at her. Looking into her eyes, the lavender mare could not shake the overpowering feeling that they had met before. Possibly a long time ago, since she met a lot of ponies with clout, but was too engrossed with her books to care most of the time. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, she decided to voice her concerns, the curiosity insatiable. "You know, you look familiar... have we met before?"

The flaming filly chuckled at the lavender mare. "It was a quite while ago, but yeah, although we were never introduced. It also doesn't hurt that I'm a Wonderbolt. Well... used to be one, anyway. My name's Spitfire. It's nice to

finally meet you, Twilight. Pony Joe told me who you were."

"Oh yeah!" Twilight realized before chuckling a little herself as she shook her hoof. "Sorry I didn't recognize you. I'm not a Pegasus and I don't really get out much, but I should have realized from the way Rainbow Dash kept raving about you. You're her idol, you know? ...wait, you mean you're not a Wonderbolt anymore? Poor Rainbow, she'll be crushed when she finds out."

The smile on the orange Pegasus vanished at the very mention of the sky-blue friend's name, only to turn into a frown the second time. "Y-yeah... I... wouldn't worry much about that. If you want, I can also escort you to town when you're rested." Twilight tilted her head at the sudden drop in her chipper mood, but she was too overwhelmed and feeling too much like pony plop to investigate further.

"If it's not too much trouble," the librarian started, pushing her finished plate away, "The last few hours have been a bit hectic for me, and I'd like nothing more than to sleep for a while. No offence, but everything I've been hearing and seeing so far is a bit... overpowering and I... just need time to set myself right."

"Well, come on then," Spitfire added in a monotone, gesturing for her to follow. Twilight frowned a little at her sudden lackluster attitude. Had she said something wrong? However, her fatigue quickly caught up with her, the siren's call of a soft, warm bed leading her on to follow in the acrobatic Pegasus' steps. Eventually, she was lead to a small, green tent near the pedestal where the elements once rested.

Ducking her head inside, she found accommodations fairly Spartan. Although, considering what she had heard (and she still thought it might have been an error on her part) than that would explain why such a famous Pegasus carried so little with her. Still, the tent had a sleeping bag (embezzled with the Wonderbolts emblem on it, no less) and any port would do in a storm. Using her magic, she unzipped the zipper and lay down inside, only managing to zip it back up before she passed out.

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"Are you sure this is a good idea?" spoke a voice, a young colt, from the

midst of the darkness. "I mean, if we piss her off... well... you know what happened to Ponyville."

"Oh please," spoke a filly. "Just because she freaks out one time doesn't mean she's a ticking time bomb set to destroy everything around her... I hope."

"Ah-ha!" the colt whispered in triumph. "So you ARE scared. I, however, am not. I mean, if even HALF the rumours about her are true, it's not like she could get away, right?"

"Then why are you shaking?" Twilight had to suppress the urge to groan and roll over away from the noises the two intruders made. Obviously, privacy was too much to ask for in this tent, but she could not deny that she felt rested and relaxed, even if she did not have any dreams. Yet, she kept her ears peeled on the two young ponies in her tent.

They had mentioned rumours and the incident in Ponyville. What sort of rumours were flying around about her? She never really left the town after she came back from Canterlot almost a year ago and her only real contact with the outside world was Trixie. Could ponies of other towns be calling her a demon? How did they even know her part in the Ponyville Fire anyway? Did somepony talk about it while visiting abroad?

The unicorn opened her eyes and stretched in the sleeping bag, the din caused by the two ponies suddenly silenced. With her magic, she unzipped the sleeping back and rolled off of her side before standing on shaky legs. Her eyes beheld the two ponies standing beside her. They were little foals, not even of the age to have their marks yet. The earth pony colt had a dirty brown coat, hay-coloured hair and soft jade eyes. Meanwhile, his friend was a blue unicorn filly with a bubblegum pink mane and hazel eyes.

Both looked upon her with greater fear than she ever thought possible. Her initial annoyance was submerged beneath a wave of concern. If the grown ponies were scared, then of course their foals would be downright terrified of her. "Are you two okay?" she asked softly. "I don't bite. I'm not mad that you snuck into the tent. Please, if there is anything wrong, tell me. I want to help."

Yet, they still stared, mouths agape as the occasional shiver of fear

passed over them. They stood frozen in place, as if petrified by a cockatrice, or as if they came face-to-face with an Ursa Major. "Um..." she trailed, trying to start anew. "Can you tell me your names? I'd like to be able to address you by name." Twilight let off a frustrated sigh as they continued to stay frozen in front of her gaze. So, she did the logical thing and turned her head away.

"How about now?" she asked the opposite wall of the tent. "Can you talk to me and imagine I'm somepony else?"

"I had a feeling you two would be here. You're parents have been worried sick about you," Spitfire chuckled as she leaned her head into the tent. "Glad to see you're up, Twilight. We'll head out after breakfast, if you want."

"Sure, that sounds like a plan to me," the librarian smiled before looking at the two stunned foals. "Are they okay? They look like they've seen a ghost or something." Spitfire seemed to frown at the remark, as if trying to choose her next words very carefully. Everypony seemed to be trotting lightly around her, almost like she was infected with a disease they all knew about, but refused to tell her. To that end, the unicorn cast a quick glance at a mirror on the small dresser and surveyed herself, pondering if she touched any Poison Joke.

Aside from the usual bed mane, there was nothing unusual. She shook her head: all this worrying was doing nothing to help. "They're fine," the stunt flier finally replied. "Just a little nosey is all. Come on: let's go get something to eat."

Twilight followed her out of the tent, the two foals galloping away together to find their parents. The makeshift streets were not more than two or three pony lengths across and left little room to navigate around the tents, big cracks in the floor, and other ponies. There had to be at least a quarter of the population of Ponyville jammed into the former foyer, all there for reasons that still eluded the purple mare.

What really confused and aggravated the librarian, however, was the wake of fear that followed her around. She had her suspicions, but the chatting little ponies in her tent earlier confirmed it: they were afraid of her because of what she had done in her hometown almost a year previous. She let out a sad sigh as she entered the line for breakfast, taking only

some cereal before she and Spitfire seated themselves at a box for two.

Yet, having ponies afraid of her was the least important thing on her mind. She unconsciously played with her food, spinning it in a circle, the white milk reminding her of The Pool of Midnight. What exactly happened to her? Did she really die? Was this some sort of personal hell for the sins she committed: for her curiosity and nearly murdering two goddesses? Occasionally, she lifted her spoon with her magic and partook of the breakfast with some unease. If she was dead, then how come she needed to eat and sleep?

Spitfire found Twilight's troubled expression comforting: she would hold off on conversation until she had a chance to eat. Sparkle was either a terrific actor, or she honestly had no clue what the Sorrel Hells was going on around her. In a way, it eased her concerns about the purple pony, yet piled on more to the pile. If THAT rumour proved to be untrue... then what was really going on?

Eventually, the Pegasus grew bored with the silence and decided to reach out to her: give her the benefit of a doubt. "I can understand why you might be confused, Twilight," she spoke softly. "Everypony here is just as confused as you are, but they are also scared and easy to panic. Just try not to think about it. Not until you get the answers you need."

"Hmm?" Twilight looked up from her cereal, confused for a moment before she registered what was said. "Oh. Well, I suppose you're right, Spitfire. No good has ever come of me getting worked up over something small. That's... well, it helped lead up to the fire in Ponyville. I read something, got distressed over it and went crazy for a little while. I see and hear things when I get too stressed out, you see."

"But, um..." the lavender mare trailed. "Can I ask... why aren't you a Wonderbolt anymore?"

The Pegasus did not answer, choosing to finish her breakfast instead. In a way, it was good to see her so open to talking about what happened on that day. It dispelled some of the worries the Pegasus had, but not quite all of them. There was a good reason that the ponies of the camp feared her, but hopefully her presence would dispel them once and for all.

"I'd... rather not talk about it, Twilight," she answered. "It's... a rather painful memory for me. I hope you understand."

After a few minutes of silence, the two mares picked up their empty bowls and returned them before heading to the doors of the ruins. Spitfire nodded to the two burly Pegasus guards before they let her and the purple unicorn pass with a flick of their wings. Twilight could not shake the feeling that the guards were watching her intensely until the two mares vanished into the thicket of the woods.

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Thankfully, the walk back to Ponyville was uneventful for the two mares as they traversed the dangerous woods. During the walk (or slow flight for the Pegasus) Spitfire told the lavender pony about how they had a whole system of safe passages throughout the forest. Well, as safe as they could get, considering the various threats that the trees held secret.

Twilight let out an audible sigh of relief the minute she stepped out of the thicket and onto the groomed grass of the park. It felt so nice to have something soft underhoof once more, causing her to trot forward to enjoy the sensation. However, looking back, she saw the Pegasus give her a nod and a smile before retreating into the forest once more. The unicorn could not deny her disappointment, since she was just about to invite her for tea at the library.

Although she wanted to turn back to extend the invitation, she thought better of it. Judging from the pain when she first woke up, she had been gone from town for days, maybe even on the order of a week. Therefore, informing her faithful assistant and all of her friends that she was safe and sound was top priority. Besides, she knew where she could find her, and had a general idea about how to get back.

A smile crept upon her face as she walked into town, ignoring the overcast sky. Gloomy days always made her more thankful when the Pegasus ponies would schedule clear skies and pleasant weather later on. However, the closer she got to the town, the more a nagging worry in the back of her mind told her that something was not right: almost as if the town was missing something... important.

Still, she could tell who that nagging voice was and quickly suppressed it. She would not be made a fool of just because she listened to THAT voice and got paranoid around everypony. Approaching her library, however, a frown spread across her muzzle as she found the place dark. Spike obviously decided to take her absence as an excuse to close it down for the day. She would have strong words for him when she found the mischievous baby dragon.

With a flick of her magic, the door refused to budge, locked up tight in a bid to keep ponies out. Twilight groaned with frustration: she was really going to let Spike have it when she got inside. Concentrating hard, the mare turned the bolt, latch and key mechanism on the door, allowing it to open with a gentle, but strange creak. *He didn't even oil the door?* she thought as she stepped into the blackness. *Now he's in BIG trouble.*

"Spike!?" she called out into the darkness, to no reply. "SPIKE! I'm really disappointed in you, mister. Just because I was gone for a little longer than I expected gives you no right to lock up. This is a LIBRARY, meaning that other ponies are entitled to come here an-" Igniting the lantern, shock waves ran through her body, causing her jaw to drop and her blood to run cold.

Books lay everywhere: scattered as if Rainbow had made a tornado in the library. What disturbed her most, however, was the thick and oppressive layer of dust on most of them, and all the spider webs that went between the stacks. It was as if nopony had touched the place in YEARS. "Spike?" she called out in quiet desperation. The confusion she felt with the campers in the ancient castle had suddenly been bested by the state of her library.

Walking forward, she found a small circle free of books in the middle of the library surrounding an open one propped up using a stack of books behind it: the way she usually did when she was studying. The pages were caked with dust, but, with a gentle wipe of her hoof, the words became clear.

The Golem is, by far, the most complicated artificially created creature in all history. It can come in any shape, size, or appearance and is nigh indestructible with careful construction. At the same time, they can perfectly mimic equine emotions, language and expressions simply by exposure to

them. If it weren't for their distinct appearance, a pony could easily mistake a Golem for a living, perfectly natural creature.

Twilight snapped the book shut: her eyes wild and mind awash in confusion. What was her copy of *Magical Automations* doing out here like that? Why was it open to that page in particular and more importantly, why was everything caked in dust? She let out a cry of anguish, her magic sparking to life as the windows opened and a gust of wind picked up, flushing all the dust out of the air as books whizzed past, putting themselves in proper order on the shelves.

Panting, the unicorn ran into the kitchen to find all the cupboards and the icebox bare. Groaning, she ran up the stairs to find her bed unkempt and the box under it missing her Element of Magic tiara. Flashing her horn again, the books on the second floor flew off the shelves, the unicorn desperate for answers. "WHAT THE SORREL HELLS IS GOING ON AROUND HERE!" she screamed after an hour of frantic searching for a clue.

Taking several deep breaths, the unicorn calmly replaced the books on the shelves and walked downstairs to the now immaculate library. A couple of ponies poked their heads inside, curious about what all the commotion was about. Twilight smiled at them as best she could, for despite being confused and irritated she had a job to do. "Welcome to the Books and Branches Library. How can I help you today?" she greeted.

Both ponies looked to her and the cleared library before screaming and madly galloping away. The lavender mare could not help but groan and affix a hoof to her face in frustration. What the hay was everypony's problem!? After turning out the lights and shutting the door, the librarian left her home and decided that it would be most expedient to hunt down Spike. He probably stayed with Rarity or Applejack when Luna came back without her. Worst case scenario: she took him back to Canterlot.

Yet something troubled her in the back of her mind: something that told her that she had seen that particular mess in the library before, but not as dusty. Setting course for Sweet Apple Acres, she decided to push the thought out of her mind: Applejack would be sure to tell her just how long she had been gone and what exactly was happening all around her. She just had to!

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Leaving the city limits, Twilight beheld a sight that made her groan in frustration. Her hooves clicked upon the surface of a cobblestone road, but the road to Sweet Apple Acres had always been unpaved. Since when did the city or the Apple family purchase a new road to link the farm with the community? If the sight at the library told her anything, it was that whatever happened with the Pool of Midnight made her lose more time than just a few hours or days.

In fact, as she walked the city streets just a few minutes ago, ponies she knew as fillies and colts looked almost completely grown! Of course, the townsp ponies of Ponyville tended to resemble one another, so she prayed she was mistaken. Perhaps, just perhaps it was all some sort of illusion brought about by unconscious stress?

Sadly, the very notion that she could be unconsciously stressed threw her for a loop. If she could experience such a thing, who was to say she did not hallucinate all the time and not even know it? Could everything around her just be the result of another attempt by her golem nature to make her out as a monster? Or was there something much more sinister lurking in the depths? She had no idea if SHE could be responsible, but the unicorn would not put it past her to try something like that for the attention.

"Okay, I'm on to you," she thought aloud as she walked down the wooded path. "Obviously you're messing around with me. Well, I'm not going to let you do it this time. I now know that I can't trust any of my senses, so your little game is at an end." However, most distressing of all, there came no reply from the little voice in the back of her head. In fact, she had not heard a peep out of her after she woke up in the basin of the pool.

"Fine, be that way," she finished, the gates to Sweet Apple Acres in sight. Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, she might find a clue to where the baby dragon was. However, as she drew closer to the hanging sign over the arch, she saw a newer, whiter sign hanging under it, reading, 'Authorized Ponies Only!' Obviously, Applejack got tired of strangers wandering onto her farm, so she added a little written warning.

Since she was a good friend of the workhorse, she promptly ignored the

sign. The cobbles turned back into soft dirt, which soothed the librarian's nerves just a little bit. It looked like that voice finally got the message and stayed in the darker recesses of her brain where it rightfully belonged. Twilight inhaled the enticing scent of fresh apples hanging on the trees. If she did not know that Applejack had a sore spot for ponies helping themselves, she would have done so.

Resisting temptation, the mare happily trotted up the winding road to the Apple family homestead, looking around occasionally to see if she could catch AJ in the middle of bucking a tree. It annoyed her sometimes, but she was always ready to do her best to aid a friend. If any pony needed help right in that instant, it would be Twilight. However, she did not expect the sight that awaited her around the next bend.

Ponies were hard at work bucking the apple trees and tending to other plants the farm grew, if only to not be so specialized if the bottom ever fell out of apples. Not a single member of the Apple family was out in the fields: not even little Applebloom or Granny Smith. Thankfully, the lavender mare recognized many of the present workers as citizens of Ponyville. Obviously, they finally decided to get some help around the farm.

One of the mares working had a yellow coat and orange mane with the mark of a carrot on her flank. This surprised Twilight a little bit, since she thought she made a living off of selling her home-grown carrots in the market. The scholar quietly approached the pony, who was rigging herself up to a big plough, before greeting her. "Hi, Carrot Top," she smiled. "What are you doing here? I thought you grew your own crops?"

To say the yellow mare jumped, once she saw who spoke to her, would be about as big an understatement as saying Nightmare Moon was not nice. A look of sheer terror raced across her features, causing her to babble incoherently. "Um..." Twilight trailed, "Are you okay? I mean, do you need a glass of water, or a break or something?"

"No!" she cried suddenly, tears welling up in her eyes. "I'll do it! I'll do it! Just please, don't! PLEASE! I... I can do the work, just like I said!" The lavender mare felt her mouth open in surprise, having no clue in the slightest what the skittish mare was talking about. However, before she could close her mouth, the orange mare raced down the field with the plough in tow. Twilight did not know for sure, but she could have sworn she

beat the all-time record for ploughing a field.

With that... interesting meeting out of the way, she continued on to the farmhouse on the top of the nearby hill. Strangely absent was the wafting smell of baked apple pies cooling on the window sill. Then again, it might prove a distraction for the workers, so she paid it no real attention. Also absent, she noted, was Granny Smith's rocking chair from the porch. She did a double take to make sure she was seeing things right before she opened the door with her magic.

Inside, several colts and stallions sat behind desks, writing out reports and giving orders to workers on the field through some magical horn on the wall. It took them many moments for the staff (no pony she recognized among them) to acknowledge her existence. When they did, everything ground to a halt: all eyes upon her, widened in that usual look of terror she found herself disturbingly becoming accustomed to.

"What the hay is going on down there!?" called the gruff voice of a stallion from upstairs. He was an older colt with a slate grey coat and a greying black mane. Twilight gasped the instant she recognized him as Brittle Lullaby: the former director of the Foal Protection Services. "You! What are you doing here, Missy? Are you a new hired hoof?" The mare shook her head 'no,' more surprised that he did not recognize her on the spot.

"I'm looking for Applejack. Have you seen her around?" she managed to voice.

"Applejack!? Do I look like I associate with wanted felons, Missy?" he answered impatiently. "You're on government property! If you have no business here, then kindly get the buck out before I have you arrested for trespassing!"

"W-wanted felon!? G-government property!?" she needed answers right then and there. However, before she could demand them, two burly earth pony stallions flanked her and shoved her out the door. Her mind reeled as they roughly escorted her off the farm, too wrapped up in thought to be able to form a coherent sentence. The stallions shoved her beyond the arch, forcing her to the ground before shutting the gate.

"Sorry about the roughhousing, ma'am," one of them apologized. "We're

just acting under orders. Please, don't come back, or else you'll get the boss really upset." With that, they turned away, leaving the mare to pick herself up and dust off the dirt on the cobblestone street. All concepts of the situation being an illusion vanished from her mind in that instance. If SHE really wanted to upset Twilight, she would have done something less subtle to Applejack than make her a wanted criminal!

Her mind groaned desperately as she tried to figure out what the hay was going on around her. She ruled out being dead, and she ruled out a psychotic episode brought about by stress (either conscious or subconscious). So, what exactly did that leave? Eliminate all the possibilities and whatever remained, however unlikely, must be the truth! Or so Shetland Stables, her favourite fictional detective, would reason.

Ah well, it was unlikely she was going to find Spike at Sweet Apple Acres anyway. Although this new information disturbed her, she needed to find her draconic assistant so she could write to Princess Celestia and ask what was going on. If anypony had answers, it would be her, and she would be happy to oblige her star student, the pony she created with her own hooves and magic.

Down the path to town, she decided to take a detour through the meadow Fluttershy lived in before heading to Carousel Boutique. She could have used some of the gentle Pegasus' homemade lemon tea at that moment, since it always managed to calm her nerves down, even during the height of her last episode. However, the closer she got to the burrow of a home, the sooner she realized it too lay abandoned, just like her library.

Through the glass she could see traces of vines and dirt on the floor, tracked in from wild animals as they scampered about. Everything was dark and dusty where wood had not began to rot, holes in the ceiling exposing the interior to the elements. Even the bird houses and little docks looked dilapidated. Worst of all, Angel was nowhere to be seen either, which served as the crippling blow to all hopes Twilight had that she still was in the area.

Sighing, the lavender mare started back on course to her new destination. Rarity would surely never abandon her boutique, nor would she do something to be labelled as a criminal... except for that time she assaulted Prince Blueblood, but that was an isolated incident. Although the

princess wrote that she personally stopped him from pressing charges, now that she thought about it.

Twilight shook her head again, causing stars to dance across her vision as she did it with a little more vigour than she intended. Pausing for a break, she noticed the spire of the boutique peak over the trees and other buildings that lined the edge of the town. She quickened her pace to a light canter in order to see Rarity all the faster. However, she stopped dead as soon as the door became visible.

The lights inside were dark and some of the windows boarded up, other smashed in. Yet, the thing that really upset Twilight the most was the blatant graffiti upon the wall of the once pristine building. All sorts of colours and violent symbols covered the alabaster walls, painting it a sickening slurry of colours that would make even the athletic Pegasus sick.

As well, slogans adorned the graffiti, phrases like 'Buck the Queen!' and 'The Crusaders 4ever!' blanketed over most of the filth that was the lower floor. The unicorn found she could not move or think. Three of her friends were nowhere to be seen, leaving no trace or clue of where they could have gone behind. It was almost as if these buildings were a metaphor for how she felt in that instant: abandoned and dilapidated.

"Twilight!" came an excited scream and a blur of greyish-purple. The unicorn was blindsided by an invisible force, upon the grass before she even knew it. A crushing force rested on her ribcage, restricting her breathing to an uncomfortable degree. She tried to call out in aid, yet she could not speak, for the air had been stolen from her lungs.

"Get off of her, or you'll kill her, you dodo!" spoke a second voice, chastising the blur. The first voice giggled sheepishly and apologized, getting off of the lavender mare as swiftly as she descended upon her. Twilight picked herself off the ground and groaned in pain, shaking her head as a vision of four mares appeared before her.

One was an orange Pegasus with a mane a little deeper in colour than the librarian's coat. In front of her stood a purplish-grey unicorn with a blond mane, flanked by two others. On her right was a second unicorn, this time with an alabaster coat and a two-tone mane of light purple and pink. On her left, there sat a grinning yellow earth pony with a rosy mane and a tattered

(and slightly burned) Stetson on her head.

"G-girls!?" Twilight gasped at the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Each one stood equal to her in height, no longer little fillies, but fully-grown (if still young) mares! Tears began to well up in her eyes as she realized just how long she must have been gone for. "Oh, Sweet Celestia," she breathed as realization hit, causing her to fall to her haunches. She ran a hoof up to her head, mind swimming at all the implications this had.

"Ah told ya she'd take it a mite hard," Applebloom sighed. "Remember ah said she'd be like this when she came home?"

"... When who'd be like what?" Sweetie Belle asked. The rest of the mares groaned and applied hooves to their faces.

"Don't worry about it, Sweetie," Dinky Hooves sighed. "She said it when we first created the Crusaders, so it's not that bad if you forgot about it."

"Still, I'm not surprised. You'd forget your horn if it weren't glued to your head!" Scootaloo remarked. "Now, that only leaves YOU, Twilight Sparkle! What the Sorrel Hells gives you the right to run off like you did!? WHY DID YOU ABANDON US FOR ALL THIS TIME!?"

"Girls!" Twilight cried out, snapping herself out of the dizzy spell. "What happened here? You're the only ponies who recognize me, but don't run off screaming! I have no clue where most of my friends are, and I'm confused as all hells as to what is going on! Don't you DARE yell at me like this is all my fault!"

The mares looked between each other apprehensively, not quite expecting that reaction from their first confrontation. They communicated in silence, speaking only with their eyes before turning to the lavender pony, sympathy etched on their features. They all nodded in agreement, before Sweetie Belle spoke, "You'd better come with us, Twilight."

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Surrounded by the four mares, Twilight found herself being led through the streets of Ponyville, able to quickly discern their destination as Sugarcube Corner. As they walked, however, the librarian found herself

curious and looked at their flanks. Surely, if this was all a bad dream, or hallucination, they would not have their marks yet.

However, upon inspection, she found that they did indeed earn them. Sweetie Belles' had always been the most obvious talent of the group and her flank reflected it with a large blue songbird with a musical note in front of its beak. Scootaloo, however, had a flaming scooter on hers that matched hers to a tee, although it was quite the sight to see the Pegasus flying... and so comfortable around her. Applebloom's mark, meanwhile, was that of a hammer covered by an apple blossom, almost obscuring the hammer itself from sight. Finally, and most enigmatic of all was Dinky's mark. It looked like a spider web connected with bubbles, but absent a spider.

As much as she gave attention to their marks, they gave equal scrutiny to hers, even going as far as to touch and rub her flank. "Girls, what are you doing!?" she blushed when they started on her. "That's not a very appropriate place to touch, especially in public!"

"Sorry, Twi," Applebloom apologized, pulling her hoof away. "We just had to make sure it wasn't a sticker or something. Sure, we know magic can't change or make a Cutie Mark appear, but that don't stop ponies from tryin' to alter them with other means!"

"It's a security thing, Twilight," Dinky explained. "Your mark is similar to another pony's is all. You'll... find out sooner or later that there are, well, rumours about you."

"I know there are. I overheard some ponies talking while at that camp in the Everfree Forest," Twilight explained. "I just don't know WHAT they are."

"It won't take long for you to hear them. Just trust us, and we'll tell you... after we explain some things. For now, just keep quiet," Sweetie Belle spoke as they walked up the steps into the bakery.

Sugarcube Corner was just how the librarian left it, although maybe not quite as lively and mirthful as it once was. Twilight felt compelled to ask, even if she had a suspicion what the answer might be. "Is Pinkie still..." They all shook their heads 'no.' "Well, do you know whe--" Again, they shook their heads. Twilight bit her lip as Mr and Mrs Cake came into sight,

ignoring the five mares quite blatantly.

Sweetie Belle stepped forward to a specific place on the floor, tapping her hooves on the ground in a rhythm the librarian was unfamiliar with. At first, she had no idea why she would do such a thing, until the floor in front of her sparkled and glowed, the floorboards vanished as a stone staircase appeared in front of them. They had to nudge her forward at first, but Twilight swiftly followed the white unicorn down the proverbial rabbit hole.

The corridor was narrow and dark, winding down in a spiral deep into the bowels of the earth. Applebloom quickly took the lead and deactivated traps she had constructed along the way. Their hoofsteps echoed off of the walls as they made their way down the sloping passage. Upon reaching the bottom, the passage widened greatly, branching off down other halls, each lined with dozens of doors.

Twisting and turning down several passages, the five mares found themselves before a set of wooden double doors. No latch or knob was visible, and she could see hints of Mythril on the surface of the door, meaning magic would not open it. Where Runite would hurt a pony that used magic near it, Mythril would absorb and dispel it in a purple glow. She looked to each of the other ponies, none of them making a move. "So... now what?" Twilight asked.

"Oh, right!" Scootaloo spoke. "Dinky and Sweetie enchanted the door so that it will only open for eleven ponies. You're one of them. All you have to do is walk up to it, and place your hoof on the door for it to open!"

"Oh...kay," she trailed. Twilight approached the door with some apprehension, placing her hoof on a strange symbol: a rearing earth pony filly on an elegant background. As soon as she placed it, a buzz rang through the stone hall, a click allowing the door to move under the pressure she exerted. The lavender mare gasped as the doors opened, a single large torch illuminating the room.

A large circular table sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by eleven chairs, each piece of furniture made of highly polished black wood. On the opposite wall, there hung a map of Equestria, dotted with drawings of various colours, arrows, and symbols to represent things that eluded her. However, upon the chairs, she could not help but notice that each was

topped by a symbol.

Three diamonds, three apples, three butterflies, a cloud with a bolt of lightning, three balloons, a six-point star surrounded by five smaller ones, a star-tipped wand against a crescent moon, a flaming scooter, an apple blossom in front of a hammer and a songbird with a note near its beak. However, the final chair had a two-fold symbol: a string of seven bubbles with a web of several connected bubbles underneath. Each chair represented a Cutie Mark of one of her friends, one of the Crusaders, or her sister.

In front of each spot sat a small raised semi circle, with a larger one in the middle of the table. The other mares took their seats in their respective chars, Twilight sitting at hers after brushing the dust off with her tail. "Let's start at the beginning," Dinky broke the silence. "When you left Ponyville, after you discovered that you are a golem, Equestria fell on some rather hard times. You see, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna disappeared and in their place, a new Alicorn ascended to the throne."

"And... nopony has seen me since?" Twilight asked: her eyes wide in horror. How did they even know she was a golem? Only her six closest friends ever knew about it! "Wait... how do you know I'm a..."

"Our sisters and their friends told us," Applebloom chimed in.

"Exactly, nopony has seen you since the fire," continued Sweetie Belle. "We do not speak her name for all the terrible acts she has committed against our nation. This alicorn has killed so many of our friends, hundreds of animals and other ponies.... and the princesses themselves! She controls both sun and moon and has driven our nation into the ground! It doesn't help that she angered both the dragons and the griffons either! We are the ponies who seek to destroy her evil and remove the temptation to control the heavenly bodies."

"H-how long?" the librarian breathed. "How long has it been since that day?"

"Ten years," the orange Pegasus replied. "In ten years, she has killed them all and plunged our country into WAR!" The table shook from the strike of the hoof upon it. Silence filled the room for a couple of moments

before she spoke once more. "The Queen has to be stopped and you, Twilight, are the key."

"She means," Applebloom said, "That yer the only pony with enough magical power ta even pose a threat to 'er. Ah mean you did study under Princess Celestia as her prized student. She must 'ave taught ya a few tricks!"

All their words washed over her. Ten years... ten years since the Ponyville fire... but no pony had seen her again since then? The good news was that she had not pissed off Princess Luna with her curiosity... but as much as that soothed her nerves, it only stood to pose more questions than what they answered. Only then did another question come before her mind, something she needed answered before she could be at peace.

"What happened to my friends?"

The four mares looked to each other once more before casting their glances back to their long-awaited friend. "We had a... falling out," replied Dinky. "Rarity and Rainbow Dash were... taken from us and after that we just sort of fell apart. The Crusaders used to be a unified front, but now we are divided. Applejack and her big brother rallied together the Apple Clan, Fluttershy and Zecora founded the Everfree Movement, and Pinkie created... the Party Poppers."

A visible shudder filtered through the four crusaders at the very mention of the last one. "What do you mean by Rarity and Rainbow being... taken from you?" Twilight asked. She immediately dreaded the answer as soon as a look of sadness swept across their faces. All eyes faced Sweetie Belle as she ignited her horn, and chanted the somber tale for all present to hear.

Chapter 3

Loyalty and Generosity

"Greetings, mine children," spoke a voice from the darkness. "Allow me the chance to show thee a time before; naught but four years in the past from the day Twilight Sparkle returned to Equestria. It was a time of darkness and confusion, more so than the present hour, for the battle lines had yet to be drawn and ponies were choosing where they stood. Our heroine had been absent from the world for six years when the events thou shalt see came to be.

"I know that it is disruptive to break from the moment, but in mine judgement, I think thou will appreciate seeing things happen in real-time, to better understand the plight. No, I am not the author of THIS story, nor will I play any major role. I stand as naught but a literary device, for the moment. I am Rachana, the creator of Earth and Moon, beloved wife to Genesis. I am the first storyteller, older then the stars. Allow me to weave the tale."

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'Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock,' clicked the simple white clock on the wall. The ebony hands neared quarter to three in the afternoon: what should have been the height of the day. However, the room remained eerily quiet as the time keeper counted second by second into an increasingly bleak and unsure future. Jewels encrusted into the customized clock sparkled as the afternoon rays of the sun impacted their highly polished faces, coating the room in a rainbow of colours.

Carousel Boutique sat in the dark confines of its own body, yet the sign on the door indicated the building was open for the business day. Dresses and suits fit for nobility still lined the massive curved windows to display the talent of the tailor, yet no ponies entered the shop. It was almost as if the building repulsed the citizens of the town.

Yet, there was a very good reason why the shop sat in darkness, despite being open for the public. It had been six years to the day since the fire: six years since the owner of the store lost something very valuable to her.

Rarity sat by the window overlooking the Everfree Forest in foolish hope that on that day, of all days, she would return and all would be right in the world once more.

Without the librarian, the town had become an awful dull and depressing place. It was as if a perpetual cloud loomed overhead and sucked the happiness and energy from the citizens, despite the sunny skies. The alabaster unicorn sighed, knowing her annual vigil did no pony any good. However, looking out the window and remembering the times, good and bad, was just about all she could do those days.

Nine months previous, the dragons and griffins unified and declared war upon the nation of Equestria, making it the first armed conflict in some twelve-hundred years or so. Many young mares and stallions were conscripted and sent off to defend the land: a nation most would rather see with a different ruler at the helm. *If only Princess Celestia were still around, this whole mess would never have happened*, Rarity mused to herself with another sigh.

Unfortunately, with so many ponies going off to war and with the Queen's abolishment of the nobility, demand for high-end dresses like hers plummeted into non-existence. Ponies could not afford such luxuries when food and rent (among other things) became heavily taxed for the defence of the nation. So, her boutique sat on the fringes of Ponyville, like a cyst on the healthy village.

A shudder came over the unicorn at the mere thought of her financial situation. She had two mouths to feed, yet with the rising cost of living and a lack of customers, the white unicorn had quickly begun to plunge into debt. In fact, she was so deep in the financial hole at that moment she could no longer afford candles or oil to light the lanterns in her shop. If it was a choice between light and food, then there was no contest (even if the lack of light skewed her attempts to keep up appearances.)

It was in times like this, in the midst of feeling sorry for herself, she began to wonder if the rumours she heard about her unicorn friend were true. If they were, it would explain a lot but it would also leave her and her four other friends completely heartbroken. How could anypony think something so ridiculous about a mare as kind, gentle and loving as Twilight Sparkle?

A knock came upon the shop's door, snapping the fashionista out of her daydreams. She walked slowly to the door, ignoring the increasingly heavy beat of hooves upon it. How dense could that pony be? Could they not see the big 'open' sign in the window? Still, a potential customer was a potential customer, no matter how stupid, dirty or impatient they were.

"Hello, and welcome to Carousel Boutique. How may I help you?" she asked the stallion beyond the threshold. He wore a dark, double breasted-suit and carried a briefcase in his mouth. The earth pony stallion walked inside in front of the mare, an air of seriousness upon his face as he dropped the case onto an empty table in the middle of the room. He sported a light blue mane and a yellow coat, his eyes hidden behind a pair of rectangular glasses.

"My name is Agent Bright Trottington of the Royal Equestrian Revenue and Tax Services," he spoke in a business-stallion demeanour. "You are Miss Rarity, the proprietor of this establishment, correct?"

The white unicorn sighed and nodded her head, dreading the day a member of the R-E-R-T-S would darken her doorstep. She refused to hide from the tax stallion, even if it meant losing everything she possessed. She still had her dignity, after all. "I am very sorry to say that you are at least three months behind on your rent, and you did not file your income tax return last month. Might I ask why you did not file them?" he went on to ask.

"One can hardly file one's income tax when one does not make any income, Mr Trottington," she replied solemnly.

"Then I suppose collecting the missing two-thousand one-hundred and fifty-five bits is out of the question?" he asked, frowning as the mare slowly nodded her head. "Then I am afraid you are left with only two choices. Please, sit down, ma'am." Using her magic, the ruined tailor brought over two chairs to the table for them to sit comfortably. Even if she did not like the financial blood-sucker, she would at least be polite and lady-like.

"Now," Bright spoke as he pulled some papers out of his briefcase, "According to the Register's Office, your special talent is finding gems, correct?" Again, the white unicorn nodded her head. "Well, for ponies in your position, the Queen, in her infinite generosity, has created a system where deadbeat ponies can wipe out their debts by going into government

service until they've paid it off. Now, since you are talented at finding gems..." he trailed as he shuffled papers, handing an information sheet to her, "you can go to work for the Mining Consortium."

Rarity looked at the government-styled brochure and winced visibly. "Are you joking?" she asked in a wild tone, "I mean, do you honestly expect me to go work in a dusty, DIRTY old mine to find gems just to pay back my debt? Are you out of your MIND? I'd ruin the pedicure on my hooves with all of that... DIRT and MUCK everywhere! I simply refuse!"

"Well, there is always a choice, Miss Rarity," the stallion calmly replied to her outburst. "You can either go work for the Mining Consortium, or you can go into military service. I don't expect they need any tailors or gem finders, so I expect you would be put on the front lines." Her jaw dropped, almost hitting the table. Before her were two options: each much more dirty and repulsive than the last. The stallion pushed forward a second information sheet, but she ignored it.

"And if I refuse BOTH?" she asked.

"Then you will be PRESSED into military service, where the penalty for desertion is death by firing squad. Surely, you don't want to be executed over such a small amount of money, do you, Miss Rarity?" he spoke plainly.

The unicorn's head swam, presented with a difficult choice: become a dirty, smelly mining pony, or become a dirty, smelly soldier who could be killed at any moment? Neither option was looking good for her, which opened up a third in her mind: she could always flee the country and be on the run for the rest of her life. At the very least, she would not have to worry as much about the dirt.

"However," added the stallion, "her majesty has given me permission to extend to you a rare offer, Miss Rarity."

"Oh?" the unicorn asked, feigning interest. Perhaps, if she could get close to the Queen, she could feed vital information to The Crusaders and help bring the titanic mule down once and for all!

"As a renowned fashion designer, her majesty has asked that, should you

refuse the previous offers, that I give you a third choice. If you would prefer, she would like you to join her in Canterlot and pay off your debt as the Royal Dressmaker. You will answer only to the Queen, and service her needs and the needs of any pony she asks you to. This potentially includes the Prime Minister and members of Parliament."

Rarity bit her lip. As a dressmaker, she would not be able to seize any vital information. Still, the other two choices frightened her, like when a mare walked down the street wearing a GREEN dress when their palette CLEARLY called for cyan. She needed to do what she felt was best: not only for herself, but for her sister as well. "What of my little sister? I'm... all the family she has."

"If you take the third option, then there is more than enough room in the castle to accommodate her. Otherwise, unless she can find another place to stay, I'm afraid she will have to be put in an orphanage. Sweetie Bell is her name, correct?" he asked, flipping through papers. The white unicorn confirmed it softly for him. He pulled out a third set of papers, those ones detailing the work of the Royal Dressmaker.

"How long do I have to make a decision?" she asked as the stallion put some other papers he dredged up away.

"One week. Oh, and I must warn you: if you plan to flee, you face a minimum of twenty years in the dungeons of Canterlot for tax evasion. As well, your sister will be forced to pay off the debt in your stead. If you take her with you, then she will face a minimum of five years in jail for aiding a felon. Furthermore, Carousel Boutique would be owned by the township of Ponyville and Governor Ironhead. The fate of this property would be placed in his hooves."

Rarity struggled to think her way out of this mess, but she knew nopony could help her. Applejack had it hard enough on the farm, Pinkie could not spare a single bit, Fluttershy only made income from odd pet-care jobs and Rainbow... well, being a weathermare never paid well anyway. "I am sorry," the stallion apologized as he opened the door. "It's never easy to to see a pony's livelihood destroyed over something like money. I wish you only the best, Miss Rarity." With that, he was gone.

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One week down the river of time, the alabaster mare stood inside of her shop, her remaining earthly possessions stacked on a cart just outside the building. A quick glance around gave an air of finality: all of her ponyquins gone, dust-drawn silhouettes of paintings, the corkboard slabs where she pinned up dress designs and desks outlined on the wall where grime (although she had no idea WHERE it came from) accumulated. A sigh passed her lips as she realized it would be the last time she stood inside her beloved boutique.

Everything was calm and quiet, almost disturbingly so as she made one last sweep of the building, just in case she missed anything important. Tears rolled down her cheeks, threatening to turn her azure eyes puffy and red as memories of better times washed across her mind. Wandering upstairs, she checked in the drawers of her vanity to find a large red bow tie studded in jewels. Her frown deepened as she remembered who she made it for. "Oh Spike," she spoke aloud to the empty walls. "Where have you gone?"

Quietly placing the memento into her saddle bags, the white mare continued to search for anything else she might have missed on her first pass. Every picture, every item she found stirred so many memories, yet she only had a little bit of room left. So, she had to make another hard choice: choosing to keep the pictures of her and her sister over the large, glossy photo of her and her friends modeling their gala dresses.

Below her, through the depths of the abandoned shop, the door opened with the jingle of a bell. She could tell just who decided to break up her moment: it was time to face the music. Rarity descended the steps, down to the lower floor when the voices started to drift across her ear. They were in the midst of a heated discussion, no doubt over what she had chosen to do.

Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Trixie and her own sister all stood at the bottom of the stairs, the small unicorn crying into the orange farmer's side. The five adults narrowed their eyes at her, silently demanding answers from the tailor. "Is it true?" Applejack accused. "Please, tell us ya didn't decide to go work for the Queen, Sugarcube!"

"I'm sorry, but... I have to do this," the alabaster mare sniffed. "I don't

WANT to work for that horrible mare, but I have no other choice! It's either work for her, or dig for gems... or fight in the war. I simply can't do either of those."

"Rarity!" cried Rainbow. "You always have a choice! You could run away, go underground! As a general of the Crusaders, we can easily keep you hidden from the government!" Her look soured as the white unicorn made a face of disgust at the very idea. "It's a figure of speech! Sheesh!"

"Rarity, you can't leave!" cried Pinkie. "Twilight is counting on us staying together for when she gets back! She'll probably be sad and lonely, so we have to stay here together to make sure we can cheer her up! I mean, she probably feels really, really bad about the fire but she'll get over it one day and come home, so we need to be ready to support and lift her spirits! I'm already planning the party!"

"I don't..." the unicorn trailed. How could she tell them her suspicions? How could she let them down by speaking her mind? She took a deep breath and decided to damn the consequences. "I don't think Twilight is ever coming back. It's been six years. If she hasn't gotten over what she did by now, then she is... she is either dead... or THAT rumour must be true."

Silence (except from the occasional sob of Sweetie Belle) filled the room, giving rise to new emotions as the deepest, darkest thought of the tailor was laid bare before her friends. Each looked stunned, too aghast to speak and urge the unicorn that her suspicions were wrong. "If Twilight Sparkle is dead," replied Trixie after a couple of moments, "then Trixie will eat her hat: with ketchup and hot sauce too! That irritating mare does not strike Trixie as the kind to be killed easily. If she were gone, we would know it."

"The selfish horse has a point," the farmer added snidely. The blue unicorn looked a little offended, but she bit her tongue, if only because she did not feel like arguing at that point. "We can't give up hope, Rarity. The day we believe she ain't coming home is the day the Queen wins! Ah refuse to ever let that horse win, an' by creators, I ain't goin' down without a fight! We need ta stick together. We can hide ya if we must, if only so we can be around for when Twi gets home, so we can end her reign once an' for all!"

"Rarity?" Fluttershy quietly added. "Um... I know it doesn't sound like much, but... um... if you leave, then I'll be sad. The girls are right: if you leave us now, you're also abandoning Twilight when she comes home. Please, don't go out that door. Don't leave us when we need you the most. We're the Elements of Harmony, remember?"

"You're wrong, Fluttershy. We AREN'T the elements, we just... we just represent them. Have you seen your jewels around lately? I haven't and I put mine in a safe place only I know about! If the elements are gone, then that can only mean that... that Twilight is gone. She's either dead or, Great Plains forbid, no longer our friend anymore."

The other mares looked at each other, scuffing their hooves against the ground sheepishly. Rarity knew she struck at a couple of bared nerves by saying that, but she just could not keep her doubt contained any longer. It was killing her inside, but she had to do it, for the sake of her little sister and for the business she had taken from the hooves of her parents, which she built into one of the most respected dress shops in Equestria.

"Please, Rarity!" Rainbow cried, walking over to her, rare tears welling up in her rosy eyes. "Don't do this! I don't think... I don't think I could handle it! I represent loyalty, remember? If you do this, the others won't be able to trust you anymore! No matter what I do, I'd be disloyal to at least ONE of my friends. Please, don't make me choose, Rarity! Don't... don't make me choose."

Seeing the athletic and tomcoltish Pegasus on the verge of tears startled the alabaster unicorn to no end. Only once before did she see the chromatic pony outside of her usual boastful self, but that had been more nerves and fear of failure than seeing her friends break up. Even then, she had NEVER seen her cry before: not even when she had the worst of injuries or when the unicorn consoled her about losing Gilda as a friend.

Rarity bit her lower lip in trepidation. She really did not want to hurt her friends, but there could be no recourse for her. The alabaster mare could not handle the idea of digging through mud, killing innocent creatures, or having to remain hidden her whole life like a filthy criminal. "I'm sorry, Rainbow," she apologized, fresh tears welling up in her azure eyes. "I'm so sorry, but... but this is the only option I have. I don't WANT to do this, but I have no other choice! If I hear anything of value, I'll be sure to tell you all."

Pinkie Pie Swear!"

"Ah'm sorry, Sugarcube," the farmer lowered her head. "But... but you can't be in the Crusaders no more. Not... not if yer gonna live in Canterlot. We just... we just can't have the risk of the Queen findin' out what we're up to. Ah motion a vote for dis...dism... for havin' her leave. All in... all in favour?"

"Aye," whispered Fluttershy, her head as low to the ground as it could get without touching it.

"Aye," nodded Trixie with her head turned away, unable to look at the scene anymore.

"Aye," Pinkie Pie sighed, on the verge of tears as well.

"Aye," Rainbow croaked, wiping the water that built up around her eyes away.

Applejack nudged the filly sobbing into her side gently, trying to coax her out of her sorrow. "Sweetie Belle? Ah know this is hard, but you need to vote. We'll accept any decision ya make, so don't you feel like you need ta side with anypony you don't want to, okay?"

The white filly sobbed into her friend's coat for a little while longer; trying to decide what was for the best. Not only the best for their fledgling rebellion group, but as a whole for the nation and the future. Forcing back her sniffles, she raised her muzzle above the fur coat so she could be heard. "Aye," she whispered, only to start sobbing heavily once more.

"Ah'm sorry, Sugarcube," she spoke honestly to Rarity. "But... with Twilight not around... that's majority." The white unicorn sat there stunned, not only at her friends being so ready to dump her, but the fact that her little sister agreed! She would kick herself for it later, but at that moment her feelings were too fresh to be left unstated, causing the white unicorn to go on a tirade.

"...how could I even THINK to call you my friends!?" she cried. With her rant finished she stood by the door, shaking form all the negative emotion inside her.

"Rarity, Please!" Applejack cried. "We've been through too much to let it end like this! Just because you're not a Crusader no more doesn't mean we can't still be friends!"

"I didn't end our friendship, Applejack. YOU DID!" Without another word, she stormed out of the building, just in time to meet with the Pegasus guards who would escort her to Canterlot. That was the last time they would see her. They sat there for many minutes, each wanting to tear themselves away and chase after her, but they were rooted to the spot by their own self-pity and loathing for what they just did.

A few minutes after the unicorn stormed out, a pair of blue-vested guards entered the building and ushered them outside. By the time they were all herded to the door, the alabaster unicorn was gone, cart and all replaced by something else. Raspy breathing came from the shape in front of them, yet no air hit their faces as it laboured for breath. It was in the shape of a pony, but the hardened clay and smart suit gave away the golem's identity in an instant.

"By order of the Queen of Equestria, I, Lord Ironhead, Governor of the Township of Ponyville, do hereby declare this structure condemned. Any who enter shall be swiftly and harshly punished." With that, the nopony turned, trotting down the street with a clunk as each of his clay hooves impacted the cobblestones. The assembled mares went about their separate ways, each one expressing their sorrow in a different way. Each of them had lost another dear and valuable friend.

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"Yet as the hooves of time move once more, the tale is found only halfway done," Rachana spoke into the darkness. *"For, although Generosity had left their midst, even if those bonds had been stretched, they had yet to rip in twain. As much as the other elements tried to be rid of it, they could not deny the fellowship they felt. Sorrowfully, one element did not see the ghosts of the relationships she once held dear. She could not see that, beyond the circumstances, they would forevermore be friends.*

"With Magic missing and her relationship with Generosity seemingly ripped asunder, Loyalty felt alone in her plight. Move the hoof of time

forward but one year, almost three years before the day we left to start this tale, and you will see the events that shattered the Elements of Harmony beyond all repair."

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Cloudsdale: the mystical floating capital of all Pegasus ponies in the land of Equestria. For at least two millennia, it floated lazily over the ground as a safe haven from most of the beasts of the world. The pristine walls and white clouds gave off an air of cleanliness and purity: as if nothing dark or foreboding could happen. It was easy to misjudge that floating city.

Rainbow Dash lay upon one of the many clouds surrounding the Pegasus sanctuary and looked over the edge at the ground far below her. As one of the three Pegasus generals of the Crusaders, the chromatic flier had the responsibility to keep an eye on the city and try to pick out new recruits who were weary of the contempt the Queen had for the ancient settlement.

Still, the Pegasus found her mind wandered away from her job quite easily nowadays, since she kept dwelling on that day almost a year previous. Ever since Rarity had left to join the Queen in Canterlot, she felt as if she were the rope in a tug-of-war. One side wanted her to find her unicorn friend and make amends, while the other told her she had to do her duty to her other friends for the good of the nation. She felt like she was coming apart at the seams, and began to contemplate jumping off the cloud, wings bound, to end her misery.

A thump beside her on the cloud barely registered in her mind as a second Pegasus joined her. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could tell instantly who the new occupant was. She had a striking mane of red and orange with a yellow coat and amber eyes. Spitfire laid down beside Rainbow, discreetly mulling something over as well, judging from the look on her face.

"Hey, Rainbow," she chirped in curiosity. "Is there something on your mind?"

"Same thing as yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before THAT," she replied with melancholy. The two fliers sat upon the cloud for some time, the silence growing between them as

they each pondered. The flaming mare wanted to lend a hoof, but she had no clue where to do so without appearing noseey.

"I'm sure once this is all over," she started, "they will be all too happy to welcome her back into the group. I mean, this war can't last forever, right? Plus, we're the good ponies, so we're sure to win out over the armies! All we need to do for now is be patient and wait for your friend to come home. Everything will be made right when she does. I'm sure of it."

Rainbow did not answer. She knew all of what her friend said was true, but she could not help a nagging feeling in the back of her mind: something that told her Twilight was never coming back. She sighed as she realized the captain of the Wonderbolts probably had something more pressing to talk about than filly feelings. "What did you need, Spitfire?" she asked.

"Oh! Right," the stunt flier replied. "Well, from my connections, I've heard that the Queen herself is coming to Cloudsdale to watch the Best Young Flier Competition the day after tomorrow. However, she's arriving later today for a royal tour of the city. You know, meet the ponies and throw off assassination attempts. That sort of thing."

"So?" Rainbow asked, honestly not in the mood to try and plan another covert operation against her.

"Well, for one, she doesn't make a lot of public appearances anymore. Secondly, we don't really know what she looks like because of that. Can't really assassinate a target unless you know what to look for, right?"

"Who cares? Just look for the great big alicorn with a crown on her head and a chip on her shoulder."

"I was thinking..." Spitfire trailed, unsure if she should bring up the touchy subject. "You know... we should see if that rumour is really true. To see if she really looks like... you know."

Rainbow pushed herself up into a sitting position with a sigh. She had to admit that she was curious, and it might just be the only time she could get a look for herself before they would face her on the field of battle, once Twilight returned, of course. She flexed her wings as a silent signal to the captain that she was getting ready for takeoff. "You pick out a good spot. I

don't really care," she answered in monotone.

The amber Pegasus took to the sky before her, soaring like a majestic eagle, which was standard considering she belonged to the most exclusive fraternity of fliers in the nation. The rainbow pony could not help but smirk as she filed in right behind her, remembering her dreams of flying with her as a foal. Granted, she was still not a Wonderbolt: not yet, anyway.

Going over the majestic city, she could not help but feel a measure of pride swell in her chest, since she had not been to her home since she entered the Best Young Flier Competition herself those many years ago. The stadium where the event took place was just as pristine and immaculate as she remembered. In fact, the entire city seemed to be frozen in time, like a portrait where the ponies inside could move and live their lives against the eternal background.

Eventually, the two athletes found a spot along the marked route not crowded with ponies (curious, murderous in intent, ignorant or otherwise) clamouring to see the Queen. However, they had about an hour to kill before she would show her wicked face to the masses. Perched on a balcony overlooking the proceedings, the two ponies sat patiently for a rare glimpse of the spiteful monarch.

As the time neared, everything seemed to slow down for the speed demon Pegasus, which annoyed her more than she could ever say in pleasant company. Yet, for the sake of appearances, she kept a stoic look on her face, the only hint to her impatience being the rhythmic tapping of a hoof against the railing. Spitfire, meanwhile, gazed into the distance, as she would sometimes do while the two waited for something to happen.

After a few more minutes of incessant tapping, trumpets began to blare as Pegasus guards in gilded armour filed down the streets, blowing into their brass instruments. Ponies around the corner could be seen bowing, telling the pair of rebels that the Queen approached their position. "Remember, Rainbow," her friend whispered, "we're just watching, not dashing into battle."

Somehow, Spitfire could see her muscles tense as the very thought of charging in passed in front of her waking mind. She nodded to show her that she understood the warning. Still, it required all her willpower to remain

glued to the spot as a golden chariot, pulled by four Pegasus guards rounded the corner. *That's supposed to be CELESTIA'S chariot*, the Pegasus thought in anger.

Rainbow's stoic facade would be put to the ultimate test as the rest of the carriage turned down the street up ahead, bringing the Queen into full view. Her eyes widened a bit in shock: now she could see how all the rumours made sense! Sitting upon the golden chariot was a large alicorn, her coat a shade of lavender that shimmered in the light of the sun. Her mane wafted in the solar breeze, much like Celestia's, except instead of a rainbow of soft green, pink, purple and blue, her mane went from the blackest of night at the roots, dotted with stars and faded through the colours of the twilight hour, ending with a soft sky blue at the tips.

Most striking of all, however, were the eyes the alicorn possessed. As she moved closer towards their balcony, Rainbow could see they were a deep, cold and unyielding purple, scanning the crowd with undisguised boredom despite the smile and slight wave of a hoof to the ponies. The Pegasus felt a shiver run down her spine and through her wings: now fully able to see how Derpy could make those connections.

The final nail in the coffin, however, came from where the Queen passed in front of the balcony, leaving her flank in full view. It took all of the willpower and discipline the Pegasus possessed to stop from crying out in pain. Her mark was an elaborate design of the sun, with a waning crescent moon closer to her rump. Around the sun, there were five small stars dotted around in almost EXACTLY the same positions.

All things considered, everything turned out well in Spitfire's opinion as the Queen passed their balcony. She did not seem to recognize them, so there was some good in that. Rainbow had her eyes trained on her from the moment she appeared around the corner, to the instant she disappeared around another bend. Obviously, she was serious about trying to see if the rumours about the Queen were true.

"So, what did you think, Rainbow?" she called to her friend once the festivities passed. "Rainbow?" Looking to her side, the Pegasus was gone, flying away from the scene. "Guess she was busy after all."

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Flying through the sky the very next day, Spitfire read the quickly scrawled note with some trepidation as she and as many other Wonderbolts as she could find swooped across the skies to meet their appointment. She looked at the small note once more, hoping it was a trick: that Rainbow would not do something so rash. However, she confessed herself curious as to what her friend and long-time fan had planned.

Spitfire, the note read.

Gather as many Wonderbolts who are sympathetic to our goals as you can. We're going to need every one we can get. Today is the day we capture the Queen, or die trying! I have a plan, and I hope to the creators that it works. Be at the Rainbow Room of the Weather Factory by 1400 hours. Stars save the Queen; her end is nigh, the Crusaders Forever!

General Rainbow Dash

Behind the flaming stunt flier flew a well-sized squad of eleven members of the Wonderbolts and their reserves, all of whom wanted nothing better than to see an end to the terrible reign of the Queen. Granted, most of them were a little scared now that they were finally going to be doing something about it, rather than loafing around and complaining. Yet, the hatred they had for the monarch knew no bounds.

Spitfire turned the corner around the central spire of the factory, avoiding the dark thunderclouds being formed by the workers as they flew down to the Rainbow Room. The stunt flier laughed inwardly at the coincidence this posed, given that the only Pegasus with a rainbow mane would be waiting for them. At least, she hoped so, since there was still the distinct possibility that it was a trap.

However, all of those nagging worries vanished the instant the dozen professional fliers touched down, right behind the Pegasus in question. Spitfire walked up to her, placing a hoof on her shoulder. "So, what's the plan, Dash?" she asked, looking at the door the rainbow mare bored holes into.

"Just wait and see," she replied with an air of finality in her voice. Spitfire stood beside her, eyes trained on the door leading in, ignoring the worker

ponies that stared at the sudden celebrity appearance. "Get those workers out of here though. This might get messy." Without another word, some members of the Wonderbolts acted on her orders, calmly ushering the neutral ponies out of the room.

Once they returned to formation, the door opened, a tour Pegasus and a dozen guards filing into the room, right in front of the Queen. The neutral Pegasus seemed taken aback by the sudden appearance of the entire aerobatic squadron. "Uh..." he trailed, trying to salvage the situation, "Might I present the Wonderbolts, your Highness... apparently?"

Both sides stood still, waiting for the other to make the first move. Surprisingly, the Queen herself acted first, stepping forward, causing her guards to stand aside in a slight panic. The flight squad shivered under her cold, murderous gaze, yet Rainbow starred back, meeting those purple pools. "I daresay," the Queen intoned, "there isn't enough room for a flying demonstration in here."

Rainbow tensed up at the voice, Spitfire noticed, as if a pony had put a clamp to her heart and twisted it cruelly. "Somehow," the Queen continued, "I do not think you have assembled here for a simple greeting, as regal as I may be. Well, GENERAL Rainbow Dash?" She chuckled as the Pegasus lost her composure, mouth opening wide. "Oh yes, I know ALL about your stupid little Crusaders. How foolish: to think you could ever hope to topple ME."

"How did you know!?" she gritted her teeth, trying not to let her anger overwhelm her.

"My Royal Dressmaker, of course," she smiled. "It's amazing what some ponies will say with a little whisky in them and a bit of magic to loosen them up, don't you think?" A wave of cold swept over everypony present, even her own royal guard as her chuckles echoed through the towering, empty room. "Now, did you come to surrender, or mount some sort of pitiful assault upon my crown? Well? Answer me, Ms. Dash."

"No, this isn't an attack, or surrender," she replied causing the Wonderbolts to gasp in surprise. "Not yet, anyway. I just want to talk. Please, you don't have to do this! Any of this! Yes, you made some mistakes: all ponies do. Just please come back. I know who you are..."

A frown spread across the queen's muzzle, but it was only for a brief instant as her eyes narrowed at the Pegasus, as if examining her under a magnifying glass. Content with the results of her search, she addressed her guard, "Destroy these traitors!" The white Pegasus ponies saluted, drawing hidden spears from the depths of their armour, pointing them at the Wonderbolts and the unarmed Pegasus.

"You don't NEED to do this! There's still hope. We're not mad about what happened in Ponyville. Really. We just... we really miss you. Please, come back to us, Twilight!"

"Who are you talking to? Surely, it cannot be me," the queen replied in a deadpan tone.

"I'm talking to you, Twi, you big idiot! Stop pretending you're this big, bad alicorn and come back to us! Yes, you made a mistake, but I forgive you! After all, you were out of your mind that day, weren't you?"

"You're raving mad, Ms. Dash," the queen calmly replied. "I've never known any sort of Twilight, except for one little pest, and I am not about to start knowing any more. Now shut up and DIE, you TRAITOR!" With a flash of her horn, a beam of light rocketed forth, slamming into the solidified cloud where the rainbow Pegasus stood. Using her natural agility, she tore herself away from the spot, tears streaming in her eyes as she shot off to the top of the Rainbow Waterfall.

"Please! Don't make me have to do this!" she begged, hovering over the fountain of rainbows. Another blast shot out of the alicorn's horn, nearly hitting the Pegasus, causing chunks of enchanted stone to fall on her head.

"The pony known as Twilight Sparkle is DEAD. I murdered her with my own hooves. She came to me later on the night I took power and tried to stop me," the queen smirked. "The screams were quite pleasant, actually. It's a shame I didn't keep her alive to torture her as a pastime. Maybe I'll do that with YOU instead, Rainbow Dash."

"NOW!" she ordered before plunging her head into the rainbow juice. All the Sorrel Hells broke loose as the dozen Wonderbolts sprang into action, quickly advancing on the dozen heavier and slower guards. The tour guide,

smartly, decided to run away. Dash's head stayed under the rainbows for a few seconds before she pulled out, many colors burned into her face. "I guess I'm going to have to BEAT some sense into you, Twilight!"

"The name is EOS, you little cretin," the alicorn scolded. "Just what do you hope to achieve? An early funeral? Well, I will be happy to oblige!" Another blast rocketed from her horn, not caring if it hit guard or Wonderbolt as it squealed out to strike. However, the rainbow Pegasus began to glow and swiftly avoided the concussive blast. "What the---?" The queen was cut short, however, when something heavy impacted her side, sending her flying into the wall.

Next thing she knew, she lay against the wall, the irritating Pegasus standing where she herself once stood, aglow in a polychromatic aurora. She had no idea just what was going on, but she refused to be bested by a commoner! Her horn glowed once more as sharp tendrils of solid cloud shot up from the floor, hoping to impale the traitor. She moved too fast, shooting up and into the ceiling in the blink of an eye. Somehow, the rainbow juice had given her incredible speed and power.

Meanwhile, Pegasi buzzed around, paying no mind to the exchange between the goddess and subject. The Wonderbolts had underestimated the speed of the guards, for once they shed their armour, they were suddenly as fast as they were. *I guess wearing that armour builds up strength after all*, Spitfire mused as she tried to shake a rather persistent one off her tail.

Rainbow mustered all the speed she could, going as fast as light itself with the rush she experienced from the rainbow elixir. In no time at all, she was upon the queen, bucking her right in the face before blindsiding her with powerful swipes of her hooves. The ruler tried to fight back, but she was so slow that it was like she was standing still. The Pegasus circled around and rammed her in the ribcage, ploughing the monarch into another wall,

Royal blood spilled onto the walls as the force of impact jettisoned some out of her lungs. The queen struggled for breath as she picked herself off the floor, trying to ignore the pain in her sides, both her wings broken. It was then she realized that being immortal did not mean she could feel no pain. "Well, have you had enough, Twilight?" the Pegasus asked with a

pleading look on her glowing face.

Her gaze was met with pure hatred, somehow paining her more than a thousand stabs straight to her heart. All around, Pegasus ponies, both Wonderbolt and guard, began to succumb to their injuries, blood staining the once alabaster floor of the room. "My name..." panted the alicorn as she stood, "is EOS!" She stood and charged, horn sparking with magic. Rainbow moved to avoid the alicorn, only to be swatted into the ground.

The queen was anticipating her tactics and teleported to where she knew the Pegasus would go. Only then did she smack her when she was unaware and smash her into the pavement. "I have bested BOTH Celestia and Luna. Do you think you stand a chance?" she gloated as she landed gracefully on her hooves. A stray Wonderbolt flew into her line of vision, causing her to electrocute him with her magic. He plopped to the ground with a thud, his uniform sizzling into his skin.

Spitfire watched with horror while keeping an eye on the guard she was being chased by. She needed to break away from the joker soon, so she could help double-team the murderous monarch. Any help to kill Queen Eos would be accepted by any sane pony.

"I've got to try!" Rainbow cried, charging forward with all the speed she could muster. Her muscles were beginning to scream in agony and her stomach turned over: the rainbow juice began to take full effect. Sure, it could give a pony a great burst of speed and power, but that was before it would turn to poison and kill the drinker (but only in large quantities, like what she had drank). But if it would knock sense back into her friend, then she would be glad to die.

Ponies dropped like flies all around them, either fleeing after they became too tired to carry on, or struck dead. Eventually, it all boiled down to four ponies: the Queen, Rainbow Dash, the guard chasing Spitfire and the flaming Pegasus herself. The orange stunt flier wanted to cry, but the tears would obscure her vision... but at least she would be with her felled wingmates again. *No! Don't think like that, Spitfire, she chastised herself. Not when there is still a sliver of hope left in the world!*

Seeing the other two warring mares gave her an idea. Soaring between the two combatants was very dangerous and risky, but her tail would also

run the same risk. At every turn, she strove to dive between the Pegasus and alicorn, putting herself in the line of fire. Come on, come on! she thought as she dove once more. An eruption of electricity arced from the alicorn's horn, but she was too fast for it, making it hit the guard instead.

"Stupid pests!" the queen panted, sporting dozens of bleeding wounds and struggling to keep her breath. As bad as the ruler looked, it was nothing next to how Rainbow felt. They had been battling for what felt like hours. Looking around, the general knew it was just between her and the queen.

"Spitfire!" she called out to her friend.

"Yes, ma'am!" the orange mare cried as she landed beside her, in a ready stance to charge.

"Tell them... tell them we did our best. Tell them," she looked to her friend, rosy eyes watering with tears, "tell them that I'm sorry, but I just had to do this. I just had to try. Get out of here: you can't do any more good."

"But you've got her on the ropes, Dash!" she called out. "We can end this right now. We can..." spying the look upon her face, the flaming mare realized. "You drank the rainbow juice... didn't you!?" Her smile faded as her friend nodded solemnly. "No. I can't leave you!"

"Do it. Do it now! That's an order, Captain!" she cried as she pushed her out of the way of a spell. The rainbow Pegasus dashed over to a control console and slammed her hooves into it, causing the panel to short out as the amber one reluctantly fled the facility, her tears streaming into the wind. Alarm bells rang out all over the city, stirring the flying ponies from school and their jobs as a synthetic voice rang out.

"All reactor safeguards are now non-functional. The weather factory will self-destruct in three minutes. Please evacuate. This is not a drill. Repeat: All reactor safeguards are now non-functional. The weather factory will self-destruct in three minutes. Please evacuate. This is not a drill"

"What do you hope to accomplish?" Eos asked coldly. "We can always rebuild this facility, you foal!"

"Maybe so," grunted the stunt flier. "But it will take you YEARS, and you won't be able to threaten anypony with droughts or hurricanes anymore! Please, Twilight. It's not too late. Please, come back to us... c-come back to ME!"

"Shut up and die," the queen replied, charging up her horn. However, she was swiftly met by a barrage of attacks, doing her part to injure the Pegasus in turn, but not quite matching up to her speed and ferocity, even with a few good blows from her magic. Eos flew into a pillar, rainbow juice spilling on her as the vat collapsed, causing her to scream in pain as the hot substance stung at her open wounds.

She stood up, panting, eyes wild in pain and anger. No pony had even come close to hurting her as much as the Pegasus did. The alicorn stood upon shaking hooves, the waves of pain cresting over her, as if her blood were on fire. However, she could no longer hold herself, collapsing onto the floor in pain. Rainbow began to pant and cough up the substance, the colour beginning to drain from her as the poison took effect. She didn't have long, and she knew it.

"Danger. Core meltdown imminent. This facility will self-destruct in thirty seconds."

"Twilight, please!" she pleaded, the tears flowing freely from her eyes, splashing onto the stained floor. "You can still turn back! Don't leave us like this. I... I don't think I could live with myself if I didn't at least TRY to help you out of this... of this prison you built!" She dragged herself slowly over to her pained friend. The alicorn growled at her, in too much pain to move, never mind cast any magic. "Please," she pleaded once more as she stroked her wafting mane.

"Ten...Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five...Four..."

"I love you, Twilight," she croaked before pressing her lips to the queen's, savouring the last sensation she would ever know.

"...Two... One..."

The world erupted into bright light. Spitfire, despite being more than ten miles from the blast, had to shield her eyes in order to keep from being

blinded. In an instant, Cloudsdale was obliterated, wiped from the face of the world with the force of a million Sonic Rainbooms. A mushroom cloud of all colours of the rainbow rose miles into the sky, the blast shaking the ground as far away as Trottingham. Rainbow Dash was dead.

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"... And so Rainbow, having failed to capture the queen, killed herself in an effort to take her with her. They say, to this day, the Queen still bears scars from the encounter," Sweetie finished the short version of the story, trying to hold back her own tears as she recounted her friend's final moments.

Twilight felt sick, as if she could lose the contents of her stomach at a second's notice. She quivered and shook in her seat. Rarity had betrayed them... Rainbow was dead... what ELSE could have gone wrong!? One part of her wanted to know, but the other just wanted to break down and cry for her friend.

"I have to admit," Dinky spoke, "that Rainbow Dash never did ANYTHING halfway." Looking at the unicorn, she could see her distress. "Let's leave her for a while before we tell her what the others are up to, okay?" The other three mares nodded silently, and filed out of the room, to leave the purple unicorn to grieve in solitude.

Chapter 4

The Queen

The next morning dawned upon a figure formed of lumps, sound asleep under a massive pile of blankets atop a large, luxurious bed. The gilded posters shimmered in the early twilight, the sun having yet to crest the horizon. Purple velvet curtains strung between the posts blocked the sleeping creature from the view of the outside world, despite the fact that the room was sacrosanct. In those troubled times, nothing was held sacred.

Soft carpets of deep crimson padded the floor under the bed. On either side sat two delicately carved end tables: a slender green banker's lamp on one, and a ticking clock and yellow bottle sitting upon the other. A large, white vanity hugged one of the walls flanking the bed, gilded in fine reliefs of plants and flowers. A dresser lay on the opposite side; a gold and onyx crown sat on a head form on the top.

Overall, the room was smaller than one might expect for a goddess, but since it was just one of many in her suite, the queen did not mind. Three doors led into the room: a set of oak double doors right in front of the bed, leading to the rest of the suite, and two others on the flanking walls. The fourth wall was gently curved and covered with tall windows that let light stream into the room.

Peace filled the space, marred only by the occasional subconscious grunt of the monarch as she slept. Dreams were her escape from the stress and pressures of trying to keep the country on-track despite war, and a few pesky rebellions who could not seem to do much more than vandalize property and disturb the peace. However, her reprieve ended when a loud ring from the alarm clock sounded, prompting a groan of pain from the waking mare.

"Shut up!" she groaned as an aura of lavender surrounded the time keeping device, flinging it across the room to shatter into a million pieces. The bottle that once sat beside it became enveloped in the same aura, disappearing behind the veil before returning with one less pill inside of it. After a couple of seconds to compose herself, the curtains flew open,

revealing Eos to nopony but her own reflection in the vanity mirror.

She was never a morning pony, and getting up so early to raise the sun taxed her patience. The queen grunted as her bad hoof made contact with the floor, making her shift her weight onto the other three as she crawled out of bed. After a quick stretch of her good limbs to begin the day, the alicorn limped over to one of the doors, leading to a spiral staircase that ascended an adjacent tower. As usual, she decided to forgo the stairs and fly up to the tall balcony instead.

Casting open the doors with a wave of magic, she limped onto the balcony and concentrated on the horizon. The magic flowed through her, pulling her out of her body as one ghostly hoof lowered the moon while the second forced the sun to crest over the horizon. Satisfied with her work, the Queen descended the tower to go through the rest of her (far too early) morning ritual, passing through the opposite door and into her private bathroom.

Fifteen minutes after the sunrise, Queen Eos emerged from her chambers after bathing, grooming, and adorning herself with her royal vestments. Her crown of gold and onyx glistened in the early sun as she slowly walked past windows, the symbol of her divinity reached up to only half the height of her long horn. Her gold and onyx shoes clicked lightly against the gilded marble floors of Canterlot's many winding halls as her matching necklace shifted while she walked. Her limp had improved from earlier and continued to do so with time, making her procession a little less noisy.

Ponies bowed before her as she progressed, with utterances the likes of 'good morning, your majesty' filling her tired and easily agitated ears. At first, she would have shocked them for annoying her at such an early hour, but time on the throne cooled her morning temper, since the castle could not function if half the faculty had to rest in the hospital wing.

As well, in the beginning her advisers would have descended upon her to get her to listen to their foolish whims, but she made sure they learned to not disturb her before breakfast. "Good morning, your highness," both the unicorn guards to the royal dining room chimed in unison. She nodded her head in understanding: about the best response a pony could hope to receive from the monarch so early.

With a quick bow to her nod, they opened the doors with their magic to expose the dining room to the hall beyond. The green-stained marble floor shimmered from the combination of the light coming from the pink granite fireplace and the high polish of the floor itself. The oak panels depicted scenes from history, echoing a time when most creatures could not read or write. Overall, the entire room sat in near darkness, as it offered no windows to the outside.

A long table sat in the middle of the room beneath a golden chandelier, worker ponies installing it fled from the monarch since they did not want to be in her way, especially in the morning. Canterlot was undergoing a lot of changes at her hoof and one of them was lightening up the depressing room. A fine white cloth of silk sat upon the solid mahogany table, countless floral decorations bringing more colour into the room. At the head sat an elaborate high-backed chair with a crest of sun and moon, the bottom and two sides of the table contained one less intricate chair for royal guests.

As soon as the royal rump made contact with the soft, solidified cloud cushions, a unicorn waiter appeared by her side, clipboard at the ready. "What would you like to eat, your majesty?" the green and pink mare asked with a small quiver in her voice. She was new, evidently.

"A bran muffin to start, followed by wheat pancakes, maple syrup and a glass of milk," she ordered. The unicorn vanished in a flash, another appearing instantly on her opposite side with a platter of muffins. Eos took a random baked treat before nibbling on it. "Leave the tray," she ordered to the second unicorn, who bowed and made a hasty retreat.

She continued to snack on the muffins before her, trying to push thoughts of a certain Pegasus out of her mind as she enjoyed the common treat. No matter how hard the queen tried, she could not stifle that irritating conscience she had. However, the voice had become stronger since yesterday, and she began to worry that she was getting soft again.

Closing her eyes, she silenced the annoying voice for the moment as the unicorn appeared with the main course of her breakfast. Her thoughts turned to her plans for the day, as they usually did while she ate her meal in the deathly silence. No pony dared speak to her while she ate, especially

breakfast.

"Your highness?" echoed one of the guards with trepidation as he opened the door a crack. "Advisor Stardance wishes to speak with you when you are done." She had to suppress the urge to moan in annoyance as the words drifted across her ears. The combination spelled nothing but trouble to the monarch, as Stardance rarely had good news that early in the morning. He tried to act like her nanny, the only saving grace being that he at least had the stones to tell her when an idea she had was foolish.

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"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WE HAVE LOST SHIMMERING PASS!?" the royal mare screeched at her advisor not more than a couple of seconds after meeting him outside.

"I-I don't know your majesty," the earth pony stallion replied in terror, although he expected the reaction. "It was General Shatterbuck's plan and it got approved by the War Council. You haven't been sitting in on it for the last few months, and I tried to tell you about it, but you just kept dismissing me. A thousand pardons your highness!"

"I'm not mad at YOU Stardance: you are but the messenger. Come. I will be sitting in on the council today." The lavender pony started forward, the stallion of white mane and peppermint green coat following. He braced himself, apprehensive about her reaction to his worries.

"Have you taken your pill today, your highness?" he asked.

"Yes, what of it?" Eos replied in an annoyed tone of voice as they cantered to her office.

"Well... are you sure that you're in the state of mind to sit on the War Council? You know that the painkillers mess around with your head, your majesty," he urged.

"Do you doubt my lucidity? Obviously, the generals cannot be trusted to get the job done on their own anymore. As such, I will take matters into my own hooves. I will attend the council from now on and there are to be NO objections. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, my queen," the peppermint colt gulped.

"Good, now what else is scheduled for the day?"

"Well, at oh-nine-hundred you will be sitting in court. There are seven indebted ponies who need to be placed, and former Prince Blueblood says he wants to discuss cracking down on crime and vigilante actions. There are also three criminal hearings and a pony says she has some information on the whereabouts of one of our top ten most wanted criminals."

"Excellent. A good tip always boosts my morale. I hope it's Applejack: that hayseed has had me gritting my teeth for two years now with her taunting notes. I'd like nothing better than to hang that horse personally," she smiled expectantly, only for the voice in the back of her head to scold her.

"Of course, your highness," he continued. "That should take up most of the morning, leaving lunch. Then, there is War Council from thirteen-hundred to seventeen-hundred, followed by dinner. Sunset is scheduled for eighteen-hundred and twenty-six hours today. At nineteen-hundred hours, you have that appointment with the Royal Dressmaker. After that, there are the usual forms to sign and seal and any other matters you might wish to see to."

"Good," she spoke as the pair reached the doors to her office, "I will be in my office until court. As usual, I am not to be disturbed until five minutes previous, unless there is a dire emergency that requires my immediate attention." The peppermint pony bowed as he left her side, allowing her to enter her office undisturbed, save for the salutes offered by the twin Pegasus guards.

Stepping inside the darkened room, the queen's horn glowed, causing the large purple curtains to pull away from the three massive windows they blocked, allowing sunlight to flood into the room. A large, darkly stained desk of extinct ancient elder wood sat in front of the windows, serving as the focal point. Carved into the legs and sides were depictions of all the different kinds of ponies, showing just how old the desk really was, as common Alicorns sat beside Pegasus, Earth and Unicorn Ponies.

Upon the top of the desk sat a large, brown quill sticking up from a pot of ink. Two piles of papers, complete paperwork and items she had yet to finish sat on the elegant desk, awaiting her signature and seal to be made official. Eos groaned as the pile had grown since the day before by about an inch. She really needed to fit in one of her marathon paper-pushing sessions, and soon, lest she be buried up to her hips in the waste of bureaucracy.

The queen rounded the desk and sat behind it with a sigh, head resting on the ancient wood. She would kill for a cup of warm coffee at that moment, but knew she could not drink it since it would mix badly with her painkillers. Instead of focusing on how tired she was, she decided to fiddle with the fireplace, lighting and extinguishing the fire with her magic. The masonry on the alabaster marble impressed her the first time she ever stepped hoof into the room, those many years ago.

Figures of sun, moon, and other important staples of Equestrian nationality were carved with great skill and smoothness, leaving anypony in awe that the hearth could be over nine hundred years old. Even the queen found herself impressed at the hard work those ponies of yore put into constructing the castle. If only they could see that it still stood after so long, not looking a day older. She made a mental note to commend the maintenance staff.

Formerly, portraits of the previous rulers and regents of the sun hung on all the walls. Their faces had seemed to stare at her in disapproval, so she ordered them removed, and had the entire castle swept for all traces of ANY past monarch. Yet, the nagging conscience persuaded her to simply store them away from prying eyes, instead of destroying them like she had originally planned.

The bright, cheery walls of canary yellow contrasted the deep, royal blue carpet on the floor, coaxing the regal mare into a state of relaxation. Eos found her eyelids growing increasingly heavy, prompting her to rest her head upon the desk. All she needed to do was shut her eyes for a few minutes and then she would be able to climb the pile of papers before her. She closed her eyes, letting the gentle blackness encompass her and whisk her away to the land of dreams again. Just a few minutes to nap was all she asked.

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'Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock,' sounded the office doors some time later. "Your majesty?" called out the familiar voice through the darkness. "It's time to head down to the throne room to hold court, my queen." The lavender alicorn moaned as she raised her head from the desk, her nap far longer than planned, but not long enough to recharge her.

"I'm coming," she answered. "I'm just... finishing a couple of papers. Give me a minute." Sitting up in her chair, the alicorn gave her head a liberal shake to rouse herself from her slumber. Holding court usually proved to be boring, but it was a necessary evil if she planned to keep her approval rating up. Naturally, as a goddess the whole thing was naught but a waste of time, but she could not be a queen without having some of her subjects respect her.

True to her word, sixty seconds after speaking, she emerged from her office, the door glowing dull lavender before opening to her magic. Stardance awaited her on the other side of the door, briefcase nestled comfortably between his lips as he fell into line behind the ruler of sun and moon. Thankfully, the two had no new business to attend to as they walked, which soothed the queen's nerves, if only just a little.

The route down to the throne room was ingrained into her very being, able to walk to it from any point in the castle without so much as a thought to what hall she needed to turn down next. If she had a soul, she would say it was ingrained into that as well, but she made do with what she had: that had always been true of her. Still, she did not need to dwell on the matter, for the queen and her entourage swiftly arrived before the single door leading into the back of the throne room.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped beyond the threshold and into the scene of her crushing victory against the two tyrants just little over a decade before. Had it really been so short a time since she seized control of the kingdom and started it on its new course? It did not really feel like it to the mare, but she refrained from celebrating the milestone, since it would anger many of her subjects: not that she actually CARED anyway.

Sitting upon the gold and onyx throne at the stroke of nine o'clock, she nodded to the two ponies that guarded the double doors leading into the

massive chamber. Stardance had taken his seat on a humble stool beside the elegant and impressive new throne. Although it echoed the designs of the two old ones, it was far larger and more intricate in detail: something befitting the liberator of Equestria.

Organizing court was an easy affair. The easily-dealt-with cases, like placing the ponies that could not pay their taxes into government work, or passing sentence on criminals, came first in the day. After that came the more difficult cases, like discussing food-distribution policy. Anything that needed further investigation into its claims, like information for an arrest, came last.

Of course, dealing with the former Prince Blueblood was a different affair altogether. Even since she had abolished the noble houses and all their benefits, the royal-pain-in-her-flank had a chip on his shoulder as big as the Everfree Forest. She could tell this 'crime and vigilante' discussion was just another excuse on his part to moan and complain in a desperate bid that MAYBE this would be the time she would restore at least HIS rank. Still, she would hear him out, if only to see if he had any amusing arguments.

"Presenting to the court, Mr Blueblood of Canterlot," the herald announced ahead of the white draft unicorn stallion.

He walked into the throne room, still sporting his usual attire, nose in the air even as he approached the living goddess. She had to admit that this time he was showing some stones, quite a break from the norm, where he would be quivering and grovelling for her to hear him out. Perhaps, just this time, she would actually pay attention instead of imagining the stallion dangling above a vat of boiling oil before simply replying with, 'No. Dismissed.'

"Most honourable QUEEN Eos," the stallion spoke with a shallow bow, his head still high in the air, as if only calling her that by mandate. "I come before you today to discuss the recent crime wave that has been sweeping our nation by storm! Just this week past, my mansion, which has been in the family for over ten generations, was burglarised for the seventh time this year! Taken was my own portrait, no less..."

And so he yammered on. For the better part of an hour, he went over numerous ideas to stem the tide of the recent outbreaks of criminal and

vigilante activity in the major cities. She had to admit that several of his ideas impressed her, until she remembered that he was probably just taking credit for the ideas of others. After a total of forty-seven minutes, he finally got to his point: a new record for his speeches.

"... and none of this would have happened had YOU not disbanded the noble houses!" he finished smugly. Several of the guards, and even Stardance, shuddered a little. They knew discussing the abolishment of the nobility was a forbidden topic to bring up in court, yet there it was, now openly before them.

"So, we finally reach the centre of the shrubbery maze," the queen spoke with contempt. "I must admit, I have never seen a pony beat around the bush for quite as long as you, Blueblood. I am impressed." She smirked, the white unicorn still not lowering his nose, as if looking down upon her despite her lofty perch. Eos stood; causing everypony around her to jump back as she slowly descended the steps.

"However," she added, her tone becoming cold and murderous, "This is the only time you have impressed me, in your eight years of WHINING and COMPLAINING. I recall my dressmaker telling me a story about you: about your unchivalrous nature at an ill-fated Grand Galloping Gala. Yet never, in my wildest dreams, had I painted you as the kind of pony to so blatantly insult a GODDESS as you are doing right now. How dare you show your muzzle! How DARE you continue to peddle your futile crusade!? It's over: you lost before the fight could even begin."

The lavender alicorn stood right in front of the draft unicorn, her mane billowing in the solar breeze, towering over the royal pair. Light blue eyes met dark amethyst, the former rolling in contempt before closing, a deep breath filling his lungs. "Auntie Celestia and Auntie Luna were goddesses. YOU are nothing more than a common trollop trying to fill their shoes." A collective gasp was heard in the court.

A gurgled cry of surprise echoed from Blueblood's muzzle in the ensuing silence. In a flash, the wafting mane of the alicorn jumped to life and coiled itself around his body like a twilight snake. He was lifted off of the ground, dangling in front of her like the trapped vermin he was. He looked into the eyes of the enraged mare, which were glazed over in a white glow of magic. A look of absolute horror was upon his face: finally an expression

other than smugness.

"I am tired," spoke the queen in controlled rage. "I am tired of your incessant whining. I am tired of your complaining. I am tired of your voice, of your smug attitude and of your face! In these last moments you have of life," she squeezed him a little harder to accentuate her point, "I recommend that you reflect upon it and see how useless, how destitute and how utterly unloved you really are! I severely doubt anypony will miss you."

His eyes bugged out of his sockets, desperate to hold onto that last breath he collected before it could be stolen from him. Everypony else in the room held their breaths as well at the sight of the queen killing a pony right before their eyes. The light of life slowly left the stupid unicorn's eyes as his face turned blue, a wave of fear rippling through the court. *Stop this!* cried a voice in the back of the queen's mind. *Stop it! He's not worth it! Can't you see he's scared!? Don't let him get to you! Be the better pony, or else you'll cement us in the minds of all our subjects as a tyrant!*

She growled: the body of the former prince fell to the floor, gasping for breath as her mane receded. "You are lucky I have calmed myself down, Blueblood," she added, turning her back on the heaving stallion as she returned to her throne. "If I ever catch you in my court, in my castle, ever again, consider yourself executed. GUARDS! Drag this sorry heap out of my sight!"

The guards sprang into action, they seized the recovering stallion and dragged him away unceremoniously. It was not until the guards returned that she decided to speak again, sitting upon her throne once more. "I apologize for the outburst, everypony. I simply could not stand his constant complaining anymore. I lost my temper and there is no excuse for it. Please, send in the next petitioner. I have calmed down."

With a nod, the pony at the front doors opened them, calling for the next petitioner before returning and telling the herald the name and town of origin. "Now presenting to the court, Miss Carrot Top of Ponyville," the herald announced. A yellow earth pony mare with an orange mane meekly entered the throne room, no doubt having witnessed Blueblood being dragged out, struggling for breath.

"My queen," she spoke before bowing deeply.

"Your appearance is familiar. Have we met before?" Eos asked, interested in knowing her origin.

Stardance leaned in close, and spoke to her, saying, "My queen, she fell behind on her taxes and was sent to work at Sweet Apple Acres. She owes the crown some five thousand three hundred bits, but has worked off about one thousand and fifty to date."

"Ah, that explains it," she replied before raising her voice to the audience. "What information do you have, Miss Carrot Top? Which of the most wanted is this about?"

"Um... well..." the mare trailed, trying to choose her words carefully. "All of the top four, I would suspect."

The queen arched an eyebrow, curious. "That is quite the claim. What is it that you wish to bring to our attention?"

The orange pony bit her lip in trepidation, scuffing the marble floor with her hoof. "Well, it's not about them SPECIFICALLY," she stressed, "But rather, I saw a pony who is friends with all of them and I know where she lives. I... haven't come to you before today because, well... everypony thought this mare was dead, your highness."

"What is this pony's name?" Eos asked, genuinely afraid of the answer she might give.

"T-Twilight Sparkle, your majesty." It was actually far worse than she had imagined, and that was saying something. The queen could not help but let her jaw drop ever so slightly, hidden behind her unwavering lips, at the news. How could that mare be around without her knowing? She dove into her subconscious, probing for any signs of magic. *I'm just as surprised as you are*, admitted that voice in the back of her mind.

"Come closer," she commanded, "I must validate your claim." The guards ushered her up the steps before the throne, stopping just short of it. The alicorn's horn glowed, the head of the earth pony mare shimmering in a lavender aura as the memory of the encounter floated to the surface. What she saw turned the alicorn's blood cold, one of her eyes twitching in

confusion as the aura vanished. "The claim is verified as true," she spoke, murmurs sounding through the court.

"Stardance?" she asked, looking to him, speaking before he could answer, "Inform the director of the R.E.R.T.S. that Miss Carrot Top has been awarded five hundred bits pardon off of her debt for services to the crown. Furthermore, go to the director of the Royal Investigation Bureau and have him list one Twilight Sparkle as number one on the nation's most wanted list.

"The mare in question is of average height and build, a unicorn with a lavender coat, deep blue mane with a single pink streak and a cutie mark of a purple six-point star surrounded by five smaller white stars. List a five hundred-thousand bit reward for capture. Include a warning as well, citing her as armed with powerful magic and dangerous. Permission is given to hire bounty hunters if he must. I want this mare ALIVE. Make special note of that key fact."

"Yes, your highness!" he spoke, teleporting away the instant he finished compiling the note.

"You are dismissed," she added to Carrot Top, who bowed and backed her way out of the room.

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Lunch, as usual, proved to be a boring affair for the ruler of the sun and moon, as she dined in the gentle embrace of silence once more. In an effort to save money for the war effort, she volunteered to take a slip of quality in the food she would normally eat. That day, she had soup and a hay and daisy sandwich as opposed to fine cuisine like fresh garden salad with exotic seasonings, fruits and dressings.

Normally, while her generals sat in council, she would go about doing paperwork, or use the time creatively in order to relieve stress and actually have fun. However, the earlier news told her that she simply could not leave them to their own devices anymore. Shimmering Pass was an important trade route with strategic importance, and recapturing it would be difficult, if not impossible, now that they had lost it.

Walking down the halls with her trusted advisor, she silently mused over ideas to try and retake the landmark before remembering she needed to know how the griffins captured it in the first place. A sigh passed her lips as the strain of the day was beginning to make itself known to the lavender alicorn. Later that night, she planned to have a nice, long soak in her tub and forgo all of the paperwork waiting for her in the office. It could always wait until tomorrow.

Two unicorn guards stood before a set of big, white double doors at the end of a rather long hallway. With a quick bow to the monarch, their horns glowed as the doors parted, opening up into the War Council chamber, otherwise known as the War Room. Inside sat a magical map of Equestria on the opposite wall, taking up almost the entire side. On it, little blue, green and red dots moved around, a white line showing the front.

Queen Eos sat herself on the tallest chair, directly in front of the map, facing the door as she put her front hooves on the table. It was a plain white and rectangular conference table, the smooth and polished surface only broken by raised semi circles in front of each chair for her four generals, her advisor (and his aide), the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence. Naturally they could rarely come directly to the castle, so they almost exclusively appeared as magical representations.

At the stroke of one in the afternoon, the alicorn's horn shimmered as the orbs in front of each place began to glow, the lights of the council chamber diminished to aid the magic. Six pony-shaped silhouettes of light began to appear at their seats, each glowing electric blue. Their details were obscured by the magic, but the monarch could place their colours from her memory.

"Stardance," spoke the queen once the spell finished, "Please, begin roll call."

"Yes, your majesty," he spoke before clearing his throat. "Her Grand Royal Highness, Queen Eos of Equestria, Ruler of the Sun and Moon," he started. "The Right-Honourable Regal Scroll, Prime Minister of Equestria. The Honourable Dropkick, Minister of Defence. General Horseshoe. General Portland. General Shatterbuck. General Shetland." Each one of the ponies called nodded their head, or otherwise made their presence known.

"Grand Royal Advisor, Stardance," he nodded before ticking his name off, "Advisor's Aide and Council Clerk, Jade Buckingham... in absentia." The queen quirked an eyebrow at the rather uncharacteristic absence of the clerk: usually, Stardance and Jade were the only ponies she could count on in the castle to always be in attendance. Still, it was of little consequence, since her advisor was well prepared to take over her duties in the meantime.

"This meeting of the War Council is now in session," Eos started, as the ranking pony in attendance. "Would you be so kind as to go over the minutes of the last meeting, Stardance?"

"Of course, your highness," he started before going into the details from last week. Old business always came first in meetings, like reviewing battle plans brought up in the new business in the last meeting, and then approval or denial of the plans. As much as Eos wanted to tear General Shatterbuck a new one for losing Shimmering Pass, that would be new business, so she had to be patient. "...and that's all there is. Now, is there any discussion of the old business before moving on?" asked the advisor, only to be met by silence.

"I suppose that brings us to new business," the Queen smirked, glancing in Shatterbuck's direction, who squirmed under her piercing gaze. "Does anypony have anything to add, or am I going to have to be the one to bring up some... issues?"

"I have something, your highness," Regal Scroll announced, much to the Pegasus generals' relief. "Earlier today, you downgraded Applejack from number one on the most wanted list and replaced her with somepony named Twilight Sparkle. Now, I am not one to question your majesty's judgment, but why have you listed that you only want her alive?"

"Mr Prime Minister, you are technically out of order, since this is not normally a military issue," the Queen replied coldly. "However, in this instance it is of vital national security. The mare in question is an incredibly talented and powerful magician. In fact, she is the only pony... only creature in this world that can pose any significant threat to me."

"Why not kill her?" questioned the unicorn known as Portland. "If she can

challenge the crown, why keep her alive?"

"If we list her as wanted dead or alive, that will only pique more interest. Rumours about the mare are ridiculous and far-flung, but not in regards to her power. If our enemies learn she had been sighted, they will try to capture her themselves. Then, it is completely likely that they will try to use her as, or part of, a magical weapon of mass destruction and sweep over the nation like a plague. I don't know about any of you, but I want her in this castle so we KNOW she isn't a threat."

"Does she really possess that much power?" asked the earth pony known as Horseshoe.

"Take all the unicorns in our command, combine them all into one single pony and you MIGHT, just might manage to create ONE Twilight Sparkle. Does that answer your question, General?" asked the queen. All ponies present, through magic or otherwise, nodded their heads in understanding. "Now, General Shatterbuck. About Shimmering Pass..."

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Like the breakfast and lunch before it, dinner was the usual unceremonious affair: the queen preferred something light before she wrestled with the task of lowering the sun from the sky. Thankfully, she was allowed just over a half hour of time to herself before her next appointment, so Eos took a quick nap after putting the sun to rest and taking her second painkiller for the day. Staring into her vanity, just before leaving to see her dressmaker, she frowned.

Under her billowing mane, the scar of rainbow from that attack on her life remained. It had been quite the task to remove the rainbow juice from her blood, causing a pain she would never wish on anypony, living or dead. Even three years later, some of the substance remained inside, putting her through constant, throbbing pain. Her limp was the only sign she ever let show of her trauma, covering the scar with her mane as much as possible. The juice would have to work its way out the slow way: she had no other choice.

Looking at her (magically repaired) alarm clock, the queen could tell she was starting to run late, and a proper lady would never keep another

waiting. Taking a deep breath, she emerged from her royal sanctuary to find no entourage waiting since her advisor had gone home for the night. The lights of the castle met the night sky with stark contrast, turning the crystal-clear windows into translucent mirrors that reflected the regal alicorn as she trotted to her appointment.

Approaching the door leading in, the queen gently knocked on the door, as was proper etiquette. "Come in," spoke a voice from beyond the wood paneling. "Ah, your majesty: right on time, as usual," the alabaster unicorn replied with a bow as the monarch entered the room. Although she put on a cheery disposition, the alicorn could tell that the tailor was not at all pleased to see her. It was like this every time.

"How are the designs for next year's Gala dresses coming along, Miss Rarity?" the queen asked as she shut the door behind her with a causal wave of her magic. The room was a large, circular space, about as close to the size and shape of the Carousel Boutique as she could manage. Purple curtains hung from the ceiling to serve as partitions, a small circular stage in the centre so she could work better at the undersides of a pony.

"They are coming along, your highness. I've had a few ideas, and I've wanted to hear what you think about them," she replied, the barest hint of discontent in her voice.

"I trust your judgment, Miss Rarity. Now, let's get this over with. I have some important relaxa--- paperwork to get to." With that, the queen began to strip her vestments; crown, shoes and necklace, floating them over to forms around the room as she walked up to the stage. The white unicorn nodded and dug into her drawers with her magic, pulling out a long measuring tape to use to get her dimensions just right. She had notes, but she wanted every dress to fit perfectly, which required re-measuring for every single one.

"Um... your highness?" the unicorn asked some minutes later. "I've... been wondering. Well, you see, there are so many ponies out in the city that are cold and homeless, especially since the price of just about everything is going up. So, I was thinking, maybe it would be better to cancel the Gala and spend some of the money on fabric, so I... I mean, the crown, could hand out blankets to them, since winter is coming."

"We've been over this, Rarity," replied the queen. "The Grand Galloping Gala is the only event of the year where I can try and garner some sympathy and improve relations on the international stage. Plus, it is a tradition thousands of years old, and I will not be the one to break it. I like your idea, but I simply cannot afford both with the war. This is the last I ever want to hear about it. Understood?"

"A... a thousand pardons, your majesty," the elegant mare bowed before resuming her work. Although the last Gala was but three months ago, the queen liked to give her dressmaker plenty of time to plan, gather materials and create the next year's dress with as little stress as possible. In some ways, Eos was incredibly charitable, but in others, it drove the white pony mad with her demands and reasoning.

"You know, I heard a very interesting rumour today," the ruler of sun and moon smirked as the mare started measuring around her undercarriage. "Apparently, a Miss Twilight Sparkle was sighted in Ponyville yesterday. It's very strange because I distinctly remember killing a mare fitting that name and description, as I have told you a thousand times before. A most curious phenomenon, don't you think?"

Rarity dropped her jaw (and her measuring tape) in shock. Eos could see her mind racing as she figured out that she had truly betrayed all her friends to work for their enemy. The realization was marked by the building of teardrops around the rims of her eyes.

Holding back her sobs, the white pony quietly picked up her tape and continued to measure Queen Eos, hiding her face so she could not see her tears roll down her cheeks. Eventually, she finished her (rather hasty) intricate measurements. "I'm... I'm all done, your highness. I'll... I'll see you next w-week for a... a design meeting," she sniffed. Eos left the chamber just as soon as she put her garments back on, straining her ears to hear the muffled cries from the tailor.

That was a very, very mean thing you did to Rarity! the voice nagged, causing the monarch to roll her eyes. *You know she feels bad about leaving her friends... our old friends.*

"Oh, shut up," Eos spoke to herself as she walked down the hall. "She deserved it for that crack about us not giving a damn for the common pony.

You know we feel bad about it, but there's nothing we can do right now." The voice in the back of her mind remained silent, as if turning her nose up at the queen in disgust, which only aggravated her just a little more.

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Staring out across the vast fields of her country allowed a sense of calm and relaxation to wash over her body, wearied by a long and difficult day. Usually screaming her lungs out at a stupid pony that deserved it, or making the dressmaker cry, would ease her nerves and help her feel better. Yet, today they only made her feel worse in the end. She was beginning to feel as if something was wrong with her.

Those feelings only helped that irritating voice become more powerful in the recesses of her mind, until it felt like it took up the entire back half. What was going on with her? Was she going soft? Nothing had changed in the last few days and she doubted the news that somehow a SECOND her was wandering about the country would do much.

"Stars damn you, Twilight Sparkle," the alicorn cursed as she slumped on the railings of her private tower. Something far above seemed amiss as she cursed the pony, but she decided to ignore it since it was coming from over Trottingham. How she hated that city and its vigilante activities! They could all die in a fire for all she cared. In fact, she had to restrain herself on many occasions from cutting her losses and doing just that.

I hope you know that you just cursed yourself, the voice smugly spoke. Just out of the corner of her eye, reflecting on the window sat an image of the lavender unicorn, glaring at her in disapproval, as usual. *Suits you right too, since you really hurt Rarity's feelings. Not to mention all of the other monstrous things you've done since that day.*

"Oh, I'm sorry," growled Eos. "Remind me WHO blew up Ponyville? Remind me WHO attacked Celestia and Luna? You're as much at fault for this as I am; I just finished what you started." The phantom Twilight looked to the ground dejectedly, tears building up in her eyes as memories of the day wafted across both of their minds.

The difference is that I regret what I've done; you seem to revel in it and take PRIDE in making me miserable. I don't know how there can be two of

us running about, but I hope she kills you, even if it damns me to the Hells as well. We both deserve nothing less for our crimes. We've made our bed, and now we have to lie in it, Eos. For the moment, we can only do the best we can. She looked beyond the towering mare and into the stars above.

"Shut up," dismissed the voice. "If I cared to listen to your counsel, I would have done so a long time ago."

You spared Blueblood today, despite your vehement desire to strangle him, countered the phantom.

"That is different. The foal would be a waste of my divine power to kill. Let nature weed him out like the genetic scum that he is. Natural selection, Twilight: that is why I am in control and you are naught but a powerless apparition existing on the fringes of my illustrious being." Her divine senses overwhelmed the alicorn, as if something in the stars above had gone wrong. Giving them a passing glance, she saw a small meteor hurtling towards the earth, aimed right at Trottingham. "At least one of my problems will resolve itself."

I have more control than you care to admit, Mirror Twilight spoke, her eyes becoming just as cold as the queen's. *I can tell you right now that you will go and save that town from the space debris, and do you know why, Eos?* The monarch shook her head. *You will do it because you know that if you don't, you'll be blamed and hated even more than you are right now. There will be armed rebellion and you will be forced to fight the war on two fronts.*

The ruler of Equestria winced in pain at that remark, knowing that her words were true. She did not want to say so, but the smug look on the unicorn's face told her that she already knew she was right. "I really, really hate you," Eos hissed in great loathing, looking to the sky above Trottingham to see the sizable astral body hurtling towards it. The queen took a deep breath and sighed, concentrating with all of her magical power.

In an instant, the night sky surrounded her, as cold and terrible as ice, yet hot and brutal like fire. A loose collection of rock sat under her hooves, her eyes opening to behold the chunk of space rock hurtling towards her country, her planet. The Earth loomed before her, like a giant blue and green eye, unsettling her heart. It was as if the entire population of the

world looked upon her expectantly, causing her to delay.

"I should really just let this hunk of rock do as the universe wants and kill those thankless cretins," she muttered into the vacuum of space, her words unheard even by her own ears. The rock was large, big enough to wipe out the city of one million ponies in a heartbeat upon landing. It would be very easy to say that it was beyond even her power, consequences be damned.

Remember what I said? the voice nagged once more. *Just because they don't like you doesn't mean you can abandon your duty to them.*

"Shut up. I'm here, aren't I?" With that, her mighty horn began to glow as bright as a sun, the lavender alicorn focusing as much magic and power into her front hooves as possible. Gathering all the mana she could spare, the goddess opened her eyes, the Earth almost completely filling her sight. She reared with a soundless whiny, kicking at space as her forward limbs dangled before swiftly becoming rigid. They slammed into the loose chunk of rock, creating a mighty crack on the surface.

Magical energy encircled the chunk of rock as white light, causing further cracks in the ball of rock as it broke up into millions of tiny pieces, much like her alarm clock just that morning. She flew down towards the planet with the rocks ensuring none of the chunks would be big enough to cause harm to anypony. Only when they entered the atmosphere did she vanish in a flash of light, appearing back on her balcony in Canterlot.

"I'm going to bed," she spat before limping down the stairs. In her tired stupor, she failed to notice the smiling unicorn in the vanity mirror as she trudged past. Her mirth was two-fold: having coaxed the monarch into doing something good, and remembering a time when a friend appeared in a mirror just as she did.

The citizens of Trottingham watched the meteor shower in awe that night, little realizing how close they had come to complete destruction.

Chapter 5

First Steps to a New Future

In a dark, stone-walled room deep under the town of Ponyville, a huddled mass lay under a red and slightly itchy blanket. The bed was little more than a hay-stuffed mattress on the floor with a pillow and blankets, but it served its purpose. After all, the room was designed with function in mind over design, since the owners could not afford any luxuries, never mind for the dozens of other rooms in the underground lair.

Twilight Sparkle lay curled under the blankets, silently weeping to herself for the past day and a half in confusion and sorrow. She barely ate, slept or even breathed through all the crying; her golem nature the only thing keeping her from death's embrace. All of her friends were dead, missing, or working for the one pony most hated in the country.

As soon as she heard the name of the queen was Eos, she became frightened of the empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. In her state, she could only draw out one conclusion: somehow, Eos had become separate from her and altered the past to create a new, dark and depressing future. Yet, as good an explanation as that was, it did not explain how she could remain asleep for so long unless she was bewitched. Even then, how could she have ever awakened?

More questions began to filter through the grief she felt for her dear friends, fresh tears and gentle sobs escaping from her lips. It was all too much for her to bear, making the lavender unicorn wish it were all a dream. Then, she could wake up, be comforted by all of her friends and be told just how silly it was by Pinkie Pie. No matter how hard she cried or hurt herself, she just could not wake up.

It's not a dream, spoke a voice in the back of her mind, causing a shiver to roll down her spine. The unicorn moaned and dragged herself from under the covers, a tiny mirror floating over to her so she could scold her directly to her evil face.

"Shut up!" she cried, looking at her own reflection. "I know you're taunting me from the castle! I know that you want nothing more than to see me cry,

you horrible murderous horse! Leave me alone, or by Celestia, I will make you regret the day you darkened the doorstep of my soul!" The voice seemed to back down, leaving her alone to her misery once more. Twilight buried her face in her pillow and started crying again.

What had she done to deserve this? Unfortunately, the answer all too willingly raised its ugly head as the memories of that day bubbled to the surface. She could see the looks of horror on her friends' and the princesses' faces as she went about her villainous rampage through the streets of Ponyville and her lashing out at the very being who gave her life.

The lavender mare found it all too easy to stay curled up in the room, feeling sorry for herself until the day the magic keeping her alive would fade, turning her back into the clay from whence she came. Sadly, that day would be a long way off, since she had done more reading into golems. Apparently, they had an eighty-year life-cycle that could be extended when the creator passed it along, usually to the next generation. That way, a single golem could serve a family for hundreds of years.

"Oh Twilight," sighed a voice beside her bed. The lavender mare jumped, turning around to see the frowning face of a sky-blue Pegasus. "It's times like this that make it hard for me to be your friend. I mean, here you are, lying around like a sad-sack because a few things beyond your control go wrong! Sheesh!"

"R-rainbow?" she asked. "But... but you're dead!"

"Yeah? So? A part of me still lives on in YOU, Twilight, and all of our other friends. I'm just sick of seeing you laze around when you've got important stuff to do!"

"Oh yeah? Like WHAT?"

"For starters," the shade started, "You have to find all of our remaining friends. I might be a part of your mind, but I can tell you that they all miss you very much. You have to unite all of our friends so we can stand against that usurping horse together! Then we can destroy the queen and find a way to bring Celestia and Luna back so they can make everything right again!"

"I guess you're right: moping around won't do anypony any good, least of all myself," she conceded to the phantom. Rainbow smiled and nodded her head before retreating back into the inner depths of her mind. The lavender unicorn pulled herself out of bed, her legs slightly shaking from the lack of exercise over the last thirty hours or so.

With a wave of her magic, the heavy wooden door into her room opened, revealing the dark stone tunnel of a hall beyond. Ponies would occasionally trot past, giving her the customary look of hidden fear before continuing on with their duties. A couple even addressed her as 'General Twilight' as she passed, causing her to raise an eyebrow in confusion. The last time she checked, she was not in any army, never mind in the position of a senior officer.

After a few minutes of searching, the lavender librarian finally found herself at the set of double doors that lead into the mess hall. Like all other rooms in the base, candles atop the table and sconces on the walls lit the dank stone walls. Ground water continuously seeped into the chambers, so several ponies mopped the floors on a daily basis, lest the facility become flooded.

"Howdy, Twilight!" waved Applebloom from a seat further in. "Come an' sit over here with us!" The scholar weaved her way through the traffic and sat herself down on the bench with Dinky and Scootaloo as present company. "Ah'm glad ta see you came outta yer room. We've been worryin' about you for HOURS now, ya know." The others nodded and threw in their own feelings on the matter, each concerned for her well-being.

"I'm fine," the unicorn replied confidently to their voices of concern. "I just needed a little bit of time to myself to work things out. Yes, I was feeling sorry for myself, but then I got around to thinking: being depressed is not going to do me, or anypony else, any good. Besides, I've got to re-unite all of my friends so we can tackle the queen together!"

"That's the spirit, Twilight!" Scootaloo chirped in excitement. "If you're feeling up to it, after lunch we can go back to our conference room and fill you in on the Apple Clan, the Everfree Movement and... that other one." As much as she wanted to know why they were so afraid of the Party Poppers, the unicorn decided not to ask, since she would be sure to find out about it later.

For the moment, she occupied herself by pondering on how she could have mourned for an entire day and a half without realizing the flow of time. Then again, such an occurrence was not out of the ordinary for her, since she could lose time quite easily when stressed. She let out a sigh as the salad slid in front of her, more at her situation than the food itself. Why did everything always have to turn into some drawn-out adventure?

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A half-hour later, the lavender mare found herself seated in her chair at the conference table with Scootaloo, Applebloom and Sweetie Belle. Dinky had to break off from the group as they went: something about setting something up for their meeting. In the meantime, the four mares sat in the dark chamber, chatting idly while they waited for some papers to be delivered to them.

If it were not for the dark and depressing atmosphere, Twilight could almost imagine the four of them outside Mr. Shake's on a warm summer's day. Of course, she and her friends would be older than the three young mares in front of her, but she did not mind so much, as the hoof of time waits for no pony. Not even the princesses could escape the inevitable.

A knock sounded ten minutes after they seated themselves, Dinky and a young stallion standing at the door once it opened. The former gently took a stack of papers from his gawking mouth (his eyes directly on Twilight, of course) and addressed him, "Thank you, Lieutenant, that will be all." With a wave of her horn, the door shut in his face, causing him to yelp. Twilight hoped it was just surprise that caused it.

"I told them we'll be a few minutes. They're anxious, but they will wait," she spoke to the three Crusaders before sitting at her seat. With a second flash of her horn, the papers congregated in front of the lavender mare. "Here you are: all our surveillance records on the other three groups." Twilight thanked Dinky for the papers before holding them aloft in her telekinetic grasp, reading them over carefully.

The Apple Clan

Leaders: General Applejack, Commander Big Macintosh, Commander

Bareburn

Base Location: Unknown

Goals: To transform Equestria into a modified republic, working under a President as opposed to a Prime Minister, who serves as Head of Government and State. Motion of the heavenly bodies will be given to a specific senator or two. It is currently unknown how they would keep said anointed officials in check.

Modus Operandi: Working with the Buffalo of the Appleloosan Plain, the Apple Clan engages in open-war guerrilla tactics against members of the Equestrian Royal Army and other crown authorities. Organization is loose and individual commanders generally operate at their own discretion, making infiltration and manipulation easy.

Relationship with the Crusaders: Tense, as our solutions to the government issue are similar, but our plans on how to deal with the gap caused by exterminating the queen are vastly different. We are officially neutral, but with hostile tendencies.

The Everfree Movement

Leaders: General Fluttershy, General Zecora (MIA; presumed deceased), Commander Angel.

Base Location: Unknown (Everfree Forest)

Goals: Naturalization of all Equestria via the destruction of all social structures. In essence, they are an anarchist group and are treated as such by ourselves, the other movements and the crown. The heavenly bodies would be released from any and all control and be allowed to take their natural (if any) course. If the assumption is wrong, this could plunge the world into half-scorching-day and half-freezing-night.

Modus Operandi: Former Crusader general Fluttershy recruits animals to do her bidding, although a few ponies have joined her ranks as of late. Tactics include sabotaging important facilities, homes, and landmarks.

They will also abduct members of the crown who wander too close to Everfree. To this end, they work to delay, or keep the new Weather Factory (currently under construction: see Project 'New Horizons') kept offline permanently.

Relationship with the Crusaders: Hostile, yet respectful as we sympathise with Operation 'Mother Nature.'

The Party Poppers

Leaders: Pinkamena Diane "Pinkie" Pie, Rainbow Dash (honorary and posthumously due to the destruction of Cloudsdale)

Base Location: Unknown, and we're not willing to find out.

Goals: Complete and utter destruction of everything tangible. They do not care what will happen when/if they kill Queen Eos.

Modus Operandi: Chaos. Sheer, unadulterated chaos. There is no rhyme or reason to what they do and how they go about doing it. However, two clear themes do emerge: a dark and sick sense of humor, and a nihilistic desire for the world to die. Their leader seems to switch opinions and dispositions at the drop of a hat to further reflect those themes. "If we're going to die, we might as well die laughing," quote Pinkie Pie during the conflict in Neighpon.

Relationship with the Crusaders: Extremely hostile. Do not approach any member unless heavily armed.

Twilight dropped the papers as her telekinetic field failed, shaking at the information dump on her already fragile mind. If just one more thing disturbed her, just one more thing, she felt like she was going to snap and repeat the Ponyville fire. She then brought a bag to her face as she began to hyperventilate as she felt her body become flooded with stress.

The Crusaders looked at her uneasily, knowing that the facts would be hard to swallow, especially for a neurotic golem with magical power projected to equal that of Princess Celestia's. They knew she was a literal

powder keg of magical energy just waiting to go off. However, they figured the impact would be lessened coming from them instead of allowing her to find out from a less understanding and comforting source.

After several minutes of shallow breathing, the lavender mare slowly calmed herself down, remembering to take deep breaths just like Luna taught her. Fluttershy was an anarchist and Pinkie was some crazy mad-mare? How could all of this happen just because she was not around to keep them in check? She groaned and massaged her temples with her hooves, trying desperately to relax: she did not want to cost more innocent ponies their lives.

"If you're feeling up to it, Twilight," Sweetie Belle spoke slowly. "We can talk to them. Dinky invented a spell that lets us communicate no matter the distance. It used to be a great advantage for our cause... until the queen found out and made her own version of the system."

"They're all anxious to see you, Twilight," Scootaloo added. "Maybe just your presence will get them to reconcile? We've waited for you for ten years. A lot changes, but even more stays the same. Please, just give it a try?" Taking a final deep breath, the librarian nodded her head. "Do it, Dinky," the Pegasus urged.

Dinky Hooves took a deep breath, her horn glowing in a pale blue aura as the semi-circular parts of the table began to light up with a soft cyan glow. What little light the room afforded was dimmed, to better help the spell and the ponies that used it. At first, only the orbs of the ponies present glowed, but slowly, others tuned in too, leaving only the ones in front of Rainbow and Rarity's chairs unlit.

"That's all of them," Applebloom chirped in delight, straightening out the worn Stetson on her head. With all the others glowing, the central sphere shimmered red and green, casting the colours upon the wall as ghostly apparitions appeared sitting in the chairs. Each one of Twilight's friends faded into existence, their forms sitting at the chair with their colours a little faded, but still recognizable despite the dim light of the room.

"Holy Shoot!" spoke the crackly voice of Applejack through the spell as Dinky's horn faded. "Ah thought y'all were just pullin' my leg! Is that REALLY you, sugarcube?!" Various exclamations of the like sounded from

all the different ponies gathered around, except for Trixie, who just starred at Twilight, as if x-raying her through the magical field.

"Oh, Twilight!" chirped Fluttershy. "I wish I was there so I could give you a great, big hug! We've all missed you so much." Although they could not see it, tears were beginning to well up in her eyes as Angel joined her.

"This calls for my Super-Mega-Awesome-Party Party!!!" cheered Pinkie waving her hooves around in delight. The Crusaders (and everypony else) seemed to breathe a sigh of relief once they saw Pinkie was her happy self. "Oh, we're going to need streamers and balloons and cake and a place we can all meet up and guests and music and party games! Oh, we simply HAVE to have pin-the-tail on the pony! I've really got to find my party plan book because I had the most wonderful party planned for when you came home and..."

"Well, I'm more interested in hearing what Twilight Sparkle has planned for the future," Trixie interrupted the pink party mare. "The sooner we end this war and kill that mule of a queen; the sooner things can get back to normal so Trixie can perform for the masses of Equestria again. Being on the Outlands does nothing for Trixie's image, or for her stomach."

"Well, um..." Twilight trailed. "I don't really have anything planned now... beyond getting all of us back together, that is. I mean, I know what happened to Rainbow and Rarity, but I doubt Rainbow would want us to stay divided like this. So, for the moment, I'd kind of like to get us all on speaking terms again, then try and convince Rarity to come back."

"Rarity!?" they all spoke in varying amounts of outrage or disgust. Then the arguing started. Overlapping voices soon overwhelmed the lavender pony's ears as they all complained about the very notion of having the alabaster unicorn in their midst again. However, it was not until Applejack shouted over the din that things became more coherent.

"No offence, sugarcube," she spoke, silencing the others. "But Rarity is a bona fide traitor! She sold us out to Eos by tellin' her that we existed! Now half our faces are on Equestria's most wanted list! Yet, here ya are, preachin' to us about how we gotta forgive her and welcome her back with open legs? Ah just can't do that, Twi. That's a good way to get 'bucked over', if'n yew catch mah drift."

"Yeah! Rarity is a meany-mean pants!" Pinkie slammed her hoof on her own table. Then a look of alarm spread over her face as she cried out, "Twitcha-twitch! Twitcha-twitch! Bon-Bon! Look out for the vat of a-" A sudden scream of pain came from her spot, making everypony else shudder.

"AHH! MY EYES!" shouted a voice from beyond.

"Acid," the pink mare finished with a giggle and a snort.

"Okay..." Dinky trailed. "Sweetie, can you go get us some water? This is going to be a long one," she sighed as the argument picked up again. The white unicorn nodded and did just that, leaving the room with a soft click. Twilight twitched an eye at the spectacle before her. All of her friends seemed to hate each other with more passion than she had seen in ages! Not even the spat between Rarity and AJ at her first slumber party could compare. They looked like they wanted each other dead.

"What the SORREL HELLS is going ON around here!" she screeched, slamming her hooves into the table in anger and frustration. She had finally reached her boiling point, causing everypony to fall silent. "We're all supposed to be FRIENDS! What happened to you girls? Don't you remember all we've been through? We're too close to be fighting like this: how can you possibly mean all the things you're saying!?"

Pinkie's eyes became half-lidded, a smile developing across her muzzle that freaked everypony out, causing a wave of shudders to go around the table. "The Elements of Harmony are no longer bound together by Magic. Loyalty is dead and Generosity is a traitor!" A fit of giggles overcame the pink mare as tears visibly streamed from her eyes. "All that's left... is to end it all!"

Scootaloo groaned and smacked her head on the table once. "Some ponies just want to watch the world burn," she moaned in frustration.

"But I'm here now!" the lavender unicorn pleaded. "Yes, Rainbow is gone and Rarity made a mistake, but we can still fix this if we just work together! As representatives of the Elements of Harmony, we are honour-bound to do so. Even if we have to find a new p-pony to be Loyalty in R-Rainbow's

stead..." She sat down in the chair, tears beginning to crest her eyes as well.

"No offence, Twi," the farmer sighed. "But ah ain't working with THAT locoweed-eating, crazy baker! Ain't no how!" She pointed an accusing hoof at Pinkie, who only giggled quietly to herself.

"Besides that," Fluttershy finally spoke after hiding under her table, "Rarity is working for EOS! I'd never work with a pony in league of the one completely responsible for DESTROYING the natural order! That includes the rest of you!"

Trixie left her chair to take care of something else while the former Elements of Harmony squawked like chickens with their heads cut off. The rest of the Crusaders lowered their heads. Dinky sighed, thinking back to better times as she decided to speak her mind. "None here truly care for Equestria anymore. If you did, we'd be listening to Twilight: the only pony who could possibly challenge the queen! If she says we need to work together, then we need to work together! Can't anypony see that?"

"I should really use locoweed in my next cake!" chirped the pink pony. "Then it would be a real surprise party!"

"Girls!" The lavender mare desperately pleaded. "I thought you were better than this! None of you care for the greater good: you just want your own vision of what this nation should be to come true! Please! We can't exchange one mismanaged tyranny for another! We... we need to bring back Celestia and Luna... somehow."

"Fer the greater good?" questioned Applebloom. "That's HER motto, Twilight. Besides, the princesses are dead. We're the only hope Equestria has left."

"...And at the moment," continued the orange Pegasus, "It's not a very bright hope."

"So?" Twilight asked, beginning to swing wild from all the stress around her. "So what if they're dead? I'm sure that somewhere out there, we can find a spell, or, or a potion that can bring them back!"

"THAT'S NOT NATURAL!" the yellow Pegasus screamed. "How DARE you, Twilight Sparkle! How DARE you!" With that, she stormed off in a huff, the soft blue glow of the stone in front of her chair growing dim before finally disappearing.

"Unicorns!" the honest farmer gritted. "That's all y'all unicorns are good fer, huh? SOLVIN' YER PROBLEMS WITH BUCKING MAGIC!! You make me sick, Twilight!" Applejack spat into a nearby pot, the 'ting!' sounding through the spell. With an infuriated slam of her hoof, her orb went out as well, taking her from the meeting.

Meanwhile, the pink party pony continued to giggle, her face in a Cheshire grin as her eyes moved into the corner of their sockets. To say the lavender mare was freaked out by the sight would be a massive understatement. "No. Death to all. The world is ending! Stars will fall. Reversing entropy is pointless! Locoweed should be legalized!!"

"Hmm?" Trixie asked as she seated herself back in her chair. "What did the Great and Powerful Trixie miss? Probably nothing, since the hayseed and tree-hugger are gone. Do Trixie a favour? Only call her when you know something USEFUL. Until then, don't bother!" Her orb went dark as well.

Dinky's horn shimmered, the rest of the orbs going dark as light returned to the room, leaving the purple unicorn squinting a little, trying to calm herself down again. "And that is why we split up," she explained. "Otherwise, half of us would be dead because of difference of opinion. Although, Luna and Celestia would be no match for Eos: she controls both the sun AND the moon. Are you okay, Twilight?"

"Yeah, I'm just..." she trailed off, looking for words, "Disappointed: at myself, mostly, for thinking of something so stupid. I was getting stressed and I was not thinking straight when I suggested that idea. I'm so sorry I crushed your hope for reunification."

"It isn't your fault, Twilight," Scootaloo spoke. "It was... kind of a long shot from the start." The door opened, allowing Sweetie Belle to behold the aftermath. She looked around, sighing with understanding before sending the drinks over to the present mares, sitting at the table herself. "We're sorry we put you through that. Really."

"I need some fresh air," the lavender unicorn spoke before rising. "I'm going outside for a bit."

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At Dinky's insistence on an escort, the two unicorns ascended the slowly rising passage back up into the warmth of Sugarcube Corner. The blond unicorn went ahead, deactivating traps and making sure everything was clear. Using her magic, the floorboards became transparent on their side, allowing them to see that the store was clear. With a flick of her horn, the secret entrance opened, the Cakes busy in the back.

After a quick check out the front door, the two mares ventured outside, the lavender mare having to cover her eyes in the afternoon sun. Finally free of the dark confines of the underground fortress, Twilight took a deep breath, savouring the late spring air. The faintest hints of lilac and sunflowers hit her nostrils, resulting in a pleasant smell to compliment the sunny day. "Well, good thing it's clear today," Dinky smiled as they started into the square. "Ever since Cloudsdale exploded, the weather has been... unpredictable. Thankfully, the weather teams manage to keep extreme weather under control."

Without the weather factory, the climate of Equestria became that of the Everfree Forest: wild and unpredictable. All the weather ponies could do was to stem the tide of big storms, or go off in search of clouds for scheduled showers. Nowadays, the idea of weather scheduling had all but become an extinct concept to the citizens of Equestria, since the new weather factory was delayed by about two years thanks to the Everfree Movement.

However, looking at the quaint town of Ponyville, one would hardly notice the state of the nation, or the climate. Happy ponies walked around as they always did, going about their daily lives in a haze of relative bliss. They did not need to worry so much about the war. They did not need to worry about their friends baying for each other's blood, too blind to see the futility of being so angry.

Why did everything always have to get shoved onto her plate? Was it too much to ask to just read her books and be with her friends? Why did all of the weird stuff have to happen to them? Twilight gave her head a liberal

shake, trying to remember that she came outside to relax and not work herself into another tizzy. To that end, she took several deep breaths as they walked down the streets.

"So Dinky," Twilight spoke, deciding to try and take her mind off of her misery, "I haven't seen your mom around recently. What has she been up to?"

The purplish-grey unicorn sighed in a mixture of frustration and pain. "You'll have to follow me, if you want to see... to see my mom, Twilight."

"Please, lead the way," spoke the librarian. Dinky nodded her head and quickly changed direction, leaving the main streets and heading north along the back alleys. The librarian had traveled all through the streets of town in her nearly two years of residence; however, she did not recognize any of the buildings down this one in particular. "Was this street rebuilt... after the fire, I mean?"

"Yeah, actually, now that I think about it," the younger mare replied. "The fires stopped spreading about three doors down from my house... my old house. You see, I had to move out of it about... eight years ago?"

"Why did you have to move out? Your mom could always pay the rent, as far as I know," said Twilight Sparkle. Seeing her genuine confusion, Dinky Hooves just snorted in reply.

Eventually, the crowded buildings began to thin as the cobblestone streets turned into dirt underhoof. The librarian had no clue where she found herself, as she had never been to this section of Ponyville before. However, an arch and wrought-iron fence soon came into view through the sparsely placed trees and bushes. Upon the wood backing of the sign rested black, iron letters, bore the words, 'Green Fields Cemetery.'

Stark realization crept across the lavender mare's features, causing her head to lower as she continued to follow Dinky. Tombstones stood side-by-side and row-on-row up the gently sweeping slopes, the trees overhead providing cover from the elements for the monuments. After about twenty rows, the younger unicorn turned, leading the librarian past several of the stones, all bearing unfamiliar names... until the inevitable.

At the top of the stone, like with all other ponies, was the symbol of her cutie mark: a string of seven bubbles rising gently. The black onyx markings of her mark contrasted wonderfully against the smooth grey stone, giving the illusion of depth. Below her mark, there was her birth, and death date. And beneath that, there was an inscription.

*Here lies Derpy Hooves. A beloved mother and dedicated mailmare.
Taken before her time in the pursuit of a better future.*

Twilight lowered her head in respect, fighting back more tears because she knew that the genius Pegasus would not want her to weep, for her pain was over. Yet, it was incredibly hard to keep her composure, especially when her friends wanted nothing to do with her, or each other anymore. Only then did it dawn upon her just how lonely she was, thrust into a strange and dark world. How she longed to be with her friends, with Spike, with the Princess... Derpy...

"She died because she had a theory," spoke the orphaned unicorn, fighting back her own tears. "I guess you died in vain after all, Mom. You see, Twilight, right at the beginning of Queen Eos' reign, she noticed something. She developed a theory that soon became a well-known and accepted rumour. You see, a lot of ponies are scared of you... because they think that you're Eos in disguise."

Doing her best acting, the unicorn shivered and looked at the former filly wildly, as if she were shocked to hear all of this as opposed to having figured it out. She shook and sat on her haunches, shaking her head while holding a hoof to it, groaning in pain. It seemed to do a convincing job, as the young mare turned her attention from her back to the grave of her late mother.

"Why me?" Twilight asked. "Why, is it all the time, ME!? I just want to study and have fun with my friends! Why do the creators have to place me into these situations? WHY!!!"

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The two unicorns headed back into town, having decided to go and have some tea in a shop near the town square. Twilight would have preferred to

have tea back at the library, but she remembered that she had nothing back there to make the drink. So, she reluctantly agreed to go to the tea shop and have some of their (rather expensive) beverages outside, since it was a nice day.

Unfortunately, (although expected) she gained many more stares and whispers as she emerged from the back streets and into the crowded square, which was partially bisected by a small river. Walking inside the shop only served to increase the number of eyes on the pair as Dinky ordered their drinks, the older unicorn having told her before that she felt like some lemon tea to help soothe her nerves.

Stepping outside onto the fenced-in patio, the two mares seated themselves at a table close to the edge of the river. As they minded their own business, it became increasingly difficult to remain undisturbed, as the whispers turned into murmurs. Of course, a thought soon occurred to Twilight: if Dinky was in charge of a rebellion against the queen, how come no pony had fetched any authorities?

The purple pony voiced her concerns as discreetly as possible to the purplish-grey unicorn, who laughed at her concerns. "Don't worry about it. Technically, I've done nothing wrong and the queen has no evidence to list me as a subversive. So the cops can look, but they can't touch this flank," she laughed.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, Dinky," Twilight smiled, thankful the little excursion was not a risk on her part. "I take it your group is in charge of stealth operations?" The younger unicorn nodded her head, keeping a discrete eye on something behind the unicorn's head.

Thankfully, she did not seem to notice where her gaze drifted, although having her mother's lazy eyes would have been an advantage in this instance. Still, for the most part, she sipped on her tea and kept an eye on the commotion. Governor Ironhead was out in force, escorted by two guards as they went about town, plastering a series of new wanted posters, judging by the look of them.

The guards soon wandered over to the tea shop, placed another sign and moved on. Thankfully, old Ironhead was too busy with what he was doing to notice Dinky and try to antagonize her. Seeing them turn away, the two

mares finished their tea and returned the cups before leaving the shop, while Twilight quietly recalled a book she had read about the different kinds of herbs that could be put in teas.

"Oh horseapples," the purplish-grey unicorn breathed when she stole a glance of the poster. Unfortunately, she drew Twilight's attention, the lavender mare walking up right behind her.

"What are you looking at, Din---" It was a great big colorful wanted poster with her face plastered on the front, her mark in one of the corners. At the very top of the poster, in large bold letters (aside from the obvious word) was the price on her head, 'ALIVE: 500,000 Bits'. Below the picture read, 'Twilight Sparkle. Considered armed and dangerous!'

"Fi--- Five Hun---!" The wanted mare stammered. Her eyes went wild in shock.

"Wow!" Dinky whispered in awe. "AJ is only listed as ONE hundred thousand. She must really be desperate if she wants that much for you!"

"Not. Helping!" Twilight cried out, inadvertently drawing some attention. "Let's get the hells out of here!"

The Crusader grabbed onto the lavender mare and started leading her away, a pair of blue-vested guards standing on the bridge between them and Sugarcube Corner. They skidded to a stop, the gray mare trying to think of another quick escape route, since the next closest bridge in the direction away from the guards was over three blocks away. There was nothing for it: if they wanted to get back to the bakery, before being caught, they would need to wade across the shallow river and climb onto the opposite bank.

Using silent, easy-to-understand gestures to communicate, the two ponies slowly made their way to the river, away from the prying eyes in the square and the guards loitering around the bridge. The bank of the small stream was shallow, yet very steep, an almost vertical drop down to the water's edge. However, if a pony crouched down, they could remain undetected from anypony in the square.

The plan was to follow the bank of the river under the bridge, and then

cross the body of water under it to avoid detection for as long as possible. Then, they would navigate back to a shallow slope just across the moving body of water from where they started. However, Dinky had not accounted for a very critical factor: the river flowed directly under Canterlot upstream.

Twilight and Dinky covertly made their way across the bank as planned, the only hint to their existence being the occasional bent reed. However, neither of them expected to find a large burlap bag the same colour of the mud on the banks of the river. 'Squish!' sounded the bag as Twilight stepped on it, prompting her to do a double take. "What the hay was that?" she asked, natural curiosity kicking in.

Dinky, meanwhile, stopped cold, as she immediately recognized the bag, and what it possibly contained. "Twilight, don't---" she tried to warn, but it was far too late. Twilight had opened the bag to find that she instantly regretted it: chalk up another time she damned her curiosity. For in the bag, she came face-to-face with the rhyming Zebra, Zecora.

Or, it USED to be Zecora, anyway. Her coat was matte and ripped off in some places, exposing pink flesh underneath. She was bloodied and dirty, bones hanging off of her frame. Various body parts lay separated, a hoof here, a part of her tail there... her head looking Twilight directly in the eyes. Her mouth hung open, tongue removed. Maggots slowly emerged from her eye sockets, wiggling in the lack of space. In fact, the creatures covered her entire body, the unicorn having missed them through the overload of visual horrors.

And then the screaming started: a high-pitched wail of pure terror that alerted half the town to her discovery. "...open the bag," Dinky finished, placing a muddy hoof firmly against her face. "Although, I wondered when she'd show up." Looking over the bank, she saw guards approach the still screaming mare, concern on their faces before they had realized who was screaming. "... And now we have to run."

With all hopes of stealth utterly shattered, the younger unicorn grasped the elder in her telekinetic hold, casting an invisibility spell on herself before bolting up, carrying (the still screaming) Twilight. "It's Twilight Sparkle!" cried one of the guards. "Seize her!" Dinky panted under the strain, trying to lead them away from Sugarcube Corner. She needed to find a place to snap Twilight out of it though, or else all hopes of escape would be lost.

She wove between groups of ponies and tore down streets while carrying the irrational unicorn with her the entire way, struggling to maintain the invisibility spell. *Celestia damn it, she has some lungs*, the mare thought acidly as she carried her down a (not so) quiet backstreet with the guards in hot pursuit. Pushing her magic to the very limits, she put a silencing spell on the hysterical mare once they got out of sight, her invisibility flickering for a quick second before dispelling. However, with the other spell on, she could easily hide.

Turning down an alley, an opportunity presented itself in the form of an open door. The mare raced inside, her charge silently screaming in tow. Yet, that would not be enough: even with the door closed, they found themselves in the back room of a store. Dashing between stacks of boxes, they finally found a hidden alcove, the young mare piling boxes around to hide them in a makeshift room.

"Twilight!" she hissed. "Calm down or I'll slap you to bucking Canterlot, because that's EXACTLY where you're going if you keep this up! Yes, it was gruesome and horrible, but she's DEAD! She doesn't give a damn anymore! We all scream at seeing our first dead body, but that was just ridiculous! I'm sorry she's gone: I really am, but I have seen too many friends killed for it to phase me anymore!" Yet, she kept screaming, eyes tearing up. Dinky sighed and back-hoofed the mare hard, nearly snapping her neck from the force.

"Stop parading your innocence, your naiveté! Damn it, Twilight, grow a spine! If this is how you react to something bad, you might as well off yourself right now because you'll be of no use to ANYPONY in this world! It's ugly out there: far more ugly than a maggot-ridden corpse! Now, I am going to lift the silencing spell, and stars help me, if you scream I am going to beat you until you pass out!"

Twilight nodded her head, still a little stunned from the sudden hit. The younger unicorn's horn shimmered, the lavender mare grabbing hold of her, sobbing quietly while clinging on to her for support. Dinky rolled her eyes at the display, hardened by battles and failed missions, yet she was reminded of herself the first time she saw a dead body. So, she simply rubbed the mare's back in an attempt to soothe her nerves and bring her back to reality.

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Together, the two ponies stayed in their makeshift hideout for hours until the raw librarian finally calmed down. "Okay," Dinky muttered as she opened a wall of their hideout by a crack, seeing the darkness in the rest of the building. "It's night now, and I'm sure your little... episode will probably increase the garrison. That is, if the fact Ponyville is your home hasn't done so already."

Twilight nodded her head. "Right, so what's the plan?" she asked, her voice cracking from all the strain she put on her cords.

"Sugarcube Corner is probably closed, so we can't get back to base without rousing suspicion. The library is definitely out as well, since I'd bet my horn that there are guards watching it. I'd say the only option is to get you out of town. I mean, you want to find Spike, right?" The lavender mare nodded her head in confirmation. "So, in order to do that, we'll have to sneak by patrols and border guards. I'd say we head for the west, and out towards Huffington. That'll take you close to Cloudsdale, and no pony goes near the place since..."

Both unicorns looked away apprehensively, unable to talk about the events that made the obliterated Pegasus capital so feared. "Well... thankfully the radiation in the air evaporated instantly. Just don't lick the dirt and you'll be fine," Dinky spoke after a few minutes' silence. "Can you do a decent invisibility spell? I can teach you, if you don't, but it's a little complicated."

"No, I know one," Twilight answered.

"Good. Cast it and let's go." With a wave of her magic, the box slid silently to the side, the two mares stepping out before donning their disguises. They silently crept through the back room of the store, keeping their ear peeled in case the guards were still searching the area, or the owner came in to grab something. Nearing the window, the two got a good look at the moon: low in the sky, yet high enough to be sure that most ponies would be asleep.

"Wait," Twilight whispered right before the younger mare opened the

door. "How are we supposed to follow each other while we are invisible?" The question proved an interesting conundrum to the unicorn, before an idea came to her. She became visible once more and stood close to the door.

"Grab hold of my tail," she whispered. Rounding the exposed mare, Twilight gently gathered her hay-coloured tail in her teeth, tugging it lightly to signal that she had done so. Nodding her head, the young mare vanished once more. The door opening quickly, causing the librarian to very nearly lose her in that instant as they dashed outside. With any luck, they would not have to open any more doors.

Together, the two mares slowly made their way down the alley, keeping their ears peeled for the sound of foreign hoofsteps. The half moon above their heads provided some cover in the form of shadow, in case their spells shorted out, but it did nothing to stifle any sounds or smells coming from the hidden ponies. Although Twilight knew her way around town, she had no idea about guard patrols and schedules.

While she was calming herself down from the trauma, Dinky had told her that over the course of the decade the queen (through her golem governors) issued night patrols for all towns and major settlements. If Twilight made a wrong move, she could turn down a street and literally smack into one. Naturally, the idea of having her captured did not sit well with Dinky, since they may as well surrender if the queen ever got her hooves on her.

The lavender mare did not like the idea of having to sneak around her own home town, however, she soon conceded to the more experienced mare. After turning around the second bend, a pair of guards stood at the end of the street in vigil while complaining to themselves about how they needed to stand guard at the dead of night. Needless to say, the two mares kept deathly quiet as they crept around the pair of blue-vested earth ponies.

Once out of earshot and after they made sure no other ponies were coming, the lavender mare whispered through clenched teeth. "I thought the guard wore gold armour?" No answer came, only a quiet and irritated 'Shh!' from a vague spot ahead of her. From then on, Twilight kept her big trap shut. She had already endangered the young mare enough that day

and she did not feel like running yet another risk.

By the time the two ponies slipped past the night patrol, after literally hours of slow going through the cobblestone streets, they found themselves safely in the confines of Whitetail Wood. Dinky stopped suddenly, flicking her tail from the other unicorn's mouth before quietly walking around in a circle. Twilight was confused, at first, until she realized she was checking for patrols. "Okay, we can drop them," she spoke, becoming visible to the purple mare.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the librarian dropped the invisibility spell as well, wiping some sweat from her brow since they were finally clear of town. "To answer your earlier question," Dinky spoke. "The army and royal guard wear gold armour, but the army has green tassels on the helmets. The guards in town are in service to Ironhead. He's the Governor of the township in place of the mayor. He is a golem made specifically by Eos to be completely loyal to her alone, as with all the other Governors. I think Huffington's is called... Copperhead: or something like that."

"Thank you for clarifying that, Dink," Twilight spoke. "Are... are you sure about letting me go off on my own? Especially after what happened earlier? Are you sure I can make it on my own?"

"You were right. When you said we needed to be together, that is. You can't reunite your friends in a bunker, Twilight. Go. For the sake of everypony: find Spike, Fluttershy, AJ, Pinkie and Rarity, if you can manage it. Just, just don't do anything stupid, okay? I don't want to read how you were captured in the paper. Just remember, we have bases in every town. If you need to hide, look for our symbol, you'll be able to get in... General Sparkle."

"Don't worry. I'll be careful," Twilight replied, moving deeper into the woods. She stole one last glimpse at Ponyville, bathed in the soft glow of the moon. Waving a quick goodbye to the Crusader she turned forward. She had no clue where to start looking, but when a pony is going from one disaster to the next, the goal isn't to find peace, but to simply keep moving.

Chapter 6

Wanted

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, or so the old saying went. Twilight walked long into the night, trying to put as much distance between herself and Ponyville as possible. Once she got to Huffington, she would find the Crusader base there and gather some supplies. For the moment, however, she had to fend for herself without any shelter or food. Thankfully, if she ever got desperate, there were plenty of edible leaves and berries around to slake her hunger.

At about two or three in the morning (it was hard to read the moon's position through the trees) the lavender mare found a patch of bushes a fair way from the road to settle down in. It felt weird to be sleeping outdoors, without a tent or a sleeping bag, but this was how her ancestors had done things, so she could cope. ...then again, thinking on it, she did not technically have ancestors, and if she did, they mostly slept in castles.

That last thought did little to aid her attempts at sleep that night, since she could imagine a now free Eos lording it up in the castle, in Celestia's chambers. The thought enraged her more than she could ever say: however, her weariness caught up with her and allowed the gentle wisps of sleep to take hold. No dreams drifted across her unconscious mind, so her awakening happened in an instant, to woods suddenly saturated by light and sound.

Twilight yawned and stretched her legs before standing in the midst of the bushes. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she trotted over to the road and started walking along it. It was probably a bad idea to do so, but all she had was a rough direction of where she needed to go. Only then did it strike her how woefully unprepared she was to face the world, but she could not turn back.

In fact, the idea of being a wanted criminal (although she committed no crime that she was aware of) still had yet to fully register in her mind. It seemed so surreal: just like everything else going on around her. Her mind strained to process new information as it came to her, since everything was

happening so fast. One minute, she was quietly translating a book, and the next she was thrust into this strange and perverse version of Equestria.

"I hate my life sometimes," Twilight sighed as she continued down the road. Judging from the occasional gaps in the canopy, it was nearly ten o'clock in the morning. Birds chirped happily in the trees, oblivious to any turmoil going on beneath them. In a way, she envied the birds: the ability to fly off in whatever direction they wanted without consequence. She wished she remembered how she had grown those magical Pegasus wings so she too could fly away.

"I'd hate to sound like I'm whining," she spoke to no pony, "But why am I always the one to get this sort of thing happen to her? Why am I the only one who can face the queen? Why does everything seem to revolve around me!? I'm no hero. I'm... I'm just a librarian: a well read pony who'd rather have her nose in a good book. This is getting really old, really fast."

No ears heard her complaining; only the ambient sounds of the forest echoing in indifferent reply. Thankfully, even the little voice in the back of her mind kept her nose out of things. The lavender mare did not think she could take much more of her taunting, unless she wanted to give herself a concussion by rapidly bashing her head against a tree. Being concussed would hardly help the quest she found herself thrust into, though, so that was probably why the voice was keeping quiet.

"I must be going crazy, if I'm talking to myself," she muttered as she passed into a larger clearing of trees. Strangely absent, however, was the sound of birds and other forest creatures in the trees. Indeed, even the path looked disused as weeds and daisies cropped up right in the middle. She could see no reason to explain this around her as she pressed on... until a flood of colour filled her vision.

Trees all around became coated in rainbow, as if someone spilled the sky on the tall, proud plants. Yet, the further she trekked, the less proud and regal they became. In short order, the trees became nothing but rainbow-dyed stakes in the ground. One side would be stained, while the other charred beyond recognition. In fact, shadows of the trees even appeared on the ground, just as charcoaled as the stumps.

Eventually, even the path became obscured, the ground painted by the

rainbow radiation. However, it was not until she reached ground zero that her breath was stolen from her. A massive plain of tie-dye paint had splattered upon the ground and turned the brown dirt into a sickening mishmash of every colour known to ponykind and quite possibly a few yet to be discovered. The clearing spanned at least one thousand yards in radius with a small crater right at the epicentre. Twilight mused that the clearing could easily hold the entire town of Ponyville quite comfortably within the confines with room for future expansions!

Even a couple of mountains in the distance had rainbow painted on them! The sheer awe of the sight overrode any grief she might have felt as she looked upon the grave of a dear friend. Even the unicorn had to admit: Rainbow Dash chose an EPIC way to die. Then again, she would probably say that it was nice to be immortalized in rainbow radiation, but it would have to be about twenty percent cooler to meet her satisfaction; particularly if the crater was no bigger than the hoofprint of a small building.

The lavender mare felt a smirk upon her muzzle at the thought, but not quite full-on laughter. Her heart still ached. Scanning the horizon to the west, she could see a couple of buildings jut out from the tree line on the opposite side of the crater. It could only be Huffington in the distance, maybe ten or eleven miles away from where she stood. It would take a few hours of walking to get there though.

Since she knew what direction she needed to head in, the mare could easily find her way to the town with her good sense of direction. Of course, she did not exactly like the idea of going across the irradiated field, just in case her steps stirred up any dormant contaminants in the soil. So, she did the sensible thing (for a normal traveller, at least) and picked up the road once on the opposite side of the clearing. She gave the site one last glance and thought of her friend before pressing on.

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Tailing her was not very hard. Not when she seemed to insist on sticking to the roads. Either the mare was incredibly stupid or overly confident in her powers to really care about the consequences. She had to admit that the possibility of the former was overwhelming. Still, she could not let her out of sight, or else it might take hours, or even days to find her again.

Of course, it was not that easy to track a pony when the sharpness of one's vision had been stolen. Over time, her other senses had heightened, which made her a very good pony to track down others. She missed her old job, but there was nothing she could do about it. She needed the money desperately, and with the amount this bounty called for, she could finally retire and live out the rest of her days comfortably.

It was no secret who the pony she tracked was, or who she associated with. A long time ago, she once saw her (and the other insidious rebels) upon the stage at a disastrous fashion show in Ponyville. One of those ponies was responsible for the event that made her this way, and she would get even in one way or another, the creators help her! Happily, she was not completely blind, but everything was a blur of hues to her which made reading hard, but not impossible: sadly, quick reading was kind of important in her previous line of work.

Mind in the present, the tracking pony kept her body low and off to the side of the road, doing her best to keep from hitting any stray bushes she passed. Given her disability, doing so was easier said than done, as she would occasionally hit one in a passing blow and silently curse. However, the lavender pony she tracked seemed to chalk it up to a woodland critter and keep moving. How naive.

Every once in a while, her quarry would stop and nibble on some branches or leaves, or leave the road to find a stream to drink. So many opportunities to pounce were presented to her, yet she stayed on the side of caution while she tried to figure out if the pony was inept, or simply baiting her. Thankfully, this gave her the chance to make sure it was the wanted criminal, since she could often mistake ponies due to her blurred vision.

At first, she was a little sceptical about her identity since it was just TOO easy. What kind of criminal keeps to the main roads when they know they are wanted, and for such an extraordinary amount? However, she could make out a horn, and a mark very similar to the one listed on the poster. Years of experience taught her how to put images together and cut through the fog, but it was still difficult.

It was not until the pony spoke, however, that she became completely sure that she was tracking the dangerous magician. Yes, it was strange to

see a pony talking to themselves and complaining aloud about how the universe likes to pick on them, yet she could not deny the whispers of her memories. A smile crept upon the hunter's face: with them nearing Huffington, the time to strike would be soon, so she could deliver her and claim her reward without much fuss.

Seeing her slow down to eat again, the bounty hunter decided to make her move. Unlike others, she at least was sporting and liked to give her targets a chance to fight back or run: she loved the chase more than the take-down. "Twilight Sparkle," she spoke as she emerged from the bushes, her purple-tinted sunglasses and trademark smirk reflecting the rays of the slowly descending sun.

"Do I know you?" the purple pony asked, wheeling around to face the new (to her) pony in the clearing. "Although... you look awfully familiar, but I can't place my hoof on where."

"I'm not surprised," the white unicorn replied. "It was over ten years ago, and I wasn't exactly at the centre of the party that night. Perhaps this beat will remind you?" With a glow of her horn, the trees around seemed to pulsate as the music sounds, jazzy at first, but building up to a fusion of techno, rock and organ music, strangely enough. The purple mare concentrated, wracking her memory for the source of the track.

As she did, the pony with the two-tone mane of navy and electric blue bobbed her head to the beat, her smirk still quite present. "Oh, I remember now!" Twilight chirped with a smile on her face. "You're that pony Rarity hired to play the music for the... er... fashion show." She scuffed her hoof against the ground, still embarrassed at the memory. "What did she call you again? DJ...DJ Poon-three?"

"It was DJ P0N-3, Miss Sparkle. All the letters were capitals with a 'zero' instead of an 'o'. You can call me Vinyl Scratch though, since... well, let's just say music isn't exactly my tune these days. Nothing personal, but I need you to come with me."

Twilight blinked in curiosity. "Why do you want me to go with you?" she asked.

"That's not important. Either play the song on your own, or I'll have to do

it for ya, filly."

"Where are you going to take me?"

"I'm not playin' Twenty Questions with you, so either play that music peacefully, or I'll drag your sorry hide like a downbeat!" The outburst seemed to startle the lavender mare, the DJ's grin becoming a dangerous scowl in frustration. She backed up a little from the white pony, obviously spooked and not willing to come along with her. "Fine, guess it'll have to be by force then. That's the tune you want to play? I've always been a softie for takin' requests, filly."

With a flick of her horn, the music stopped, and the saddle bags at her sides opened with a soft azure glow. Twilight gasped as she pulled out a small crossbow with thin, green-tipped bolts. "Relax, they aren't for killin' ponies... they're for catchin' them," Vinyl smirked as she loaded one into the weapon.

Fight or flight instinct roared to life inside the lavender mare. If it came down to a magic fight, she could probably win... but she might hurt the pony. She never wanted to hurt another pony again. In a flash, the librarian gave in to instinct, fleeing into the woods with all the speed her pony legs could take her. She could not hear the hunter chuckle before she sprinted right after her prey. The two ponies raced through the woods, Twilight still trying to reach Hoofington while trying to shake her pursuer. Vinyl quietly pondered her motives as they galloped: what could she possibly hope to do there? Pick up more ponies who'd want to sell her to the crown? Sure, it would mean competition, but she had been in the game for years!

Catching the blurred shape of lavender ahead, the musician almost let loose a bolt from her weapon, before the unicorn vanished from existence. Vinyl skidded to a halt, surprised that she could teleport away like that. Just as she was about to silently curse herself, there was a rustle in the bushes. "Clever girl," she smirked, knowing in an instant she simply made herself invisible.

She quietly snuck up on the bush the rustle came from, and pounced! There was screaming, howling, growls and grunts of effort as the two wrestled in the bushes, the other pony desperate to get away. However as the din died down, the former DJ got a good look at the shape she beat the

horseapples out of. It was brown and canine in appearance, but she could not make it out for sure. "Perhaps a little cleverer than I gave her credit for," the white pony smirked, loving a good challenge. "Sorry, wolfy."

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Twilight panted hard, having only just managed to get away from the hunter on her tail. Thankfully, she mistook the napping wolf she vaulted over for herself, so that would buy her some time. The lavender pony quickly (yet quietly) made her way for the deeper woods. She had never taken the threat of being on a wanted poster seriously until that point. Unfortunately, she did not know any spells to disguise her beyond invisibility. Hopefully the Crusader base in Huffington would provide some.

Although invisible, the mare decided to be cautious from then on, taking the woods parallel to the road, maintaining a fair distance away from any prying eyes. Still, new questions now bubbled in her mind's cauldron. How could a DJ as famous as her lose her job? What did she mean that her friends were responsible? Twilight hoped the fellow unicorn would take the hint and back off, but she seemed pretty eager to capture her.

She quietly sighed, straining her ears to listen, just in case the other unicorn was hot on her trail. That had been a close call: far too close for her liking. Twilight bit her lips as hundreds of terrible situations involving ponies out for her reward crossed her mind, until something snapped into place. Why did the queen want her for so much money, never mind the fact she was wanted alive specifically?

Would killing Eos mean killing herself? If she died, would she go with her? Question after question bobbed to the surface of her brain, distracting the invisible mare as she wandered out of the bush and into the dirty outer streets of Huffington. Her mind did not register her change of scenery until she ran into the side of a building.

"Oof!" she muttered in pain, rubbing her muzzle where it suddenly impacted the stone. Standing nearby was a stallion, who looked over his shoulder to find the source of the sudden noise. Thankfully, he made no move towards her, or he would have walked right into her. That would only bring confusion and uncomfortable questions: a scene best avoided by a pony wanting to remain hidden.

After a couple of minutes of dead silence, she slowly started her way onto the busier streets, where her hoofsteps would be drowned out by the ambient noise. She needed to look for the Crusader's symbol: a filly earth pony rearing in the centre of a circle. She had noticed the symbol on the outside of the bakery, but it was in a discrete place; somewhere you would not look unless you knew something was there.

So, Twilight did just that, examining every single building she could find: looking around every entrance for the elusive symbol. Although she was busy searching, she could not help but marvel at the architecture the city provided. It was similar to that of Ponyville, due to regional influence, but different. Instead of the pastel colours, the walls of Huffington were a little more subdued: blank whites and greys opposed to cheerful lilac, dusty rose and cyan.

As well, they seemed to prefer brick and stone to plaster as an exterior appearance, which made spotting the symbols a little harder since it would not contrast as well. Of course, as she concentrated, she ran the risk of being hit by a walking pony: Twilight had been nudged a couple of times, in fact. At most, a pony would look around before deciding they tripped on a loose cobblestone and resumed their normal activities.

Eventually, the sun began to grow orange as it reached the western horizon. On the one hoof, sneaking around in the dark would be easier. On the other hoof, this town probably had patrols too, and she did not have a guide who knew them like Dinky did. She bit her lower lip in trepidation, knowing she could not even count on time to be her ally. *I need to find the base, and find it fast!*

However, she did not count on her stomach beginning to growl as she walked down a quiet backstreet. She had not had a decent meal since yesterday, and even then it was a light snack of tea and cookies. The librarian never counted on being, more or less, kicked out of town due to her own inexperience in the twisted and dark world. Another quiver of hunger betrayed her position, thankful that nopony else was around.

Suddenly, two sets of hooves on the cobblestones met her ears, the last rays of the sun slowly dying behind her, painting the sky above in soft hues of orange and lavender as darkness set in. Twilight stopped dead in her

tracks as two ponies in blue vests walked out from the intersection ahead. One of them was a Pegasus with a green coat and blue mane, while the other was an earth pony mare with a grey coat and silver mane. They were guards in the employ for the town's governor: she could tell by the crest they bore on the lapel.

At that moment, her stomach chose the inopportune time to gurgle again, reminding her of how empty she felt. The guards paused, looking down the street: directly at her. "You hear something?" asked the Pegasus stallion. "Sounds like it came from down there."

"I'll tell you what I hear," replied the mare with a roll of her eyes. "I hear a pony goin' crazy from hunger. Come on, our shift's up: it's not our responsibility." She sighed as the stallion disobeyed her, walking right up to Twilight with an expectant look in his eyes.

The wanted mare became rigid as stone, pleading to her stomach not to go off again, or else betray them both to the guards and be shipped off to who-knows-where! Her heart picked up speed the closer he got, his muzzle hanging low as his ears stood erect, trying to detect the slightest noise possible. Thankfully, after coming to her rough area, he decided to nose around the boxes and crates, trying to see if a pony hid in one of them.

"Damn it, Jack!" the mare pounded her front hooves into the dirt. "I've got a foal to get home to! I don't want to see my house destroyed by the tyke JUST because you decided to sniff around some musty old boxes!" Thankfully, her shouting drowned out another grumble from her stomach, causing her to silently thank the impatient mare.

"Okay, okay," the stallion sighed after a less thorough search of the area than he wanted. "Don't get your mane in a knot, Smokey." With that, he trotted back to his partner and continued along their way. Only when they were out of sight did Twilight breathe a sigh of relief, uttering a silent prayer to the creators.

However, the altercation only wasted more valuable time. The mare took off, throwing caution to the wind as she lightly trotted down the back streets, looking in desperation for the mark of the Crusaders. However, just as the last rays of the day ended, Twilight found herself at the very tip of a dead-end street. Abandoned buildings sat on both sides, which could serve

as a good shelter from the patrols.

Walking up to the house on her right, she found the door sealed. Trying to use her magic to unlock the door proved fruitless, however, as a spell seemed to be jamming her magic. Curious, she looked around the door, just in case. She smiled invisibly as she turned her head to look at the mailbox. There, burned on the side was a rearing earth pony filly inside a circle: the mark of the Crusaders.

Gently placing a hoof against it, a spell clicked into place on the symbol, herself and the door. A clunk to her side told her that the door had unlocked itself, causing her to jump for joy. Using her magic, she cast the door open and walked into the dark hall. As soon as the door slammed shut behind her, candles sprang to life, illuminating the hall to her amethyst eyes.

Unlike the outside, the inside looked immaculate: solid wood walls and a royal red area carpet spread across the floor before a flight of stairs leading up. The tiles of the floor were white ceramic, cool to the touch of her hoof even in the warm weather. A large silver chandelier hung overhead, bathing the two-story room in a soft yellow glow. Overall, the lavender pony felt more like she was walking into an upper-class home than a rebel base.

"Hello?" called out the voice of a pony upstairs. "If you've come back to grovel, Hammer Strike, then I'm afraid nothing you say can convince me to... Hello?" Looking down on the foyer was a light blue Pegasus mare with a mane as dark as night itself. Her eyes were a shade of turquoise that reminded the lavender unicorn of Princess Luna. "As commander of the Huffington base, I DEMAND to know who is there! SHOW YOURSELF!" She flapped into the air authoritatively.

With a flash of her horn, the lavender unicorn appeared in the midst of the hallway, causing the pony to drop her jaw. "I'm sorry about that," Twilight apologized, "But I needed to remain hidden. Can I ask your name, commander?"

"C-commander Cloudjumper at your service, G-general Sparkle!" she saluted with a hoof to her face. The Pegasus fluttered down to the ground, her eyes wide in shock. "To what do we owe this incredible pleasure and honour?"

"I need supplies and a place to stay for the night. And please, just call me Twilight," she smiled, walking over to shake the shocked mare's hoof. "I'm impressed by the base here. I was expecting a hole under a building like in Ponyville. Dilapidation illusion to keep curious ponies away, right?"

"Y-yeah, Gen... I mean, Twilight: although, it has a habit of attracting homeless ponies. What sort of supplies do you require?"

"Oh, dried food, a tent, heating plates: I'll make out a proper list in the morning. Can I bother you for a place to eat and rest for the night first? I haven't had a proper meal since yesterday afternoon."

"Well, of course, you just follow me right to the kitchen," she smiled before leading her down to the end of the hall and into the kitchen. "If you need anything, just let me know. Sadly, the group is pretty small here in Huffington, so most of us stay at home unless there is a meeting." With that, the Pegasus left the unicorn to her devices after receiving her thanks, her mind still reeling from what she had just seen and heard.

Twilight Sparkle, THE Twilight Sparkle was in her base, of all places! This had to be a gift from the creators: they had heard her prayers and delivered the one mare that could help her most. Things were finally beginning to look up for the Pegasus as she happily trotted up to her room. It could wait for later, without a doubt, so in the meantime she would stay in her room and quietly celebrate. First, however, she had to pull out her address book and make a few calls.

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For the first time in days, the unicorn known as Twilight Sparkle had a dream as she slept. Everything was dark, voices of her friends buzzing around her skull. She felt as if she were falling through an eternal void of blackness with only angered and arguing companions for company. She tried to call out to them: to ease their worries and soothe their anger, yet she could not find her voice.

The lavender mare woke up with a groan, rubbing her forehead with her hoof. Beyond the window in front of her, the sun began to gently rise up into the morning sky. With a sated hunger and plenty of bed rest, the mare felt more energized than she did the day before. With a yawn and a stretch

of her limbs, she climbed wearily out of bed and into the hall, a question poised on the edge of her waking mind.

Now that she was in Huffington, where could she go? She had no clue where her beloved Spike could be, or even what direction he went. All she could do was hope Cloudjumper, or another one of the Huffington Crusaders had seen him. However, as she walked down the stairs, the tantalizing aroma of fresh pancakes almost pushed it out of her mind. "Good morning," she chirped to the Pegasus.

"Ah, good morning, General," she replied, prompting the lavender mare to roll her eyes as she sat at the table.

"Listen... I have a curious question..." Twilight trailed. "Have you ever seen a baby dragon in these parts?"

"Once, about nine years ago, curious enough. I mean, the chances of seeing a baby dragon around here are slim and none. Why do you ask?" She busied herself with the pancake batter, wanting everything to be just perfect for her special guest.

"Do you know what direction he headed from here? Did he say anything about where he was going? It's imperative to the future of Equestria that I find him!"

"In that case, I think he said something about the Outlands: dragon territory would be my guess since the border is about... fifty or sixty miles from here? Of course, travel time is a lot longer, since the Everfree is right in the path," she replied, flipping the pancakes with great skill. Twilight never knew how earth or Pegasus ponies could flip pancakes like that without magic. She would have to remind herself to ask Applejack to teach her when it was all over.

However, she could not help but note a change in the atmosphere around her as she set the pancake down on the table in front of her. It was tense, almost as if she was expecting something or wanted to say something of importance. Twilight shook her head at the suspicion, causing the Pegasus to quirk an eye at her. "Sorry, I just had something in my ear," she lied.

Levitating the fork and knife, the librarian dug into her pancakes, the

Pegasus taking a couple off of the stack as well and began to eat. No words passed between them: the breakfast far too good to ignore and start conversation. However, when she finished, she decided to speak her mind. "I made that list of items that I will need: if you can please gather them together for me, I will be on my way a little after breakfast."

"No!" half shouted the Pegasus. "I mean... not until you've had another pancake." With a smile, the Pegasus plopped a couple more onto her plate, passing the syrup and butter with a smile. "I'm sorry. I just... spend a lot of time alone here. As commander, I have to be on-base all the time unless there is a mission. You're the first pony to stay overnight with me in seven months. Naturally, I'm pretty lonely almost all the time. I'll... I'll get the supplies while you eat."

Without another word, the Pegasus got up from the table and into the hall, leaving the lavender pony to her own devices. There was... an urging in her mind, as if something were not right about the situation. *I don't like this at all*, spoke the voice in the back of her mind. *Did she not seem a little... terrified at the idea of us leaving so soon? I would not place too much trust in her.*

"Keep your forked tongue in your mouth," Twilight growled at the voice. "Shouldn't you be in Canterlot, taking care of more important business like executing more of my friends?" With a tiny 'harrumph' the voice retreated back into her mind, obviously miffed at being found out. Still, it was a suspicion that the unicorn found she could not easily disregard.

Cloudjumper looked out the front windows, tail swishing from side to side impatiently. Luckily, the unicorn seemed hungry enough to eat those extra pancakes, but she would be pushing it to offer her more. True to her word, she had the list in hoof and gathered many of the items that Twilight requested, but she did not stray too far from the front door of the base, stealing glances out the windows when she could.

Suddenly, her heart jumped in her chest as six ponies walked down the street. The Pegasus rushed to the door, eager to meet her guests. She opened the door quietly, looking over the ponies at her doorstep. "Did you have any trouble?" she asked the discernible leader of the group.

"None at all," the stallion at the head answered in a deadpan tone before

he and the rest of the group stepped into the threshold. "Where is she?"

"She's down the hall, in the kitchen," the Pegasus replied, standing off to the side as the contingent marched down and into the kitchen. Twilight sat at her chair, hearing the door open, followed by many hoofsteps. She assumed the rest of the Huffington Crusaders came to greet her.

"Twilight Sparkle," spoke the head of the group, causing her to turn her head. "By order of Her Grand Royal Highness, Queen Eos of Equestria, Ruler of Sun and Moon, I hereby place you under arrest. You may come quietly, but if you resist, you will be punished." Standing there were six members of the town guard, each sporting their blue vests and a smug smile upon their faces. All of them were unicorns, each with a dark blue ring at the ready. It could only be Mythrill.

"I'm sorry," spoke Cloudjumper as she entered the room. "But I'm SICK of the stupid Crusaders. If it makes you feel better, the rest of the Huffington Crusaders are already in custody. Just come quietly, please." The lavender mare herself felt sick. Not only because she had been betrayed, but because, for once, she could not deny the voice in the back of her head was right: that she could not trust the Pegasus.

"NOW!" cried the commander of the squad. They all sprang forward, trying to take the unicorn by surprise, but they underestimated her. All she could think of was escape, and given the reaction time, she could only think of one place to go that was in range. Twilight appeared at the doorstep to the former base, nearly falling down the stoop. "OUTSIDE! GO! GO! GO! GO! GO!" cried the stallion once more.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, her fight-or-flight instinct kicked into overdrive. As much as she wanted to be hurt over the recent betrayal, the guards would be upon her in seconds. So, she did the sensible thing and ran, but in the direction she wanted to go anyway. However, she was no athlete and the guards quickly began to catch up with her. Before too long, they were just a pony length behind her.

She hated doing so, especially at full gallop, but she had no choice. Looking ahead of her, she concentrated with all her magic and suddenly teleported to gain three hundred yards on the guards. "STOP HER!" the commander cried out. Running through the streets of town proved a difficult

task, even at such an early hour. Already, the streets of Huffington were packed with ponies and more guards. It did not help that the ponies chasing her would yell her name and order her to halt.

More than a couple of times, she nearly ran into a guard in her flight, having snaked ahead in an attempt to cut her off. She would usually teleport ahead of them, but the strain was beginning to show on her mind. Everything was becoming blurry, her ears ringing a little more with each casting. Sure, she teleported a lot before, but that was before she knew how draining the spell could be.

"SHE'S HEADING FOR THE FOREST! STOP HER!" one of the guards noticed, much to her chagrin. However, by the time they noticed, it was already in sight. Charging up her horn, she cast the teleport spell just one more time, appearing within the confines of the wicked wood. "KEEP GOING! IF YOU LET HER GET AWAY, THE QUEEN WILL MAKE YOU WISH YOU WENT IN!"

The threat seemed to work, as Twilight could hear the hoofsteps of her pursuers. Sadly, the tightness of the trees did nothing to aid her escape, nor anything to slow down the guards. There had to be about a dozen of them on her tail by then. If they managed to surround her, she would have to stand and fight, potentially hurting innocent ponies in the process.

However, short, loud yelps filled her ears, the pursuing ponies either stumbling... or coming across some sort of creature. After about a dozen yelps, there was only silence in the woods aside from her panted breaths. Slowing down to a light trot, the lavender pony tried to catch her breath while keeping herself as alert in possible, just in case there were reinforcements.

"I really need a disguise," she sighed. Before she could elaborate on that thought, however, something suddenly wrapped around her back leg, hoisting her painfully into the air. She yelped in surprise, suddenly hanging upside-down from a thick tree branch by a strong vine. "Stupid... tree!" she cried out, flailing helplessly in the air as she tried to reach the rope.

However, a rustling in the bushes pushed away the idea of using magic to snap the vine, as a furry white rabbit with an annoyed glare hopped into the clearing, holding a tube of bamboo. "Angel?" Twilight asked before the

fuzzy creature put the stem to his lips, shooting a dart that stuck into her neck. "Ow! What the hay was that for!?" As she tried to get at the rabbit to make him explain, the librarian felt her limbs go slack.

A fog filled her mind, rendering her mute, pupils dilated as she hung helplessly from the branch. Angel climbed the tree and started gnawing on the vine keeping her up. Twilight fell to the ground, not even a yelp able to pass her lips: all of her non-vital organs completely paralyzed. The little rabbit came up to her and waved his paw in front of her eyes. Satisfied that she could not track it, he closed her eyelids, bringing her world into darkness. She could hear only the rustle of undergrowth as she was dragged away.

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After a short while of being dragged across the forest by the insidious rabbit, the mare found herself hefted onto something a little harder, but a lot smoother. Despite being completely paralyzed, she could still feel: a gurgling moan of pain escaped her lips from the scrapes on her side. Something seemed to notice and flipped her onto her opposite side, applying something that stung against her tender skin. After a few seconds it began to, thankfully, ease the pain.

Time passed in a haze as she was carried on the (what she assumed was a) cart, bumps in the forest floor flaring up the dull throb she felt above her ribs. It had to be from the countless rocks and sticks she was dragged over earlier. A strange echo filled her ears a while later, familiar, but too garbled to figure out. A moan of pain washed over her as she was placed roughly onto another smooth, solid surface before something warm slipped over her.

Another prick in her leg yielded a yelp from the unicorn as a tingle spread over her body. In a matter of minutes, she could open her eyes and move, not expecting the sight before her. She lay in a wooden room, vines and other plants seeping into the cracks. Various bottles of herbs and potions hung from the ceiling and sat on the shelves. She had to suppress the disturbing possibility that it was actually Zecora's house.

"Oh, good: you're moving," spoke a gentle voice from beyond a door of long grass. Stepping outside, the yellow Pegasus made her presence

known, looking exactly as the unicorn remembered her. "I'm sorry about Angel-bunny paralyzing you, Twilight. He thought you wouldn't follow him on your own to my place, so he made you come along by force."

Twilight wiggled under the thatch blanket, getting herself a little more comfortable on the make-shift bed. Beyond, she could see nothing but blackness: quite some time having passed since she galloped into the forest. "Oh, it's fine. I'm just glad you're not going to try and take me to the queen," she replied groggily. "It's nice to see you, Fluttershy."

"It's nice to see you too, Twilight," she smiled pulling up a chair to face the resting unicorn. "I was concerned to see you with the Crusaders, I will admit. Are you... with them? I mean, are you officially in their group? Not that it matters if you are... because you'll always be my friend."

"What do you mean by that? They took me into their base and gave me food, shelter and some answers to what was going on. I mean, you left me and scared me when I saw your house and Rarity's shop abandoned. Not to mention what happened to AJ's farm." Again, she shuffled to get a little more comfortable.

"Oh, no, um..." she trailed. "I mean, did they tell you what they planned to do? I'm... I'm sure they told you what I and the others want to do to save Equestria."

"No," she replied simply. "They didn't tell me anything about their plans at all, now that I think about it."

"Yeah... I kind of figured they wouldn't," she sighed. "You see, they want to keep Parliament as it is, right? But... well... it's barbaric, Twilight! They want... they want a unicorn to steal Eos' divinity... and then... and then merge her soul with the universe... so no pony can raise the sun ever again!" Tears began to stream from her eyes. "They want to sacrifice a pony just to remove temptation!"

"But...how? I mean... they don't seem like they would do such a thing!"

"Trust me, Twilight," Fluttershy started. "A lot of ponies have died for this cause, not aware of it, of course. In fact, the girls... those sweet fillies... never told the rest of us about it. We had to find out for ourselves! That's

what divided us, giving rise to the arguing! The only reason you were given the position of general is because... well, they want you to kill the queen. They don't even care if you die trying! They don't care how many die just to accomplish their goals!

"I'm going to be honest with you, Twilight," she spoke, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "We're all doing what we think is best for everypony; what will cost the least amount of lives in order to do so. Zecora and I... we both agreed that it would be best for everypony if we just... forgot about something as stupid and pointless as who controls the sun and moon."

"How can you expect me to believe all of this, Fluttershy?" the lavender unicorn asked, tears beginning to form in her own eyes. "I mean... these are AJ and Rarity's sisters and their friends! How could they ever think something like that would be okay? I'm... I don't believe you."

"War changes ponies, Twilight," she answered sadly. "You saw Pinkie at the meeting. Poor thing... she's given up and just wants to cause more pain and destruction. AJ is in open war against the army. The girls have covert operations everywhere: even in the queen's inner sanctum. No pony... no pony cares about your leadership skills, or your advice on anything. Sure, in the beginning we all cared, but..."

Silence filled the room for several minutes, only the carious calls of nocturnal animals reaching their ears. It was then that Twilight noticed a small semi-circular stone on a table in the middle of the room: obviously the other end of that spell Dinky used. Yet, she refused to let her words sink in. None of it could possibly be true! If it was, then those sweet, innocent fillies... she did not want to think about it.

"In the beginning," she continued, "We did care about you and your opinions and we missed YOU a lot. Yet, as time passed on... we began to miss you less and... wished for your magic more. The girls... our friends... see you only as a tool to be used against the queen. It's... better you found out now; before you got hurt." With that, she stood up and strode to the door. "We have a lot to do tomorrow... and beyond. Sleep well, Twilight. Hissy and Sissy will make sure you're not alone."

Two snakes slithered into the room, resting at the base of the ledge where Twilight lay, hissing idly, although they scared the mare nonetheless.

"Um... Fluttershy?" she asked, growing more fearful with each passing second. "Do you... Would you mind untying me?" She shuffled around again, struggling against her binds to emphasize her point.

"Oh, Twilight," she giggled. "If I did that, you'd just run away. Good night." With that, the room was plunged into darkness.

Chapter 7

To Wear a Mask

Sleep did not come to the unicorn that night: too many thoughts milling about her mind conspired to drive back the wisps of sleep from her. The fact that she had two snakes within three hooves of her did not help the matter either. Fluttershy's words were still on her mind, like a poison coursing through her veins. Did her friends really see her as nothing more than a weapon to be wielded against the queen?

She could not, and did not, want to believe her vicious words. The lavender pony did not think she could live with herself if what she said was true: that her friends really did not care for her anymore. Shaking her head, she tried to roll onto her other side, only to be stopped from doing so by the thick vines keeping her legs together. Twilight had no doubts she could burn them away with magic, but that would destroy the hut as well and she did not want to leave her friend homeless.

So, she lay there for hours on end, watching shapes move about beyond the windows, listening to the whispering hisses the terrifying snakes made with each breath. Everything would be sorted out in the morning: perhaps the stress had made her hear things again and the yellow Pegasus was only trying to calm her down? It was a flimsy hope she clung to desperately.

Dawn came late that morning, or so she thought as she watched the oppressive blackness beyond the windows turn into deep indigo before swelling into the green-tinted hues of an orange sunrise. With the sun up, her body's urges for sleep died down, allowing her to no longer fear that one of the snakes might bite her in the night. She sighed deeply, growing increasingly weary of her situation.

A few minutes (or possibly an hour) after sunrise, the sound of humming filtered through the other room as the Pegasus stirred. The tune was one the librarian was unfamiliar with, but it sounded chipper and pleasant enough to not worry over. Sure enough, the yellow pony emerged from her room just a moment later, dripping a little bit of water from her mane and

tail. "Good morning, Twilight," she chirped. "Did you have a good night's sleep?"

"No," the purple pony replied curtly. "You know I'm afraid of snakes, Fluttershy. I can't sleep when I know they're here!" However, the gentle Pegasus seemed to ignore her plight as she hovered over to a stove to start on breakfast. Twilight was taken aback: she never so blatantly ignored a pony before, especially when they were upset. Then again, she did shout, but the Pegasus looked unafraid.

Irritated, she got to work on the vines binding her legs, rubbing them in an effort to loosen them and allow her to get free. However, this prompted a giggle from the cheery Pegasus as she made the soup, watching her out of the corner of her eye. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Twilight. Those vines have thorns in them that spring out when warmed. Isn't it just the most adorable thing ever?" she smiled with her back to her.

Twilight immediately stopped rubbing the vines together, not willing to take any chances, and growled in frustration. "Please, Fluttershy, let me go! I need to find Spike... if only to make sure he's still okay. Please? It's really important to me that I find him."

"No," she replied simply.

"You can't just keep me tied up like this! I'm a pony: I need to be able to get up and walk around. I need to eat, sleep and... and I need you to be my friend. I don't know what I would ever do without your kindness and love, Fluttershy. Please... please let me go?"

The Pegasus sighed, putting down what she was doing and came to sit in the chair directly in front of Twilight, a serious look in her eyes. They lacked the softness the lavender mare remembered: they were hardened by trauma and pain. She looked over the unicorn for a couple of minutes, as if pondering her words before she opened her mouth once more to speak.

"I can't be your friend anymore, Twilight Sparkle," she sighed. "I am only friends with nature and the creatures she makes. The fact is I'm not going to feed you or let you run about. Do you know why, Twilight?" The bound mare shook her head, not knowing where her train of thought was going. "It's because you're NOT a pony. You're a golem: an unnatural and

ARTIFICIALLY created being!"

Suddenly, a look of pure rage came upon her face, stunning the lavender pony into silence. "By all rights, I should have destroyed you the very minute you dared to step hoof in my forest! How dare you taint this hallowed ground with your EVIL and NATURE-CHALLENGING magic! The only reason I didn't let one of my bear friends rip you to shreds is because I need you! You're nothing to me, Twilight Sparkle! Now shut up like the good little weapon you are and let the REAL ponies eat in peace!"

Stunned into silence, the lavender pony's jaw hung agape. Tears began to flow freely from her eyes as realization crept across her mind: she was not her friend anymore. If a pony as kind and loving as Fluttershy could come to see her as naught but a tool, then what happened to the rest of her friends? Could she trust nopony in the world?

Soft sobs escaped her muzzle as she buried her head into the blanket, too choked up to speak or try and sway her friend's opinion. So she just stained the blanket with hot tears for lack of ability to do anything else.

After a couple of minutes, the yellow Pegasus sighed and got up from her seat, the chair scraping against the wood as she floated up to a cupboard. "Twilight," she spoke softly, gently stroking her mane with a hoof. The lavender unicorn raised her head expectantly, eyes brimming. "Shut up!" Before she could react, the Pegasus shoved a hoof-full of foul yellow gunk into her mouth.

She tried to spit it out, but the sticky sap quickly thickened into a tough gum, spreading down her jaw to coat all of her teeth. "Mmmph!" she cried in surprise, beginning to struggle as her cries became muted by the sap. Satisfied, the yellow Pegasus turned away to finish making her breakfast, leaving the muted unicorn to sob silently.

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It was not easy to pick up the trail again once it had gone cold like that, but she did not mind a single bit. After all, she did prefer the hunt to the actual capture. News of Twilight's narrow escape from the Huffington guard quickly spread through town that day. Naturally, Governor Coppertop was enraged by the news. Vinyl thanked her lucky stars that she was not

working directly for him: a perk of being a bounty hunter instead of a member of the guard. In fact, while he was busy chewing out his troops, she was busy deducing that Twilight had left town to brave the Everfree Forest.

So, Vinyl Scratch trotted forth into the evil forest. Slowly, she was beginning to get an idea about what her quarry was up to. Directly on the opposite side of the forest was a small village called Coltsberg: too small to even have a governor of its own. Still, it would be an ideal place for her to lie low and recuperate from her time in the forest. The quaint hamlet had no love for the queen, so they were not likely to turn her in, even for the amount listed on the poster.

Of course, one never went into the Everfree Forest unprepared, unless they knew the lay of the land like the bottom of their hoof, or if they had a death wish. Thankfully, Twilight Sparkle was not the first bounty she had that decided to flee into the confines of the wicked wood. Unfortunately, most of them were dead by the time she could find them.

Yet, the lavender unicorn had to be made of tougher stuff than that: why else would she be listed as dangerous? So the former DJ took her time trekking through the wood, bobbing her head to a beat she recalled to pass the time. A predator might choose that moment to strike, but that would be a big mistake, since her ears were always alert. Thankfully, most of the monsters rose with the moon and the day began a few hours ago, so she had little to worry about.

Eventually, the hunter came across an interesting sight: it was a sprung sling trap, but the vine making it had been chewed away by some creature. As well, clumps of purple hair lay littered among the undergrowth, torn off on some spiny bushes. Although her vision could not make out the marks, a feel of her hoof told her that a small herbivore, maybe about a hoof high, nibbled through the vine. Twilight could not have chewed herself free, so something else did it for her.

Checking over the immediate area, the white unicorn soon found disturbed dirt and more hairs in bushes and on rocks. As well, there was a tiny line of dried blood leading from one of the sharper stones in the path. Whatever had freed Twilight probably knocked her unconscious or otherwise immobilised her before dragging her off. The list of suspects

quickly narrowed at that revelation.

After tracking the trail for several minutes, down steep rocky hills and across a creek, the dragging suddenly ceased, at least as far as she could tell. Vinyl looked around, the forest a blur of green as she tried to figure out the next step. If the dragging stopped, that meant she had to have been moved onto a transport of some kind, possibly a cart.

She felt out the ground for something like the rut of a wheel. Shortly enough, she came across a patch of mud, with an obvious trough in the wet earth. This told the experienced tracker that the mare she sought was picked up and placed on a cart before being carried off. Now all she needed to do was track down where the cart went, and soon she would have the unicorn in her grasp!

However, that age-old saying of 'easier said than done' reared its ugly head once more as she tried to track the transport. If she had her normal vision, the task would be foal's play. However, she had to make due with a fuzzy world of indistinguishable colours all meshing into one smudged-up tapestry. Thankfully, the forest floor was generally soft, able to retain the rut the wheel made as it rolled along.

Naturally, conditions began to deteriorate as she moved onto harder ground, up and away from pools of water and mud. The bounty hunter furrowed her brow as she flared her nostrils, deciding to rely on scent to guide her. The trail was very faint, but the canopy of the forest thankfully provided some shelter from the wind, meaning she could follow it reliably.

It was not until about noon that she approached a small clearing, keeping her body pressed against the ground as she spotted all sorts of creatures ambling about. A small sod and wood shack sat in the middle of the grove, a shape of yellow discernible through the leaves of the bushes and the windows. *Horseapples*, she thought in anger and frustration. *Of all the ponies to steal my bounty, it had to be that tree-hugging horse! Now how am I supposed to steal back Twilight!?*

Vinyl detested the idea of hurting innocents just to get at one pony, even woodland critters. Yet, the mare that had her prize would not hesitate to order an attack on her. Although she lacked it ten years ago, she had developed the intent to kill others if they threatened her or her beliefs. The

white mare ducked her head behind the bush, trying to form a plan and come up with escape routes.

I have to be at least halfway through the forest, she mused. Mountains flank to the west and east of here and it would probably take longer if I went back to Huffington. So... I need to head north to Coltsberg once I have her. Great: absolutely wonderful. I'd be hopping out of the oven to get into the frying pan. I don't like where this concert is going, but if I want the payoff, I've got to play that song.

An idea slowly came to her mind the more she pondered the savage beasts between her and the prize. It was noble to go in there guns blazing, kicking flank and taking names. Yet, against such numbers, it would be a suicidal move. She could make out bears, wolves, coyotes, and stranger beasts like manticores, flaming salamanders and even perytons!

However, the alabaster unicorn was more than just a one-trick pony: she still had a few spells left in her horn. With a light blue shimmer, soft and gentle music began to fill the clearing, all the creatures looking around in surprise. Vinyl nodded her head to the beat: a simple but effective way to keep the score from working on her. Some of the beasts roared, others simply looked around curiously, but after a few minutes of the calm, relaxing lullaby, they all dropped like flies, falling asleep peacefully.

Once confident all the creatures outside were passed out, she moved in, being careful not to step on any of them, or disrupt the spell with a howl of pain. Yet, she still kept herself as close to the ground as possible, in case the pony that captured her bounty could resist the spell. If so, then she could kick her flank, but the noise would probably wake up the animals and enrage them.

After careful minutes of walking past the gauntlet of sleeping creatures, she kept her sleep spell up while nodding her head to the beat. She slowly poked her horn and eyes above the window sill to see two ponies and a rabbit inside, all passed out. The hunter smirked in victory, gently opening the door just in case it would clatter. Thankfully, both her target and her captor remained sleeping, under the influence of the spell. Even a couple of snakes seemed to be grooving on the sleepy beat, hissing unconsciously.

Using her magic, she dragged the blanket off the unicorn mare to see her

legs bound in thick vines, causing her smirk to widen. "I love it when they come gift-wrapped," she chuckled before she moved the snakes out of the way and pulled her off the ledge with a soft thump. The mare was heavier than she anticipated, but once they were clear, she cast a featherweight spell on her to make the trek a little easier.

Seizing hold of her by the tail, the mare with the electric blue mane slowly pulled her away from the shack. It was slow going, since the risk of stepping on a sleeping monster was incredibly high and that would bring with it nothing but trouble. The yellow mare was probably going to be pissed anyway, but by the time she and her army of critters woke up from the spell, she and her quarry would be long gone.

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Rustling leaves met Twilight's ears hours later, the wind gently playing across her body as it moved. The occasional bump and turn would make her stir, but she did not open her eyes. She did not want to see where her friend wanted to take her. However, the hoofsteps seemed hurried: almost panicky.

Reluctantly opening her eyes, the lavender mare found her legs still tied up by the strange vines, and her mouth was still caked with the sticky sap that silenced her. She lay upon some sort of thatch blanket, being towed at a quick clip through the woods. Lying on her side, she could make out a white flank and electric blue tail in her vision. Twilight could not help but groan through the sap: somehow, Vinyl Scratch had managed to pull her from the yellow mare's base.

"Sounds like somepony's wakin' up," the unicorn breathed as she trotted through the undergrowth. "Sorry 'bout being so sneaky, but I didn't feel like havin' to fight my way through her beasties. That tune just doesn't go on my turntable, dig? Oh, I wouldn't try magic either. Mythril ring on your horn." The librarian sagged in the sling, knowing she was caught and utterly helpless to resist.

So Twilight lay, watching the scenery pass before her eyes, torn about how she should feel at that moment. Was she supposed to be thankful or mad at Vinyl for getting her out of Fluttershy's house? When it came to Fluttershy, was she supposed to be happy to be away from there, or sad

that she became like that? The words she spoke earlier came back to her mind, chilling her to the bone. *You're nothing to me, Twilight Sparkle! Now shut up and let the REAL ponies eat in peace!*

Muffled sobs filtered through the sap, fresh tears streaming from her eyes. How could a friend say such a horrible, hurtful thing? Did she think the emotions she felt were not her own? "I'd be upset too if I were in your shoes, but it's nothing to cry over, Twilight. Sheesh!" the bounty hunter sighed in frustration, slowing down her pace.

"Mmph, mph," the lavender unicorn muttered, shaking her head in a vain bid to tell her that was not why she was upset.

Vinyl sighed, reluctant to fix the issue with the tree sap, but her constant sobbing was really starting to get to her. Besides, she liked talking to her prey after they were finally caught. Hearing a river nearby, she pulled the mare over to it, the waters roughly lapping at the bank. "Here," she spoke, unhooking herself from the sling. "Take a drink and it'll get rid of the sap."

Walking around, she grabbed the other pony by the scruff of her neck and pulled her to the water's edge, allowing her to dunk her head at her own leisure. Twilight dipped her muzzle in, a little apprehensive to do so around the hunter, but when she felt the cool, refreshing water pierce the sticky barrier, she dunked her head in, desperate to remove the obnoxious substance.

Once every bit of the goo was washed out of her mouth, she greedily drank the waters from the river, having not had any liquid since the previous day's ill-fated breakfast. Twilight pulled her head out with a deep gasp, finally able to breathe through more than her nostrils. "Gotta love Sticky Root Sap," the former musician chuckled. "Of course, I'm sure you know what that song is all about."

"Yes, and thank you," the mare replied. Sticky Root Sap came from a specific species of tree in the Everfree Forest. If a creature tried to eat the sweet sap, it would expand in their mouth and render them unable to continue; unless they figured out they had to drink from moving water. It was an interesting defence mechanism on the tree's part, no matter how annoying it was to experience.

Strapped back into the sling after dragging her catch away from the water, the white unicorn began speaking again as she pulled her prize. "It's too long to head back to Huffington, so we're going to Coltsberg. As is, I doubt we'll get out of the forest before dark though. Don't worry: I've traveled through the forest at night. Now, I noticed you were cryin' earlier. Do you mind tellin' me why? Not that it's any of my business."

"You're right. It is none of your business," she replied curtly, in no mood to talk to anypony at the moment.

"Fair enough, but we could at least make conversation. Like... um... what did you do to get such a price on your head? Did you slight the queen by tellin' her how ugly that mane is, or are you a rebel leader? Did you kill a lot of ponies, or engage in major tax evasion and refused to pay your debts?"

Twilight sighed before speaking. "If you know the rumours, she probably feels threatened by me." The white unicorn simply nodded her head in reply, knowing well the rumours that surrounded the mare like a haze. Fact and fiction easily became distorted around Ms. Sparkle and her friends. The two ponies traveled in silence from then, neither willing to break the tension between them.

Nightfall, however, brought about many new dangers in the forest. All sorts of creatures that slept in the day came out at night: most of them dangerous and hungry for flesh. Yet the hunter continued unabated, although she picked up the pace considerably. For even if one had experience with the forest, they could not survive out in the wilds for very long: especially once the sun began its slumber.

In addition to the usual suspects of wolves, bears, manticores, ursos and cockatrices, the Everfree occasionally played host to the supernatural. Creatures like ghosts or zombies would occasionally rise from the ground and spring upon unsuspecting travelers. However, sometimes creatures from other planes would materialize in the world of the living: demons most foul.

To make matters worse, judging from the night before, that night would be the night of the new moon, meaning they had no light to guide them in the dark depths of the forest. Creatures that hunted in the dark would find that night to their advantage. Vinyl Scratch quickened her pace more, trying

to keep her ears peeled for any of the tell-tale sounds of an approaching predator. Despite the long centuries since the pony races had ceased to be nomadic, nothing had changed when it came to the danger monsters in the Everfree Forest posed to their kind.

Long after the sun had dipped below the horizon, the pair of ponies entered a small clearing, the lavender mare still tied while being dragged behind the white unicorn. Just as she was about to muse on her excursion with Princess Luna, and how safe she felt then compared to the present moment, the white pony stopped dead in her tracks. "Vinyl?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

However, all that came out of her mouth was a squeak. At first, she did not understand what had happened... until they made their presence known. Large, emerald eyes stared at them from beyond the darkness, glowing the same shade as the emerald aura that outlined their abyss-black bodies. They swiftly and silently surrounded the small clearing of trees.

Silhouettes of tendrils squirmed sickly from their faces. The creatures were roughly the size and shape of large wolves. They now slowly emerged from the darkness, closing their deathly circle around the pair of unprepared ponies. Quavering cries of fear sounded from the white mare. They moved forward with unnatural grace, making almost no sound, even as they passed through bushes. Their legs were lean with muscle, obviously able to propel their bodies forward at unmatched speed. Even if the little ponies tried to run, they were doomed.

"Well," spoke one of the creatures, his voice barely more than a whisper, "Looks. Like. We. Caught. A. Fellow. Hunter." The other creatures laughed in a staccato fashion, taking slow, methodical breaths. Although they spoke very softly, the tones carried much farther than one would expect. Every word was slow, deliberate, and just enough to make even the most brave pony weak in the knees.

Vinyl shivered in fear as the lavender mare looked around to the obvious pack leader. "Look. The talking. Horse. Wishes. To speak. How. Precious," the leader spoke once more. He appeared to attempt grinning, circular rows of jagged, razor-sharp teeth lining his maw. It was not until then that Twilight became sure about what they were: Barghests, also called 'The

Children of Nightmare.' They could only emerge during the new moon and repopulated by mutilating their prey and injecting them with a black sludge-like fluid that would transform their corpse.

Yet, thinking back on the dark book she read on them, their weakness came to mind: sunlight. "Vinyl!" she cried out, desperately. "You have to untie me! I can save us! Please, you have to trust me, or we WILL die!" Unfortunately, the former DJ was paralyzed in fear, the creatures no more than a pony length away from them, ready to pounce.

"What. Could. You. Hope. To do. Little. Horse?" the pack leader snickered slowly. "Be. Still. And. You shall. Join. Our pack. Painlessly."

Twilight struggled in renewed vigour from her binds, trying to get the Mythrill ring off of her horn so she could wield her magic. The sound of a rattlesnake's tail filled the air as the tendrils flared, their teeth bared as a sign they were about to feast on flesh. *You can't go a single day without putting your life in danger, can you?* The annoying voice in her head sighed. *Give me a second.*

Their advance stalled as a purple light began to overtake the clearing, covering their large, murderous eyes with their legs. The Mythrill ring on her horn glowed brightly, trying in vain to suppress the overwhelming magic she possessed. A snap filled the air as the trinket disintegrated, lacerating a couple of the creatures, who oozed the black sludge onto the forest floor. Immediately, the vines binding her legs burned away, allowing the mare to stand once more, her hooves a little shaky.

However, the monsters refused to back down, seeing the development as nothing more than a nuisance. Twilight charged her horn, glowing soft lavender before rings of yellow rippled up, congregating at the tip of her horn. Crying out, the mare unleashed the spell, a point of light as bright as the sun emerging. The beasts gave a rattling hiss, retreating into the thicket in an instant, yet they had not fled. "RUN, VINYL!" the mare screeched, slapping her flank to snap her out of the daze.

It seemed to do the trick, as the alabaster mare galloped off into the forest, her former prey right beside her, helping the little ball of sunshine follow them. Through the trees ahead they could make out the glowing eyes of the monsters: a tribute to their speed and stealth. However, as they

came hurtling along, they would have to move, lest they be exposed to the blinding light of the miniature sun.

Together, the two mares galloped, jumping over fallen trees, stumps and the occasional trap or two set by Fluttershy and her minions. Twilight's heart pounded in her chest, pumping pure adrenaline. She had not used that much magic since the day she attacked the princesses. Overloading a Mythrill horn ring was no easy task: only an extraordinary amount of magic could do so. Then again, the same could be said for the miniature sun flying right behind them.

Slowly, the trees became thinner, the undergrowth less littered and a little more tidy. Even as they passed the threshold of the forest, they did not stop until they were upon the town's doorstep. A dozen emerald eyes flickered in the distance, glaring at them with anger and hunger before they reluctantly turned away: not willing to run the risk of being hurt. Only when they were gone did the miniature sun fade from existence, the librarian panting with expended effort.

"You... you saved me, Twilight," the bounty hunter panted, leaning against a lamp post for support. Neither of them moved for minutes, the adrenaline washing out of both of their systems as they calmed down from their flight. "Listen... I'm an honourable pony," she started, "How about we pause the jam right here and take a break from the dance? You know, mingle, and have a couple of drinks? Then we pick up the beat from the beginning, dig?"

The lavender pony blinked, not quite sure what she was talking about. The DJ smirked and chuckled. "In square terms, it means I'm giving you a break from the hunt. Say... thirty seconds head-start? I'll just stand here and groove and you do your thing. I'll start the counter the second you start running."

"You're still going to hunt me!?" The lavender mare opened her jaw in disbelief. How could she say she was still going to turn her in after saving her life?

"I have to eat, Twilight. I could slip another ring on you right now and knock you out, but that ain't my scene. So, I suggest you get going." In a flash, the purple pony teleported away to some distant point just in sight.

However, before she could make it out, she vanished. True to her word, she sat there for the full thirty seconds, letting the mare escape once again. "Damn. I should have made it ten seconds," she chuckled before she moved.

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That day proved to be one surprise after another for the lavender unicorn as she quietly fled down the streets of town, looking for the Crusader's mark in desperation. She knew she could not trust them, but for the moment they did not know it, which put her at the advantage. She hoped Fluttershy had been lying to her about their goal. Did they really plan to sacrifice a pony just to remove power's temptation permanently?

Thankfully, as she snuck around, she noticed the town of Coltsberg had very few guards, if any. She planned to keep an eye open and an ear on the alert, just in case. Her memories drifted back to the time she was in Fluttershy's house. She was laying on the ledge, sobbing over how hurtful her friend's words were. Suddenly, some sort of music started playing, making her relax before everything went black.

It only took a minute of thinking to remember she had pulled a similar stunt on a cranky Ursa Minor. Twilight had to admit the feat of putting all of those creatures to sleep was impressive. She had gazed out the window beside her earlier to see the army of critters and monsters in a ring around the central hub of the hut. Even if she could get herself out of there without hurting anyone or anything, she would have been too taxed to deal with the Barghests later on.

The lavender pony shook her head: she could not afford to drift off in musing when she had a bounty hunting pony breathing down her neck, trying her damndest to catch her again. Looking down the streets of the town, she came across a curious cellar door, since it was neither chained up nor appeared to be locked. Venturing closer, she got a good look at the mark of the Crusaders! Opening it with a flick of her magic, the mare descended into the cellar.

Jars of various pickled items sat on dusty shelves, glimmering in the light of a single hanging candle. Of course, it all had to be an elaborate trick to deter unwanted company. She lifted every jar and prodded under every

shelf for a button, or a lever of some kind to open a trapdoor, or a hidden passageway. However, the deeper she looked, the more she came to realize that it was just a dusty old cellar.

Twilight emerged from the underground about an hour later, the darkness of the night beginning to give way to her namesake. Shutting the door, she glanced at the mark burned onto the wood. Perhaps it was just a decoy to throw pursuers off of the real base? Placing her hoof on the mark, she felt the same strange tingle she did from the Huffington base, a click sounding beyond the double doors.

Curious, the mare opened them with her magic to find a different sight. Beyond was a narrow passageway leading down, lit by magical torches that sprang to life as she descended. The door slammed shut behind her, another click telling her the false entrance had reset. "I wonder who came up with that one? It was actually quite clever," she spoke, removing her invisibility spell.

Coltsberg's base reminded her of the one in Ponyville in many ways: a steep winding passage leading down followed by wider passages branching off into halls and rooms. However, the deeper she went into the chambers, the more apprehensive she became. No pony came to greet her, or at least inspect if friend or foe had come into their midst. An eerie calm met her ears as she called out for somepony, anypony to answer.

Rounding the next intersection, she turned: everything suddenly becoming clear. Splotches of red dotted the floors and walls, arrows embedded in the stone at every turn. Tattered vests painted in magenta polka-dots of dried blood lay on the floor beside dented helmets of gold. Doors were broken off their hinges and parts of the ceiling were scorched. "The base is abandoned," Twilight realized.

This conclusion presented her with two new facts: one good and one bad. On one hoof, the guards knew it existed, but by the looks of things it had been quite some time since the battle, so they would not count on her being here. On another hoof, all the food had probably spoiled. Unless she could sneak up into the cellar and steal some of the food there, she would go hungry... but she did not really like the idea of living on pickled onions.

Still, the mare wandered around the facility to try and find the storage

room. If nothing else, they probably left things behind that she could use to help her trip a little bit, especially if she was going into the dragon lands. Wandering down flights of stairs and past more hints of the battle within, the lavender pony finally came across the storage rooms. They were dark and caked with dust, but a little light from her horn was all that was required to illuminate the fairly small space.

Rows of shelves contained just about everything she needed: tents, magical stoves and heaters, portable fairy lights, maps of different parts of Equestria as well as pots and utensils to cook and eat with. Sadly, she could not find any place where there might be bits or even saddlebags lying around for her to carry all the stuff in, which frustrated her to no end. "What kind of storage room doesn't have bags!?" she fumed to herself.

Keeping her items in a pile, she left the room in search of something to use as a makeshift bag. She considered making a bundle out of a stick and blankets, but she did not want to look like a hobony. Nosing into many of the different rooms, Twilight let out a soft gasp as she saw a brown pair of saddlebags sitting in the corner. Trotting over, she felt a little bad stealing the bags, but they had no special marks on them, and they were abandoned with the rest of the facility. Thinking along those lines soothed her guilt a little bit, but not so much when she found a pile of bits inside the bag.

Pulling the currency out, she placed them into stacks of ten, yielding twenty-five stacks of coins. "Two hundred and fifty?" she asked herself. "Who keeps that much on them?" Shaking her head, she replaced the bits and levitated the bag, placing it gently on her shoulders. The fabric was worn and tattered, frayed around the edges. Rarity could have made it more appealing, but right now she needed it to be functional. Trotting back to the other room, her mind began to ponder the subject of disguises.

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Over the next couple of days, Twilight Sparkle stayed within the confines of the Crusader's base, for the most part. She only ventured outside to visit the local market and steal the odd apple or two (under her invisibility spell, of course). In the course of her combing the base, the librarian had found a whole bunch of books on magical disguises and their applications in the group. Apparently, that base used to be the chief supplier for all the stealth

needs of the Crusaders.

Included in the instruction book she found, not only did she need to cement an appearance into her mind's eye, but a suitable back story as well: preferably one that could not be verified unless one of the operatives in the Register's Office looked into the faked files. So, during her excursions to get food, the mare would take note of all the ponies wandering around, trying to decide how to make herself look when the time came.

Of course, being gifted with magic would have her master the spells almost instantly, but it still needed a vivid mental picture of the pony the user wanted to be in order for it to work. Without that, nothing would happen and she would be stuck having to try and explain a floating pair of saddlebags to some guard later down the road. She already decided on a white coat: in tribute to her fallen mentor. However, a lot of other questions remained.

However, on her third day out, she could not help but become infatuated with the colour green. Thinking about it, it would contrast nicely to the white coat, although she was sure Rarity would throw a fit to end all fits. The thought nearly made her giggle out loud in the middle of a quiet street, making her blush as she remembered she was invisible. Soon after, all the other pieces began to fall into place as she noted the differences in architecture between Coltsberg, Huffington and Ponyville.

With the appearance (and subsequent Cutie Mark Sticker design) decided upon, the mare got to work crafting her new appearance in her imagination. A change of hue there, a sprinkle of colour there, a streak or two here and the pony in her mind was coming to life. With that out of the way, she focused her magic, pulling up a sheet of plastic before staining it white to match the coat colour. Sharpening her mental picture, an image of a house popped into existence.

Twilight frowned at the design: it looked far too much like a traditional house and too elaborate in design to fool anypony. Cutie marks were usually simple and featured three or four colours at maximum. An idea suddenly came to mind, much simpler than what she first foolishly planned. It was a house like the last one; however, it appeared to be made of blocks of different sizes, much like building blocks that young colts would play

with. She made them all a light green to compliment the future colours of her mane and tail.

After repeating the process on a second sticker, the mare walked in front of a large mirror in the room she decided to sleep in. Much like the base in Ponyville, it was fairly Spartan with only a bed, dresser and said mirror inside. Her new bags laid on the floor at the hoof of the bed: everything inside and ready to go at a moment's notice. However, her concentration was on the mare staring her in the mirror.

Taking a deep breath, Twilight focused on her eyes with all of her attention, the striking amethyst slowly fading into pink before turning white. She panicked at first, staring back into the narrow points, but quickly resumed the spell, turning them into a striking green as she was reminded of the Barghests. "No!" she cried out. "I wanted them to be blue! Ah well, it will have to do," she sighed before focusing on her coat. Soft lavender faded into a snowy white, the mare stopping the spell halfway through.

Next, she focused on her mane: the dark blue becoming progressively lighter until it too became white. With a push from her magic, it slowly faded into a deep green, her pink streak going further to become a sharp black. Satisfied, she started on the next spell. It was slightly more complicated, but it would cement the appearance of her body, but allow her to switch back and forth quickly in an emergency. A light flash surrounded her, showing that it was a success as well.

Applying the stickers over her usual mark, the unicorn placed two powerful spells on them. One made sure the bond would be waterproof so that it would not peel off in rain, or if she had to swim. The second, meanwhile, made the plastic feel like a smooth coat to the hoof. Of course, it could not be one hundred percent perfect, which explained why the girls felt her flank when they first met. She would just have to be careful.

Looking into the mirror, she smiled at her appearance. At first glance, no pony would suspect her of being Twilight Sparkle! However, she became disheartened when she began to notice the similarities upon closer inspection. She may be under watch from hostile ponies for hours at a time! They would surly recognize her in a few minutes! Thinking quickly, the librarian pulled a brush out of her bag and began to fray the edges of her orderly mane and tail.

Staring back at herself, she could still see traces of Twilight Sparkle in the mirror. Looking at her forehead, however, it soon became clear. She sighed and lowered her head, not wanting it to come to such an extreme. But, if she wanted to be undetected, she would have to do so. Taking a deep breath, the mare focused on her horn, applying an invisibility and intangibility spell upon it that Princess Luna had taught her.

Looking at her from the mirror was a white earth pony mare with emerald green eyes, a dark green mane with a streak of black and deeper green. Her cutie mark was that of a simple light green house silhouette made up of several different blocks of all different shapes. She swished her tail happily back at her, trying to pick out the bits that were still her old self. However, they were minor and only things she would know anyway.

"So long, Twilight Sparkle. Hello, Blueprint," the mare smiled to her reflection.

Although her horn was hidden, the mare levitated her saddle bags onto her back, making careful note not to use her magic in public anymore. It was a foreign concept to her, since she used her magic to do a lot of the work that would be tedious to an earth pony. However, it might be beneficial to put her magic aside for a while, like she did for Winter Wrap-Up back home. Trotting to the base's door, she scanned the street before emerging, putting her disguise to the test.

Walking down the streets of Coltsberg, she noticed nopony looked at her in fear, joy or anger anymore. They just looked past her, like she was just another face in the crowd! Twili- Blueprint had to stop herself from giggling like a school filly at the overwhelming success of her disguise. Humming happily to herself, the white pony gladly walked up to the stores and bought some canned goods and other camping items she would need before turning towards the north, heading for the Outlands.

Chapter 8

Drifting Through Draconia

Wind howled and thunder cracked throughout the valley as rain fell heavily from the clouds above. For the past two hours, the pony trudged through the sudden storm, only then beginning to realize the full implications of the destroyed weather factory. Ducking for cover was not an option on the slopes of the mountain and setting up her tent would only attract lightning. Why had she forgotten to pack that magical lightning rod?

The white mare sighed, her voice drowned out by the ferocity of the wind against her face. Twilight Sparkle (now known as Blueprint to everypony else) thanked her lucky stars that nopony was with her so she could cast a bubble shield charm, which stopped the driving rain from soaking her to the core. It did nothing to stem the tide of the wind, however: her mane and tail being whipped about by the turbulent currents.

Walking up the narrow mountain path, the white earth pony shivered the higher she climbed. Although she knew from a previous mountain climbing adventure that the temperature decreased as altitude increased, she had not accounted for the gale-force winds. With every breath, she felt as if the warmth of her body had been stolen from her by some demon most foul.

Her saddlebags began to indent her back, the weights balanced but still quite heavy. She wished she had been more curious about the pocket dimension spell Princess Luna cast on that bottle, rather than the stupid Pool of Midnight. *You just had to go for the more glorious mystical object rather than the practical spell*, she scolded herself internally. She had given up talking to herself out loud, since she would not be able to hear her voice over the howling wind.

Yet, despite the wind, thunder, lightning and rain, only one thing scared the disguised unicorn as she walked along the mountain path: the path itself. It was narrow, with only enough room for a single pony, maybe two walking side-by-side at the most. As well, there was a very steep, one hundred hoof vertical drop right off the side and onto the jagged rocks below. Thankfully, as a golem, a fall like that would only inconvenience her (albeit with a great

deal of pain), but she would rather avoid the trek back up.

As much as she hated the mountain path, it was the only safe way to leave the nation of Equestria while heading north. The armies fought over the traditional trade routes like Shimmering and Dranous Pass and the mountains provided a natural barrier since they were too steep for all but flying patrols to bother fighting over. However, during her reading in the Coltsberg Crusader base, she found out about a tunnel that had been dug out high in one of the mountains.

That tunnel was the only safe passage for refugees and non-military ponies wishing to enter, or flee from Equestria. Twil- Blueprint knew that bounty hunters would stalk the road to capture fleeing prey, but so long as she kept her mouth shut around a certain white unicorn, there would be no altercations. Of course, the chances were that none of them would be out in the storm unless they stayed near the tunnel's mouth.

Carefully, the white mare navigated around a narrow and sharp turn in the path up ahead, breathing a sigh of relief that was stolen by the wind at the sight. A small, dimly-lit tunnel appeared ahead, burrowed into the mountain after a short rise. A jagged wall to the left and a sheer drop to her right prompted the wanted pony to keep herself on a straight and narrow path. She shied away from the edge while giving the wall a respectful distance, or become lacerated from the sharp rocks.

Approaching the mouth of the tunnel, shapes began to stir the closer she got. The disguised unicorn deactivated her bubble shield charm, lest rouse any suspicion. Blueprint took a deep breath as she came upon the threshold. On cue, five ponies jumped out from behind rocks littering the entrance of the cavern, Vinyl Scratch thankfully absent. Still, she took a couple of steps back in trepidation, a forward hoof raised and ready to go at a moment's notice.

"Well boys?" asked the first, a brown earth pony stallion with a brown mane. "This one on anypony's list?" The four other stallions, an equal mix of Pegasi and unicorns, surveyed the mare. She was too startled (or pretending to be so) to really pay attention to them.

"You're not... highwaycolts, are you?" she asked with some measure of fear on her voice, the concern genuine despite her acting. The five stallions

looked at each other and laughed, some tearing up. She put a confused look across her face.

"Nah," replied the first. "We're much worse! Well, if you pissed anypony off that is. We're bounty hunters, Missy. Care to tell us your name?"

"B-blueprint, sir," she stammered, cold and wet from the still driving rain. Each of the stallions rounded her, looking her over from head to hoof. She felt a little bit uncomfortable being stared at like that: she hoped the illusions would fool them. Eventually, they all looked to the draft brown pony and shook their heads. Suddenly, the stallion's tone became much more chipper, a smiling cracking his face.

"Well then, good day to you, madam," he trotted over, taking her raised hoof and kissed it gently. "Although, I wonder... why is your name Blueprint when you're green?" The mare's eyes went a little wide, having not accounted for that when she made up the persona. Swinging wildly, she frowned and sighed.

"My parents were colour blind, okay?" she answered, pulling her hoof away from him.

"Oh, sorry to hear that, Miss. I know where you're coming from: I was raised by my nana and she was completely blind. Made things a bit difficult, but I'm not here to tell my life story. Come on inside, you must be freezing!" With that, the white mare followed the stallions into the tunnel, shaking the water out of her coat once inside. "So, what do you do for a living, not that I can't guess...?"

"I'm an architect," she replied with a smile, her disguise still working like a charm.

"Cool. Where did you study?" he asked, throwing more questions at her than she thought to come up with beforehoof. They were testing her: she could tell.

"I went to Canterlot University and majored in architecture. I did okay; not the top of my class, but well enough."

"Huh, I was in old CU myself, back in the day. Did Dean Buckingham still

have that annoying-ass cat of his?"

Thankfully for the fictional Blueprint, she had met him once before when he asked the princess to ban her from using his laboratories for her 'unorthodox' experiments. It would be the edge she needed to convince him she was legitimate and get him off of her case. "Boots? Unfortunately. I've never seen a tabby with such an evil look on her face." The stallion laughed happily, no doubt remembering any trouble he might have been in with the dean.

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "Boots. Mangy little bugger, right? Well, we'd best let you on your way. Have a safe trip, Miss Blueprint!" He smiled, waving her off as she continued down the tunnel, smiling and waving back at him. A fair distance later, she let out a silent sigh of relief over a combination of dumb luck, and quality of her magical disguise. That had been a close call: too close for her comfort.

Halfway down the tunnel, the white mare arrived at a small cove carved into the side of the tunnel to serve as a rest stop for weary travelers. Blueprint yawned and walked into it, lying down after placing a soft blanket on the carved stone floor. She started up the mountain after lunch, and judging by the pangs of her stomach, it was just after sunset.

Digging into her bags with her muzzle (just in case any pony wandered past to see an earth pony using magic), she extracted a bunch of berries she picked from a bush during her travels. It had taken her three days to reach the tunnel from the hamlet of Coltsberg by walking. Although she still had some dried food from the market in her bag, she wanted to save them for after she crossed into Draconian territory, since pony food might not be readily available there.

After consuming the berries and taking a swig of water from her canteen, the white pony stretched her limbs before lying down on the blanket. Her bags had an enchantment on them that would alert her in case somepony tried to look in them. Thankfully, it was a common enchantment found on most saddlebags, so it would not necessarily blow her cover. With a sigh, the disguised unicorn shut her eyes to get some much-needed sleep.

Twilight stood alone in the familiar expanse of the Canterlot throne room, the glass skylight above shimmering in a strange light. For beyond the

stained glass was a world of utter blackness: not even the lights from the other wings of the castle visible. She walked up to the empty throne with some hesitation, though she could not say why she felt that way.

After a quick look around, the unicorn found that she was truly alone in the room, stealing a sit upon the throne of Equestria. The solidified cloud cushions felt good against her lavender rump, as if passively massaging away all the aches and pain she felt. The mare let a contented sigh pass her lips; she often wondered what it would be like to watch the world from the lofty perch as she had never been allowed up the steps before, except to speak to her mentor.

"I daresay you look rather fitting up there," spoke a voice from beyond. The librarian panicked and got off the symbol of power, her eyes looking around wildly. The doors to the room burst open, more blackness sitting beyond the threshold. However, that was not what caused her to gasp: a black figure slowly emerged from beyond, powerful and imposing despite the purple mare's elevated position. "Then again, it is not surprising," Princess Luna added with a smile.

"P-princess!" Twilight shouted, running up to the midnight alicorn. "I've been looking all over for you! I'm sorry I sat on the throne, but it looked so comfortable..." Luna chuckled as the unicorn descended from the platform, looking at her with such a gentle expression upon her face. "But... um... aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Twilight, I should tell you," she started, "This is all a dream. Ponies that have passed can still appear in the dreams of their living loved ones. How else could my sister's vestments suddenly appear on you?" Looking down, the lavender mare screamed in surprise. Indeed, Celestia's necklace, shoes and crown had suddenly materialized on her body, shrunk down to fit her proportions. She struggled in vain to take the gilded clothes off, yet they remained affixed to her body. "Interesting reaction," the midnight princess added. "I want you to see something... Princess Twilight."

With a soft giggle, everything began to spin and turn: the throne room warping and becoming a blur of colour and sound as the giggles turned into a din. Dapper ponies surrounded the pair, going about their business as if they could not see or hear them. The room was grey and expansive, yawning out into the sky, banners of purple and yellow hanging from the

ceiling. They had obviously appeared in the middle of a high-class party easily the likes of the Grand Galloping Gala. Luna wound through the well-dressed crowd, the lavender mare following behind her, still trying to force the golden jewelery off her body.

The midnight alicorn stopped dead, pointing with a hoof to the high table. Twilight let out a soft gasp as they trotted over. A large alicorn stallion, coat and mane as dark as night, both speckled in stars, sat at the centre of the table. Beside him sat a regal alicorn mare, her coat a soft yellow, her mane a brighter yellow at the roots before fading to black at the tips. Flanking them sat two alicorn fillies, one with a white coat and pink mane, the other with a midnight coat and teal mane.

Naturally, her eyes settled upon the only pony of the quartet she recognized: the pony that gave her life. The younger Celestia looked like, in succinct terms, a geek. Thick, round glasses covered her rosy eyes as they bore into an old and ratty book. Large braces kept her teeth in line, since they obviously lacked the dental technology for any sort of subtlety. It looked like she had a lampshade on her head, to say it politely. Twilight could not help but remember how SHE looked and draw parallels, since her mentor was obviously an adolescent at the time Luna was showing her.

"Are they...?" the lavender mare breathed.

"My family? Why, yes they are, Twilight. You know Sol, of course, and those are my parents: King Altros and Queen Notia. If Celestia is technically your mother, that makes them your grandparents, you know. Of course, we also have lah at the end."

"lah?"

"As Celestia is to Sol and Eos is to you, I am to lah. That was my name before I officially took my station as regent of the moon. Anyway, what I have to show you is inside her head."

Suddenly, the world turned black, only the filly princess and the grown version remaining with the exception of Twilight herself. Lah looked upon the princess with fear in her turquoise eyes, babbling as she sat on the invisible chair. "Why do you fear me so?" Luna asked, approaching the filly. She shied away, hiding her face from the imposing alicorn, whimpering.

"Have I done anything to warrant such fear and distrust from you, lah?"

The young alicorn huddled on the invisible table, whimpering in fear. "Leave me alone," she croaked. "Just... just leave me alone. Please." The darkness faded, showing the filly with her mane in her mashed potatoes, her father trying to coax her into voicing her distress.

"You are not the first pony to shun their inner deity, Twilight. I know from personal experience," the regent of the moon replied, her eyes fixed upon the filly. "I was afraid of Luna because I suddenly had this voice in the back of my head, whispering to me and trying to offer advice when I did not think I needed it. In hindsight, I was unprepared for the burden, and I was about five hundred years old at the time. I can understand why you think Eos is an evil mare, considering what happened that day."

Scuffing her hoof against the grey stone, the lavender unicorn suddenly felt very small in her presence again. "Why did you show me this?" she asked, straightening her posture as indignation quickly washed over her. "How... how can you tell me that Eos isn't actually evil? Look at what she's done to Equestria... to my friends! If anything, I'm MORE convinced she's evil!"

Luna sighed, looking to the ground dejectedly. "I can tell that I cannot convince you since I've heard you share Celly's iron will. Have a good day, Twilight," she spoke with finality.

The mare fluttered her eyes open, her internal clock rousing her awake. Looking at her hoof, the mare became certain the dream... or nightmare, ended as it was a snowy white with no royal vestments upon it. The earth pony stretched her legs with a yawn. No pony had come during the night, her bags untouched and the ground undisturbed. Rolling up the blanket, Blueprint gathered up her supplies before continuing down the tunnel.

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Even though the sun shone brightly that morning a feeling of gloom hung over the area: much like in Ponyville, but less subtle and more hopeless. Cresting over a small hill, a town lay ahead flanked by two mountains riddled with large cave openings. The buildings looked small enough to house ponies, but what were they doing in the dragon lands? Blueprint

mulled the problem over as she descended, finally finding the road halfway down the steep hill.

Still, it was a mystery that did not really matter to her. She was far more concerned with finding her dear and valuable friend, even if he would not recognize her disguised the way she was. Although she had left Equestrian soil, she had doubts that bounty hunters, Vinyl included, did not really care about them. In fact, she could have sworn that she had seen an electric blue hair or two in the couple of days since she had left the tunnel.

So far, the architect impersonator was surprised by the overall nature of Draconia: mostly forested with the odd mountain or two dotted in between. Of course, one could never extrapolate what a nation's climate was like based off off a small portion. If she was not so afraid of fully-grown dragons, the disguised unicorn figured it would be a nice place to build a cottage or a house to live in.

Walking down the wooded road, the usual ambient noises filled the air, birds softly singing to one another. Overall, the white mare loved traveling in the forest: there was no hint of war or death, just peace and tranquility. She could see the appeal to Fluttershy's eco-friendly lifestyle. At least, that of the Fluttershy she used to know.

Not even that annoying voice in the back of her mind made itself present since that night in the forest. Obviously, the queen took the hint that no matter what, Twilight would not trust her. The emerald-maned pony smiled and happily trotted down the road as she hummed a familiar tune. Hopefully things would become even brighter once she found her oldest and most dear friend.

About a mile away from the city she spotted earlier, the white mare emerged from the forest, the settlement sprawling out before her. Dozens of ponies walked in fields flanking the roads, tilling the land for the next crop while harvesting the fruits of the last season. Many of the ponies working closer to the road looked at her with quirked eyebrows, confused by her chipper trot.

Blueprint looked around in confusion; each of the ponies appeared to be hopeless and lost, wading in a sea of depression. For the first time in days, the mare felt out of place as her happy gait slowed into a walk, a frown

coming upon her face once she passed the farmers. However, another smile flashed upon her face when she imagined Pinkie Pie (the non-crazy version) having a field day in the town.

Almost a dozen similar fields passed by as the wanted mare wandered past the limits of the town. She did not expect to have any success in the very first town she happened across, but it made sense Spike would continue in a straight line from the pass. At the very least, she could ask around and see if anypony had spotted a baby dragon fitting his description and possibly know where he went.

However, the town itself had the same gloomy and depressing atmosphere that the outer fields seemed to covet. The white pony slowly made her way through the town, looking for someone who would stop and talk. Every time she tried, they all brushed past her hurriedly, as if some invisible threat hung over their heads. Judging from the state of the buildings, it would not be too hard to imagine why everypony seemed miserable.

She recalled that Princess Celestia once told her that the dragons would protect the ponies from monsters like manticores and hydras for a rather steep price. In exchange for their protection, the ponies would serve the dragons, mining gems and acting as slaves, more or less. That dispelled the mystery of why there were ponies in the country quite nicely, once she thought about it. Sometimes, she forgot things all too easily.

The doom and gloom of the town became all too clear to her as she pushed on into the town square. Still, Blueprint was still there on a mission and no amount of depressed ponies would stop her from finding her dear friend and number one assistant. "Excuse me, Sir," she asked a pony loitering near a fountain. "Have you ever seen a baby dragon around here? Came from Equestria, green scales, purple spines, no wings and possibly a chip on his shoulder?"

"Missy," grunted the aging brown stallion. "I can think of at least fifty dragons fitting that description. I've never heard of one comin' from Equestria though."

"That's fair enough. Thank you for your time," she replied before returning to the hunt. It was especially unlikely that she would ever find information

from the first pony. Huffington was just dumb luck. Still, she would not be deterred and started asking everypony she could about her missing friend and his whereabouts.

After nearly five hours of searching, the white mare began to feel just as depressed as the rest of the town. Although it was sunny outside, the gray and dark brown woods of the buildings felt like they were in a perpetual rainstorm. Only a couple of buildings rose over two stories, each house packed tight on the little land there was between the two mountains flanking the town. It looked like a medieval Manehattan slum.

Blueprint sighed with her ears pinned to her skull: utterly dejected after asking what felt like the entire town for his whereabouts. Not a single pony had seen a dragon of that description, or too many of them to really even care: especially the young mares who were asked to care for the hatchlings. Could she ever relate to those ponies! When Spike was a hatchling, he somehow broke into the treasury room and nibbled on half of the crown jewels. She was STILL having her stipend garnished to pay back the damages!

Just as she was about to give up and get directions to the next town, the white mare walked into the town square once more only to happen across a crowd of ponies, looking at a disturbingly familiar caravan. Intrigued, the disguised unicorn walked up, joining the crowd who murmured in confusion and curiosity. The caravan was tall and dotted with the stars of the night sky, soft wisps of gentle blue painted on the wooden sides.

"Come one, come all!" boomed a powerful voice all of a sudden. "Come witness the magical might of the one, the only, THE GREAT AND POWERFUL.... T-R-R-R-RIXIE!" As she spoke, the side of the caravan collapsed into a stage, the familiar azure mare appearing in a puff of smoke. The ponies looked confused, no one applauding her entrance or appearance. Yet, she seemed to shrug it off, going into her show nonetheless.

"Watch in AWE as The Great and Powerful Trixie performs feats of magic not yet seen by pony eyes!" Blueprint rolled her eyes. If her suspicions were correct, then that altercation with the Manticore never happened, meaning nothing good would come of the performance. "Find yourself carried off by the entrancing stories that Trixie will weave for you, much like

the first storytellers: the stars themselves!"

Magical fireworks and fanfare filled the air, several of the ponies taken aback by the sudden displays of magic. Some began to walk away, having better things to do, but the white earth pony lowered her haunches and sat, genuinely interested. So far, the performance resembled the quality of her first Ponyville show. All that had to be seen was if her attitude had followed suit.

So the show began in earnest: for her first feat of magic, she turned a plush doll she had (which Twilight immediately recognized as her stuffy doppelganger, named Bella) into a real pony that assisted her with the next trick. From there, the mare sawed her in half in a box and set the entire thing on fire, only to open both halves and reveal a dozen beautiful doves. Twilight immediately began to draw more parallels to the 'thank-you' performance she did after the Manticore incident than the other show.

Ponies applauded and cheered: those who had not left as soon as the show began stuck around to see it through to the end. After turning the doves back into her assistant, the azure mare began to retell the story of 'The Ghost of Greystone Tower' to the audience. Vivid images of the tale of unrequited love danced across the white pony's eyes, almost able to see the tears in the illusionary mare's eyes.

Once the compelling story finished, she seamlessly dove back into the show. Blueprint smiled as she continued; the references to and influences of Hoofdini far more clear to her than ever before. After suspending her manufactured assistant above a pit of magical fire, the mare went for the big finish. Her body bubbled and twisted as hooves became claws and bat-like wings sprouted from her back as her tail grew a stinger. The Manticore snarled, sending several ponies running before she turned back, giggling and bowing to her audience.

"Thank you, everypony! The Great and Powerful Trixie will be in town all week! Be sure to tell your friends," she spoke before vanishing in another puff of smoke. Her stage folded up on its own accord, a last blast of magical fireworks and fanfare blared through the square, announcing that the show had ended. The white mare smirked as she decided to pay her dear younger sister a surprise visit... at least to see how the years had treated her.

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After having a light (and late) lunch, the white mare waited patiently for the crowds to thin out around the caravan. Apparently, Trixie's show had done a wonderful job boosting the atmosphere of the town. She could already feel the intangible gloom begin to lift, as if somepony had cast the light upon a room that had been in the dark for far too long. Only when she felt the crowd had mostly dispersed did she approach the caravan.

Taking a deep breath, Blueprint knocked her hoof against the wooden door, her back aching a little from the heavy bags on her shoulders. "The Great and Powerful Trixie grants you entry," the unicorn beyond spoke with an air of dignity and pride. The white earth pony pushed the door open, walking inside to find an interesting sight. The caravan was dark and lacked windows, but a dozen books sat on a shelf beside a desk, complete with writing tools to plan performances out on.

A ratty red rug lay upon the floor, giving some homely overtones to the dark space. A bed sat in the opposite corner, with room for only one pony, unsurprisingly. Trixie sat before a large vanity, combing her mane in a mirror, giving her guest no real attention. A coat rack sat beside her, holding her hat and cape on a lofty perch. She must have found them in the library closet before she left Ponyville for the last time.

The azure mare cast a glance at her guest, a smirk appearing on her face, mistaking her surveying gaze for one of awe. "Welcome to Trixie's humble abode. Have you come to shower the Goddess of Showmareship with the praise she so rightly deserves? Well, Trixie supposes she has a few minutes to spare, so you may commence with the compliments, my enthusiastic little admirer."

The white mare cleared her throat, trying to tune her vocal cords in such a way that the younger unicorn would not immediately identify. Sure, she could have used her magic to do so, but she might as well drop the disguise if she were to do that, since unicorns could sense another's magic. "Oh great and powerful Trixie," she greeted, her tone a little lower and carried more authority. "My name is Blueprint. I am but a humble architect."

Trixie quirked an eye at the white and green mare: her voice sounded

disturbingly familiar, but she could not pin down where. Of course, the obvious question pushed the thought out of her mind. "If your name is BLUEprint, Trixie wonders why you are GREEN."

The mare sighed in simulated frustration. "Look, my parents were colour blind, okay? Every single time I introduce myself, everypony asks that same stupid question and it is getting on my nerves." Much to her chagrin, Trixie began to laugh out loud, most likely at her plight. It looked like she was still the obnoxious egotistical mare she was before coming back to Ponyville... in her world, or time, or wherever the Sorrel Hells the Pool of Midnight had plopped her down.

"Well, the GREAT and POWERFUL Trixie has never had that problem, nor does she care to hear about the puny little grievances of a commoner such as yourself. Quit wasting Trixie's time and tell her what you've come to see her for!" Trixie puffed out her chest and shut her eyes, the grating aspects of her personality shining all the more clearly with every second the white mare spent in her presence.

"I'm here for two things," she spoke plainly. "First, I need to know what you want to do about the queen. I know you're a former member of the Crusaders, so don't play dumb with me. I... I want to join you and help crush her evil reign once and for all!" She knew it would be a gamble, but hopefully by taking this route, she could find out if she could trust her sister or not. If Fluttershy could be so drastically changed... she did not really want to think about what Trixie would be like.

"Sorry to shatter your hopes, you foolish mare, but I honestly don't care if that horse lives or dies anymore. If you really want to be a gung-ho moron, join the Apple Clan in Appleoosa or the Party Poppers in Fillydelphia. You came here for nothing. Now, what is this second thing you want to waste my glorious and oh-so-precious time with?"

Taking a deep breath, the white mare turned around, shutting the door after she looked around in case anypony came walking up. "I need to know where Spike is," she spoke in her usual tone of voice. At first, the azure mare looked at her in confusion until, that is, the wave of realization washed over her. Trixie's eyes went wide as she surveyed the white mare in front of her.

"T-twilight?" she asked her eyes wide. The white mare nodded and closed her eyes, a bright flash over took the room, nearly blinding the azure mare. Once it subsided, the lavender unicorn stood before her, looking far wearier than she remembered. "Holy pony plop! It... how... where did you learn to do those spells!?"

"It's a long story, Trixie. I'm glad to see you, actually. I... had a run-in with Fluttershy and she... she..." Twilight began to tear up at the sheer thought of it. "Is it true? Is it true what the girls plan to do... once the queen is gone?"

"Sadly," the azure mare replied after a few seconds silence. "Now, tell me why I'm supposed to CARE that you want to find Spike? How am I supposed to know you're not some sort of spy, or golem made by the queen to gather information on me, hmm? Why should I let you walk away from this alive?"

"Well..." Twilight started. "I'm actually from another world, or timeline or something where you came back to Ponyville and fought a Manticore by turning yourself into an Ursa Minor with your illusion magic after you lost all of it for a little while. I can tell you stuff that you told me there that you've never told anypony ever."

"Oh yeah?" the showmare smirked. "Just try it."

"Well..." the lavender pony trailed, a hoof raised to her mouth as if contemplating. "For one, you're the Heir of Hoofdini. He gave you the hat and cloak on that rack along with a letter after he died doing the Rainbow Faint. In the letter, he even said he thought of you as a daughter. In addition, you told me that you felt, or feel bad that you've let him down by having everypony hate you instead of putting them in awe of your magical abilities."

Trixie opened her mouth in awe, a gurgling sound coming out of her throat as she tried to process just what was spoken to her. There was the possibility she could have read her mind, but mind-reading spells always made the target feel a strange crawling sensation, and she had felt nothing before or during the exchange.

"How did... I... You.... What!?" she stammered, unable to form a coherent

sentence. The azure mare fell to her haunches, shaking her head in disbelief. How could it be possible? Unless she was a very, VERY good spy, she would never be able to guess. The lavender unicorn frowned at her, contemplating something herself judging by the look upon her face.

"If you still don't believe me, you know your little doll? The one you used in the show? Her name is Bella and I have a doll myself that looks like you since our mom gave them to use before we had to be spl---"

"I BELIEVE YOU, OKAY!?" she shouted, a hoof massaging her head. "Just SHUT UP and let me think for a minute here." The magician rubbed her temple and moaned as she tried to digest the information. On the one hoof, it meant she could finally ask her the questions she needed answered. On the other, she probably was not going to stay for a while. A magical bell rang above her doorway, distracting her from her musings. "Somepony's coming."

Without another word, Twilight Sparkle flashed, becoming the white earth pony once more. A knock suddenly sounded on the door just two seconds after her warning. "The Great and Powerful Trixie grants you entry," the showmare spoke. The door opened, a familiar face popping in. "Vinyl! What are you doing out here, you old pirate?" Trixie walked over and gave the bounty hunter a hug before allowing her to cross over the threshold.

The white unicorn glanced at the white mare with the green mane, as if x-raying her with her eyes. "Oh, I didn't know you had company, Tricky Trixie," she smiled. "I'm sorry if I harshed your groove."

"Oh, not at all. She's just an enthusiastic fan of mine who wanted nothing more than my autograph and to gaze upon my godly visage!" The white unicorn rolled her eyes and chuckled. "What can Trixie do for you? How's your friend Octavia doing?"

"Tavia's doing fine. Dancing along to her own beat, but that's what I dig about her," she replied happily, breaking off the hug. "I'm afraid I'm here on business and all that jazz. I doubt you can, or want to answer, but I need to know if you've see that vexing older sister of yours."

"Twilight's giving you the run-around, eh? I didn't expect any less from that insufferable mare."

"Worse than you ever did, Tricky," Vinyl laughed. "Now, what do you know about Twilight?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie has heard rumours that she's finally decided to show her stupid face, but thankfully she has neither seen nor heard from her. Sorry, Scratch."

"No biggie," she smiled, taking the lie as truth. "Later." With that, she trotted down the stairs, the azure mare waving her off until she turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

"I was one of her targets," Trixie started to explain. "Yet, as we tried to outfox each other, she got into a spot of trouble and I felt compelled to save her life. Eventually, we both decided that we just could not spend so much time hunting each other. So, we came to an agreement. I cut off part of my tail, and Vinyl would tell the queen that I had died. All I had to do was stay out of Equestria. I miss performing for the ponies there, but I have so many more interesting stories to tell."

"Why?" Blueprint asked as she walked closer, her eyes as wide as saucers as her heart beat fast. "Why didn't you tell her about me, Trixie?"

"I lived in Ponyville for six years. I made friends with the ponies who knew you best. You just did what you had to do during the Ursa Incident and... I grew up, big sister." Trixie looked to the floor, shutting the door with her magic. "Have a seat. I'll get some tea going while I tell you about Spike."

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Many miles away, above the town of Wyvern, a large and imposing stone castle sat upon the top of a steep and jagged mountain. The castle shared the same name as the town, for the settlement of servile ponies was owned by it. Smooth, straight lines of dark grey stone contrasted the enemy castle of Canterlot to a tee as the towers scraped the sky, as if to steal the clouds themselves.

As the sun began to rise over the opposite horizon, the green and purple dragon sat beside his window, watching as the twilight gave way to the day. He loved this time of morning, if only because it reminded him of a creature

he loved and respected more than any other. Yet, she had hurt him so many years ago, without a single explanation as to why. Sure, the ill-set bone still ached to this day, but the emotional trauma far outweighed the physical pain.

How could she have hurt him, her friends and nearly destroyed their home before vanishing without a trace? He had already solved the dilemma some time ago, but he still found himself asking the question far more than was healthy. Spike sighed as he pushed himself away, getting slightly worried about his only friend left: Owlowiscious.

Sure, he liked to go out for nightly flights, but he was usually home in time for breakfast. When he left Ponyville, the horned owl had been the only creature to come along. He could not understand why, but as time went on, he figured it was because he felt a duty to keep an eye on him for... that pony. His clawed feet ticked upon the cold stone floor as he walked over to the soft and still warm bed.

Like most rooms in the castle, his bedroom was plain and humble. Grey walls were sparsely decorated with small gems and paintings. Unlike pony paintings, dragon paintings were made of coloured sedimentary stone, since the pony versions were incredibly flammable, as the dragon learned at a young age. However, since he was used to sleeping on flammable objects, the dragons allowed him a nice mattress made of hay and blankets, although many called him crazy for sleeping that way.

Spike yawned and stretched his limbs, used to being up early ever since he left the ponies. Thankfully, his experience with them proved invaluable to the king, so when the war started, he was immediately put on the council as an advisor on pony language, culture and history. Although he was not quite an expert on the latter, he happily contributed, if only to spite the queen for killing one of the few ponies he respected.

Just as he was about to give up on waiting for the owl, a rush of air grabbed his attention, light green ears shaking as the sound registered in his brain. Turning around, the brown owl sat on the windowsill, a letter clutched in his beak. "Oh so that's what took you so long: Trixie's in the area," he spoke, taking the letter from his friend who gave a happy and energetic hoot before fluttering over to his perch.

"What's gotten into YOU?" he asked acidly. "It's just Trixie, Owlowliscious. It's nothing to get too excited about." Turning the envelope over in his hands, he saw the typical scrawling of his name in light blue ink upon the white envelope. As much as she got on his nerves at times, it was refreshing to hear from a pony for once, as opposed to other dragons. Of course, he was leery of her letters at first, especially since the brown owl would hoot and pester her until she wrote: at first, anyway.

Dear Spike,

The Great and Powerful Trixie is doing just fine, before you even ask. There have been some developments in Equestria, as far as my contacts have been able to source. For one, apparently Zecora's body washed up in Ponyville last week: no surprise there. However, I just received an interesting visit from my friend, Vinyl Scratch. You know: the bounty hunter who drove me out of the country?

Apparently, she is on a very interesting assignment, worth some five hundred thousand bits! Considering the subject, I'm not surprised by this development. You see, a few days previous, I received a call from Dinky for a conference with the other Crusader generals, both present and former. Sitting with them, I kid you not, was one Twilight Sparkle! In fact, she visited me in my caravan just moments before my former nemesis showed up.

I am sighing right now as she is bugging me to no end to write to you. For being my elder sister, I have swiftly learned just how foalish she can be at times. Yes, Twilight, I'm getting to it! Celestia damn it! I still have the dictation spell going! Look at what you made me write, you little---

The baby dragon could not help but laugh at the letter and how quickly the azure mare had lost her cool. Yet, he was a little annoyed at how dumb she must have thought he was. Until, however, he made out the very clear writing he knew only Twilight could make. It was neat and proper, but small out of habit so that she could fit as much on a single page as possible.

Spike,

There are no words to express how deeply I regret what happened that day ten years ago. I can understand if you can never forgive me, since

everypony told me how you left town just a couple of months later. I am so sorry! Written words can never express how deeply I regret hurting you and your feelings. If you can, please allow me the opportunity to apologize face-to-face. I need to see you, to hear your voice: I need to know that you're safe. Please, list a time and place and I will be there in a heartbeat.

Lots of love,

Twilight Sparkle.

PS: Trixie wishes to put her salutations here too! Honestly, you're not that important, Twilight!

A tidal wave of emotions, old and new swept over the young dragon as he read and re-read the letter, especially the section claiming to be from his oldest and most dear friend. He felt conflicted at best over the new information, especially the idea of her being back in Equestria. Spike had no idea what, exactly, was going on, but it probably did not bode well for him, or for the efforts to remove the queen.

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Three days later, the false earth pony climbed up the steep mountain path, just south of the castle of the dragons. The massive building loomed over the valley, like the creature the ponies worked diligently to serve. She smiled as the thought of embracing her old friend came upon her mind. Although it had only been little over a week for her since she last saw the young dragon, it felt more akin to the ten years the other said she had been gone for.

Disguised as Blueprint, she had little trouble getting past the young dragon sentries at the entrance of the village, hanging a left to climb up a lesser-known access road to the castle on another mountain. Trixie would come along in another few days when she would perform for the king himself! The baby dragon apparently pulled some strings and assured the elder dragon that she could be trusted.

A smile crept upon her muzzle as she looked down on the pony settlement. Out there, she felt confident that Vinyl had not followed her and that not a pony in the country cared about her. After taking a deep breath,

the white mare glowed and flashed before turning back into the purple unicorn he would recognize. Taking a look up towards the sun, she knew the hour had come, picking up the pace to reach the ledge above.

At the top of the winding path, standing impatiently was the green dragon. Her eyes glistened with tears as they made contact for the first time in what felt like ages: pure joy sweeping across her features. "Spike!" she cried out in a whisper, galloping the rest of the distance between them. He stood taller than she remembered: equal to her in height and able to wrap his scaled arms around her neck in a gentle hug.

Tears openly flowed from her eyes as she sobbed on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Spike!" she cried. "I'm sorry! I... I wasn't in my right mind when I broke your arm... when I hurt our friends. I... I was overwhelmed by Test Stress, only it was so much worse! I know that is no excuse, but please know how sorry I really am!"

The baby dragon softly patted her back, hugging her tightly as a part of his mind cried out that she was being sincere. Yet, the dominant part refused to believe her. "Why did you leave us, Twilight?" he asked quietly. "Why did you leave me, Owlowliscious, your other friends and Ponyville? If you were really sorry, you would have come back in a heartbeat. So why... why did you leave us for TEN years!? Why did you ignore us?"

"I... I..." she trailed. He just had to ask the most difficult question. How could she tell him that she was from another world? The hurt and pain in his eyes told her that he would never buy it, not at first anyway. She had to lie quickly if she was to save any face. "I wanted to come home... but I was afraid everypony would hate me after what I did. I sort of... stumbled upon Ponyville by accident. If I had known what it would have done, of course I would have come home that very day!"

Spike looked at her in hurt and contempt, his green eyes becoming cold. "Liar," he whispered. Twilight shivered under his gaze. He had obviously developed more than she anticipated, already able to cultivate the famed Dragon Lie Sense. "You horrible, horrible LIAR! What's your game, EOS? Are you here trying to taunt me, or did you send some stupid golem to spy on us!?"

"Spike," the lavender mare breathed, tears welling up in her eyes again.

"It's me! Remember the time you ate the jewel on Celestia's crown and I took the blame? R-remember when I would take you with me to Pony Joe's and you would fall asleep on the table? Remember when I would read you those foal's stories to help you sleep? It's really me, Spike! How... how could you call me by that horrible name?"

"She... she put her memories into you, didn't she!?" Spike breathed in disgust. "I never knew she... she would go so far. Oh Twilight, why have you fallen so? Why... why did you become the queen? Unless... unless she only gave you the memories up until she SNAPPED!" Twilight backed away from the baby dragon, becoming increasingly afraid that he had become like the others.

"Oh no, you don't," the young dragon raised his voice. "Seize her!" Suddenly, over two dozen griffons, each plated in blue armour descended from their unseen perches. The lavender pony looked around, unable to move from shock. They surrounded her on all sides, spears and swords in their claws, all pointed at her. Even if she wanted to use her magic against them, there were too many of them, as a dozen more griffons and three fully-grown dragons came upon her.

"It's really me, Spike!" Twilight cried desperately. "Please, listen to me! I want to STOP the queen! I came from another version of the world where... where I didn't kill Celestia or Luna. I want her dead just as much as you do! I want to see her punished and destroyed like the evil horse she is! Please, you've got to believe me! Please..." Tears streamed down her eyes as they became puffy and red from the crying.

"At last, confirmation," he spoke coldly. "I think we can learn a lot from you... 'Twilight'" he made the air quotes gesture with his fingers. "Take her away!" Suddenly, three guards jumped on her and clamped three Mythril rings to her horn. Two more were swiftly applied to her hind legs before she managed to shake free, only to run into another guard who held her roughly.

The dragon turned his back on the proceedings in contempt, secretly unable to bear the sight. A lavender hoof extended from beyond the wall of guards, her head sticking over the griffon's shoulder. "SPIKE!" she called out in a desperate mixture of pain and fear. "SPIKE! **HELP ME!! PLEASE!!!**" Two more bracelets were clamped tightly to her front

legs, digging into her coat and flesh. Tears continued to stream from her eyes, as the scaly claw of an adult dragon scooped her up into its palm and covered her, muffling her cries.

Later on, she would think back on that moment and swear that she felt her heart break the instant the red scales obscured her vision. She could feel the dragon lift off from the ground, carrying her to parts unknown as she bawled over his betrayal. If Spike, of all the living things on the planet, did not care for her anymore, then there really was no one... no living creature that she could trust. That last thought hurt Twilight more than anything else ever could.

Chapter 9

For Whom the Belle Tolls

'Doooong, dooooong, dooooong, dooooong, dooooong,' tolled the bell of the clock tower in Canterlot as it signalled the hour. Since time immemorial, the tower had measured the march of time's hooves. Every clock in every land around the world hoped in vain to keep pace with it, yet it endured the centuries and millennia in stride. Like time itself, it stood indifferent to the plights of others, existing only to keep track.

Queen Eos sat in her office, almost finished tackling the pile of paperwork that sat before her. Somehow, she always got a cheesy thrill out of completing her paperwork as close to the deadline as possible. Even from beyond the other side of the mountain, the clock tower's toll rang clear through the old castle. She groaned in frustration, with dinner being another hour off, she could not start any of her other favourite pastimes lest she become berated by her nanny of an advisor.

"If I knew ruling this country had so much repetitive paperwork, I would have let at least ONE of those idiot alicorns live, if only to shove it all on their plate and save the fun ones for myself!" the queen cried in frustration. Over the past week, the rebellions had grown some stones and sharply increased their activity tenfold. If their stupid little song was anything to go by, the lavender doppelganger's return signaled the end of her reign. "By the stars, I need a vacation! How DID Celestia do all this plop by herself for a thousand years!?"

She slammed her head into the desk as the stress began to overwhelm her. It was a good thing she was immortal, because otherwise she feared all the stress would have cut down her lifespan by a quarter of what it should have been. A knock on her door elicited a groan from the goddess of the sun and moon: more bad news obviously. "Enter at your own risk!" she warned, not in the mood for any visitors.

A sheepish-looking earth pony entered the office with Stardance filing in right behind her: definitely bad news. It took all of her willpower to stop herself from setting the both of them on fire in retribution. The earth pony

spy walked forward, prostrating before the monarch in fear and respect. "A thousand pardons for interrupting your important work, your highness," she apologized. The mare had a pink coat and periwinkle mane, perfectly normal and beyond the sight of the creatures she spied on.

"Arise, Vivid Grain," the queen spoke. "What news do you bring from Draconia?"

"Earlier today..." she trailed, "Master Spike, the advisor on Pony Affairs... laid out a trap for a pony to fall into. They took the bait and are now in dragon custody, your highness. The... the dragons have captured Twilight Sparkle. As well, he said she confirmed... the... the unmentionable rumour..." She winced, and rightly so as a stony look swept over the purple alicorn. On the inside, she was screaming, wanting nothing more than to spray the spy's blood upon the carpet. However, her annoying conscience overrode her desire.

"You are lucky that I make it a point not to shoot the messenger, Vivid Grain," she spoke calmly. "You are dismissed, before I change my mind. Stardance? Tell the royal winery to send up as many bottles of the cheapest wine they possess to my chambers. Also, organize a strike team to extract that stupid unicorn if none of the rebels do so in the next week." The spy bowed deeply and exited the room as swiftly as she dared, the unicorn advisor becoming concerned.

"Of... of course, my queen," he bowed before vanishing in a flash of light.

Shoving her paperwork aside, the queen herself vanished from the office in a flash of bright magic. She was in no mood to suffer a walk through the castle to her intended destination. It was a large, expansive room created for the sole purpose of practicing powerful magic. The walls were as white as the rest of the castle, carved in thousands of runes to cement the spells that made it function. Eos screamed in anger and frustration as her horn glowed in lavender energy.

"STARS-DAMNED BUCKING DRAGONS!" she screeched. "Damn you to the Sorrel Hells, Spike, you villainous traitor!" An illusion of the baby dragon appeared before her, created by the room in response to her desire. She picked the illusion up and shook it roughly with her magic before she tore the limbs off of his body. Simulated blood flew everywhere as she scattered

the limbs and severed head to the winds. "How could you do such a thing!? Didn't you LOVE us!?"

Hot tears seared the queen's cheeks as her mane and tail simmered in indignation, three fully-grown dragons emerged to replace the felled juvenile. She darted forward, impaling the nearest one with her horn before she ripped out his intestines and strangled the second one with them. Her eyes burned in pure magic as the tears refused to abate; the third suddenly exploded and rained blood all over the room, staining her lavender coat crimson.

Eos let out an infuriated scream as the other two dragons succumbed. "Why, Spike!? WHY!!! I was going to forgive you and let you LIVE after the war, but NOW? I'm going to execute you MYSELF, you TRAITOR!!!" The alicorn fell to her legs, the illusions washing away as she broke down and sobbed.

Why did she care? He did not betray HER; he betrayed the OTHER her running about. Yet, the thought that he would so easily condemn the pony that raised him stung. He had broken her heart... what little of it that was not shattered to pieces already. The tyrannical Queen of Equestria curled up upon the floor like a foal, wanting nothing more than to end it all: to be rid of all the pain and suffering.

Composing herself after several minutes, the mare flashed her horn again and appeared within her chambers. Twelve cases of cheap wine awaited her arrival. After casting a soundproofing spell upon her chambers, she pried open the first case and downed the first bottle in one magnificent gulp. Throwing it into the empty fireplace, the bottle shattered and speckled the carpet in glass. She continued the process with the first two cases before levitating the remaining ten.

Stumbling into her bathroom, the queen started running the water. "Ninety-nine bottles of wine on da wall, ninety-nine bottles of wine. You take one down and drink it dry," she muttered in a slur, drowning another bottle in a single gulp before casting it haphazardly into the tub. "Ninety-eight bottles of wine on da wall..."

A couple of minutes later, the water stopped running. The alicorn flopped drunkenly into her bath, crushing five bottles with her side. Even as her

blood stained the water red, she did not care, for the dozens of bottles she drowned had numbed the pain from the shards of green glass. She righted herself and emerged from the water, sobbing gently in spite of herself.

Bottle after bottle became consumed by the greedy mare's lips, yet her vision did not even blur, even after consuming enough drink to kill half the royal guard. The new wound to her heart had opened up older ones, bringing back that day where she forsook her teacher and her friends out of foalish anger and pain. As much as she regretted thinking about it, she could have used the former monarch's wisdom and comfort, even if she had lied so horribly to her.

"Why did you do it!?" she cried out in anger, before smashing her newest bottle against the door. "Why did you have to sell her out like that, you cold-hearted lizard! Didn't I raise you better than that? Didn't you love me? If you don't love me, then... what point is there in trying anymore!?" she slammed her hoof on a standing bottle, frowning as some wine spilled onto the elegant marble floors, glass embedded into her hoof.

Eos turned herself around and started bashing her head against the lip of the tub, remembering the faces and the words of the friends she killed. *"Although you may speak in naught but lies, I see Twilight Sparkle in your eyes!"* the phantom voice of Zecora rhymed.

"I deserve this," the queen croaked as she slumped into the red waters, her forehead bleeding into her eyes. "I'm a monster and this is the hell I get for my crimes." In fits of depression, she could not help but let the reflection of the purple mare shine through the cracks. It was just as the zebra said: Twilight Sparkle was still alive inside of her.

"I did wha I had ta do... it was either going to be her or me! Damn you for lying ta me, Celescha! If you had been OPEN, then maybe this whole mess would have never HAPPEN! Why did ya hafta lie to me? I... I loved you like a mother, but I was jus yer TOOL! I h-hate you sho much..." Letting out a heavy sigh, the queen's muzzle dropped below the surface of the water.

Eos spent the rest of the night (after drunkenly raising the moon) like that, soaking in a tub that slowly became saturated with her own blood. Even after drinking all of the wine, she remained alive and alert. Everything

would be better in the morning, but for then, she just wanted to wallow in her own self-loathing and pity.

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"Thank you very much, Commander," Dinky spoke before her horn terminated the communication spell. The orb in the centre of the table went out, casting the room into darkness before the hanging lantern sprung to life. "What do we do about this, Crusaders? Do we mount a rescue, or let events play out? It's obvious that they'll try to put Operation Jormungand into motion now that they have The Key."

"Don't look at me! This is YOUR fault, Dinky," Scootaloo pointed an accusing hoof. "You should have just waited out the night and brought her back to base. Then we would still have her! My contacts in the Bounty Hunter's Guild told me that FLUTTERSHY, of all ponies, captured her too. You basically let our trump card go! You're a big feather brain, just like your mother wa--" The orange Pegasus' eyes went wide as her voice seized, her throat sparkling with magic.

"We needed ta show her that she can trust us," Applebloom calmly replied. "O' course, there's the possibility that Fluttershy told her OUR plans ta shake that trust, but we didn' tie her up an' gag her with stupid ol' tree sap! Now, is this somethin' we let Sweetie Belle in on, or is it part of Operation Blackout?"

"She'll find out eventually, whether from us, or that snake of a sister of hers. Tell her so that she doesn't become suspicious. She might be a spacey moron, but she can be pretty sharp when she pays attention." With a flick of her horn, the silencing spell on Scootaloo dropped. "Third warning, Scoots. Next time, I take your voice PERMANENTLY." The orange Pegasus raised a hoof up to her throat, glaring daggers at the unicorn.

Skilled with communication magic, Dinky was the one who perfected the Conference Spell with the use of the focusing stones. As well, she created the telepathic communication spell, which had helped countless times on stealth missions. Furthermore, she could grant or deny creatures their voice and could even translate old texts, making her invaluable in finding the Divinity Drain spell that they would need to kill the queen.

"Captain Snails?" the orange mare croaked as she opened the door. "Please find General Sweetie Belle and tell her that Twilight Sparkle has been captured by the dragons. There is no news yet on any extraction plans." The dull unicorn saluted before trotting down the stone passage, prompting a sigh from the Pegasus as she slammed the door. "Even her ponies are stupid," she remarked before seating herself at the table.

"Maybe, but she's useful, fer the moment," the former farmer stretched, placing her hat on her head again. "Sorry, girls, but ah gotta use the mare's room." With that, the earth pony left her two friends alone in the room together. Sensing the meeting had officially ended, the blond unicorn pushed herself away from the table as well before the orange stunt flier followed suit.

Meanwhile, the white unicorn known as Sweetie Belle sat in her office. Like most other rooms in the Crusader's main base, decorations were considered a luxury. A simple desk with a conference orb sat near the far wall, pictures of landscapes and newspaper clippings of her sister's designs filled out the small space. Papers lined her desk as reports from different bases filtered in. As the head for Administration Services, she had to keep all the commanders in line, and it was a really hard task.

A sigh passed her lips when a familiar knock sounded on the door to her office. "Come in, Captain," she chirped before the mustard unicorn stallion made himself known. "What's up, Snails?"

"Um... General Scootaloo told me to tell you... that..." he trailed, trying to remember the message. Sure, he was not the most intelligent pony ever, but at least he was honest. "Oh! That Twilight was captured by dragons and that there are no ideas on how to rescue her." With a pleased nod of his head, he happily trotted out of the room, the door shut behind him automatically.

The white mare sighed as she realized she was once more not included in a meeting between her frie--- former friends. Ever since Rarity left to become the queen's Royal Dressmaker, the rest of the group kept her at a leg's length. They must have thought she was really stupid if they thought she did not catch on, but she maintained the appearance of staying in the dark, if only to stay with them. She would miss them too much, despite how

easy it was to see her as a spy.

With this new information under her belt, the singer got up from behind her desk with a steely look of determination upon her face. Just because she was pretending to be a fool did not mean that she could not stand up for herself. At the very least, she would march up to the others and demand to be told when the next meeting would be. Of course, after the thirtieth time, she had her doubts that they would listen to her.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, the mare stormed down the halls of the base, ignoring anypony who saluted or greeted her out of the sheer anger she felt. Descending upon the mess hall, she stormed to the back to find Dinky, Scootaloo and Applebloom happily eating their lunches, none of them paying her any attention. "Ahem!" she spoke, as if clearing her throat. Yet, they continued to ignore her.

"This is the thirtieth time!" she nearly shouted. "Twenty-nine times before, I asked you to TELL ME when we had an impromptu meeting, yet for the twenty-ninth time, you three have IGNORED me! I might be forgetful at times, but I am not an idiot! I think you're hiding something from me and I am going to find out what it is! Unless, of course, you'd like to tell me NOW and save me all of that trouble."

"Can you please pass the hot sauce, Scoots?" Dinky asked politely.

"Sure, here you go," the orange mare chirped as she slapped the bottle into the unicorn's hooves. Sweetie looked between the three of them: all quite blatantly ignoring her. A tinge of red developed in her face, a shade that would have made Rarity proud. The alabaster mare gave a short cry of frustration before turning her back on the three ponies to work off her aggression on something else. "You think she's beginning to suspect?" Scootaloo asked as soon as she was out of earshot.

The other two mares looked between each other for a brief second in contemplation before they all chimed, "Nah."

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A massive set of double doors stood before him, carved of gray and white stone to impress upon visitors whose domain they were about to tread.

Draconic designs of gaping maws and carved bones of lesser creatures blanketed the slate canvas, hoping to strike fear into the hearts of the servants and other lesser beings. For beyond the portals sat the domain of the oldest and most powerful dragon in the entire world.

King Bluefire of Draconia, Keeper of the Eternal Flame, waited patiently beyond the doors for news. Spike gulped audibly as a pair of dragon guards opened the impossibly heavy carved stones with but a casual gesture. Entering the throne room always put him on edge, as it was nowhere near as bright and inviting as Canterlot. Taking a deep breath, the advisor stepped forward to brave the face of the king.

Although the castle had charms on it to reduce a dragon's size to near pony height (if only to save on building and maintenance costs) the throne room could still hold a fully-grown dragon at full height. Therefore, the room could not afford windows without having to add columns, which would obstruct the full sight of the ancient and regal dragon, which simply would not do!

A throne of pure steel sat under the towering gold dragon, buffed to an impossible shine that reflected every beam of light. A large red circle of intricate design served as the cue point for royal guests to stop, as it served as a trap door and was within convenient biting or burning distance from the aging king. Spike bravely walked into the heart of it and bent down on one knee before bowing his head in great respect.

"Arise, advisor Spike," the gruff voice of the monarch called out. The baby dragon did as the elder commanded, rising in as slow and deliberate a manner as possible to not startle a member of the royal guard. "You are just in time for Lord Backfeather's report on your catch. Please, stand off to the side for when he arrives."

"Of course, your majesty," Spike replied carefully. He walked off the symbol and over to the side, making sure to never let even a hint of his back turn to face the king. Bluefire was known for having a short temper and an easily threatened sense of pride. Taking his cue from the king, he stopped walking and turned to face him fully once more as they awaited the griffon emissary.

He shuffled silently on his clawed feet, always getting a little nervous

around the imposing dragon. He never felt that way around Princess Celestia and she was arguably more powerful than him. Yet, she always carried the same warmth with her as the sun itself and genuinely cared for all creatures in her kingdom. Bluefire, meanwhile, only cared for the dragons, since ponies were less to him than the gems he ate for breakfast.

At first, he was thrilled with the opportunities and title granted to him, since he always imagined what it might have been like to live with his own kind, rather than being raised by a stupid pony. Spike quietly ushered the thought out of his mind, hating the fact that the dogma was slowly getting to him. Dragons proved to be extremely selfish jerks, now that he thought on it, but it was too late to turn back.

Lord Blackfeather entered the throne room in much the same manner as the baby dragon did just a couple of minutes previous. He was a tall and proud (if aging) griffon with feathers of charcoal gray and white in his plumage. He prostrated himself before the king before speaking. "Our examination of the capture is complete, oh exalted one," he proclaimed.

"Excellent," spoke the dragon king. "What are your findings?"

"We bring tidings of mixed benefit and drawback, my lord. You see, after a thorough vivisection, we determined that the mare sent to us by Master Spike is NOT Queen Eos in disguise. Her body has no hints of such transformational or illusory magic upon her. However, we have determined that her magical abilities easily MATCH that of the late Princess Celestia. In addition, we can confirm that she is an advanced golem, so she is very durable and can produce a lot of magic in a short span of time. As such, she will be perfectly capable of aiding Project Jormungand as planned, my lord."

"Good," growled the dragon. "Break her using whatever methods you deem fit, Blackfeather. I want Jormungand operational in one week."

"It shall be done, my lord," he replied before retreating from the dragon king.

"You are dismissed, Spike." The baby dragon quickly followed the griffon lord's lead, bowing out of the room before wiping the sweat from his brow once the doors closed. Once free of the oppressive atmosphere, he let out

a quiet sigh and started his way back up to his room. A strange feeling crept over him at the news that they would be breaking the golem spy into submission. He did not care, of course, since it was just a tool the queen had sent to mess with his head.

Eos had given it her memories, so of course it thought it was really Twilight Sparkle. He had to admit, it could even copy her mannerisms and writing perfectly. Not to mention that it had a disturbingly vivid range of emotions that it could produce to fit the situation. Still, it was all a trick just to weasel information out of him. The queen must have been really desperate to try such a sneaky tactic.

Opening the door to his room, the baby dragon groaned in frustration as Owlowski turned on his perch so that his back faced him. "Oh, don't tell me you actually bought that!" he exclaimed as he slammed the door. "That's not Twilight: it was just some stupid golem the queen sent to mess with us!" However, all that met his ears was an angry and irritated hoot from the owl. "Fine, be that way, you featherbrain!"

With another slam of the door, the baby dragon left his room, heading to the one place in the castle that would calm him down: the royal library. Granted, it was not as large as the one in Canterlot, and it mostly contained books written in Drakish, but he had been learning, and the quiet air helped him relax. "I guess Twilight rubbed off on me more than I thought," he chuckled to himself as he started browsing. Then again, when one was raised by a bookworm, one tended to become a bookworm themselves.

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Everything was dark and cold to her as she lay on something solid, yet soft at the same time. For a couple of minutes, she almost thought she was back in the Pool of Midnight, having the life squeezed out of her. A shiver ran over her body as she inhaled, a deep, musky scent irritating her nose into sneezing. Twilight opened her eyes only to be greeted by a dark blur as a wave of pain washed over her.

For some reason, she could not remember how she came to be in such a sorry place, or why she felt sore all down her belly. The unicorn groaned as everything came into focus: the dark stone walls sharpening as black, metal bars appeared in front of them. She laid on a red-stained bundle of

hay on top of stone matching the walls. A foul-smelling hole in the floor sat near her head. Her only source of illumination was a torch in front of the barred wall, the other three being pure stone.

Everything slowly started coming back to the pony the longer she remained conscious, although she wished that it had not. They... a bunch of small dragons and a griffon entered her cell some time ago and chained her to the wall. They carried knives and other strange metal tools with wicked grins upon their faces. She tried to fight back, but her magic was cut off by seven Mythril rings upon her horn and limbs. She cried out in pain as she remembered them cutting into her body, ignoring her agonized screams as they surveyed and played with her organs.

The lavender mare slowly climbed off the bed of hay and moved as far away as her chained legs would let her, putting as much distance between herself and her dried blood as possible. She whimpered and cried as she remembered passing out, only for them to place smelling salts under her muzzle to wake her up and continue the sadistic exploration. Although her golem nature kept her alive, she did not want to face a world where her beloved Spike (and everypony else) hated and feared her.

Try as she might, she could not get the images of the dragons out of her mind. They were fully grown, but they stood about as high as the princess. Either they were small by nature, or some magic on the building was at work. There were three of them, she remembered, a purple one with large wings, a green serpentine one and a blue dragon that looked like his scales were made of metal. Another shiver ran down her spine as she imagined their claws bloodied with her viscera and the toothy smiles on their maws.

Bracelets of Mythril around her legs cut down the circulation to her hooves, each attached to a short chain of steel mounted to the far wall. Taking a guess, she had about enough room to walk halfway across the cell, which she approximated to be three pony-lengths wide and seven deep. A narrow door in the bars proved the only entrance into the room, aside from a ventilation hole smaller than a hoof in diameter. There was probably only one exit from the dungeons, followed by a gauntlet of halls and guards. Even she could not hope to escape, not with those dastardly bracelets on her legs and horn.

Twilight shook as a pang of hunger ripped across her tired and pained

body, only then noticing a bowl filled with the most disgusting and foul substance she had ever smelled (besides the hole behind her). However, she slowly moved forward, her chains ringing painfully in her ears as she walked. The gruel was as gray as the surrounding stone and bubbled occasionally like Froggy Bottom Swamp. Taking a deep breath, she plunged her muzzle into the bowl.

To say the food tasted disgusting was to say being eviscerated felt unpleasant. The librarian nearly gagged the moment her tongue touched the foul substance, but sheer hunger and force of will pushed her on to eat. After managing to keep the horrible 'food' down, she dunked her face into a waiting bowl of water to cleanse her pallet.

Another shiver ran down her spine as the mare realized she could see her breath down in the depth of the dungeon. With no other recourse, she returned to the bloodied hay and buried herself under it to both keep warm and to hide in vain in case a guard or torturer came back. She curled up into a tight ball under the blanket of hay, her mind quickly wandering to how she had come to be in such a horrible situation.

Oh, Spike, she thought as soft sobs echoed all around her. How could you... how could you DO such a horrible thing? Don't you love me anymore? Even if I really was that awful mule, how could you so easily condemn me to such a fate? I gave you everything... I loved you like a little brother... I raised you, and this is how you repay me? I guess I can't be surprised... considering Fluttershy, Pinkie and the girls. At least Trixie hasn't changed.

A loud clang down the hall beyond prompted the mare to quiet herself as the sound of claws upon stone met her ears. She prayed silently that it was just a guard coming to check up on the other prisoners... if there were any others. Another shiver crept across her spine, the hay doing nothing to ease the oppressing cold she felt all over her body. The mare welded her eyes shut, too tense to even look.

Thankfully, the sound of the claws moved past her cell door, down to the other end of the hall and back before the door shut with a thud. Twilight poked her head out of the pile of hay, genuinely thankful she had somewhere to hide. She had never been in jail before... unless she could count being confined to her room for twelve days for breaking an antique

vase as serving a sentence.

"Why me?" she moaned to herself as her voice echoed through the chambers. "Why is it always me?" However, no pony, or creature spoke, causing her to worry that she was alone in the dungeons. Sure, being around others did not change her position, but at least she would not be lonely for long stretches of time. "Hello? Anyone there?" she called out, hoping that something would answer as opposed to her delusional chatter. She sighed as she realized how alone she really felt.

A short while later, the door at the end of the hall burst open, startling the lavender pony into hiding in her hay bed once more. A series of clicks sounded down the hall, causing her to quiver and whimper in fear at the memories from the nightmare before. All too soon, the clicks stopped... right outside her cell. "Well, well, well," chuckled a voice she immediately recognized as the griffon's. "It looks like somepony's awake. Good. Bring her out here: we're going to have some fun!"

Four armoured dragons entered the chamber: she could see them through the hay as they passed one-by-one through the barred door. They quickly surrounded her so-called sanctuary, snickering through their razor-sharp teeth. A claw dug into the grain fortress, making the mare yelp in surprise as they pulled her roughly out and back into the deeper cold. "Let me go!" she cried out in vain as she struggled against their iron grip.

The five creatures present laughed at her struggles as they used their magic to pull the chains off her bracelets without damaging them. From there, they used special hooks on each bracelet to link them together to keep her squirming to a minimum. Twilight tried to call out for help as tears streamed down her eyes, quickly becoming tired of being utterly helpless.

One of the dragons lifted her over their shoulder, the armour combined with her own weight putting tremendous pressure on her spine. However, she would not go down without a fight. She grunted and struggled, trying to use her horn as a weapon since she was robbed of her magic. Yet, the plates were too thick to pierce or even scratch, beyond a slight scrape.

The griffon following at the end of the group smiled and chuckled at her plight. "Aw, the little pony thinks she can actually escape? How cute," he grinned. Although she could only see behind the group (and upside-down

to boot) she could tell they were heading for a door down the opposite end of the hall from the exit. Tears welled up in her eyes despite herself as she realized they were taking her into a torture chamber.

Her struggles renewed themselves ten-fold as she was taken into the room. Dried blood coated the floor and some of the walls that she could see. Iron maidens, metal sawhorses, waterboarding benches, beds of nails, the typical rack and even a Brazen Bull of all things lay within the chamber, just to name a few. The griffon smiled as he saw her survey their line of devices. "Oh, don't you worry. You're lucky enough that you'll be able to try out ALL of our little toys. First, however, we've got something special," he smirked.

Twilight was thrown roughly onto a flat, hard table before being rolled over to lie on her back. After separating the bracelets, they held her down and secured her front legs to light blue clamps on the table. The mare cried out as they dislocated her hind legs to put them in the binds, probably seeing her as some sort of toy since they knew she could not die of normal means. She cried from the pain as they tightened the braces, digging into her flesh with their sharp edges.

The griffon walked forward, pulling off an amulet he wore around his neck. "Now, as a unicorn, I'm sure you're familiar with Runite," he grinned at the look of horror that dawned upon her face. "Good, then I don't need to explain why this happens!" He took the amulet and pinned it to her chest, causing the purple pony to cry out in a bloodcurdling scream.

It felt like her body was on fire as corposant scoured her very soul. Twilight screamed and bucked in vain against the stiff clamps, tears streamed down her eyes as she strained her vocal cords. Although he only kept the magic amulet against her coat for a couple of seconds, it felt like an eternity to the mare. When he finally released her from the pain, she slumped against her binds, panting as if she had done the Running of the Leaves ten times over.

"That looked like it hurt," the griffon chuckled. "I've never seen a pony react so strongly to it. You must have a lot of magic built up inside of you. That's good. We could do this non-stop and have you broken in only a couple of hours... but where's the fun in that?" He looked to a corner of the room, ignoring her pained sobs and nodded in gesture for an item. In the

meantime, he placed the amulet on her again, casting the mare into a world of pain and agony once more.

As soon as the insidious beast lifted the amulet from her body, she relaxed again by reflex. However, without so much as a moment to breath, a large weight crashed into her chest which made her cry out in pain as blood spewed from her mouth. One of the dragon guards carried a large, wooden mallet, holding it for her to see as she coughed up blood, a wicked smile on his face. Before she could even make note of her broken rib, the griffon placed the amulet on her once more.

Between applications of the amulet, they would do something else to make her feel the most pain possible with the least damage so she would not pass out. Sometimes, they would hit her various other body parts with the mallet, other times they would chop off just a little bit of her hoof or her ear, Worst yet, they would make her drink a foul concoction she swore consisted of hydrochloric acid. The cycle continued for hours, until they tired of her screaming. She was growing to welcome the idea of death.

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Trixie sighed in a mixture of anger, frustration and weariness as she climbed up the steep road to the top of Wyvern's Castle. Security checkpoints had stripped her of her caravan and most of her aids despite her protests that they were merely props for her show. Needless to say, the guards refused to listen to reason and took them away. In fact, all she had left was her hat, cape, doll and the magic in her horn as they would give her caravan back after a more thorough inspection.

Obviously, some creative ponies had tried to kill the dragon king before. The only reason they even let her pass without the proper identification cards was because Spike had forwarded a description of her appearance and some questions to test her with. When it came to questioning, dragons almost literally took it to the third degree. Pun aside, she hoped it would be a one-time show.

The blue unicorn nearly collapsed the very instant she arrived at the castle gates, having to pause for several minutes to catch her breath and for another security check. Not even Canterlot had security that tight for something so casual, not that she had any personal experience, of course.

Once they finished frisking her for any concealed weapons (one of them getting a little fresh with her hindquarters) they waved her through the gate.

Standing on the other side was the purple and green juvenile dragon, a genuine smile on his face as he walked up to her and gave the azure mare a brief hug. He stood taller than she remembered; as tall as her from hoof to the top of her horn. "Hey there, Trixie," he greeted. "How have you been? How was the trip up? I hope the guards didn't go too rough on you."

Turning to face the front doors, the mare and his guest went into the castle, talking as they walked up to his room. "Performances have been going well. Then again, I am The Great and Powerful Trixie. The guards coming up, however, are insufferable. It's like someone jammed iron rods so far up their rear ends that they have become their spines. One of them even had the AUDACITY to cop a feel of Trixie's glorious flank!"

"Sorry to hear about the guards, but they pretty much have to be that way after a couple of disgruntled worker ponies came to assassinate the king under the pretence of being performers. They were hung from the gallows the next day," he spoke dispassionately. It took the pair only a couple of minutes to reach his room, to find Owlowiscious asleep on his perch with his head nestled inside his wing.

"So, where's Twilight?" Trixie asked quite bluntly. "Let me guess: she's in the library to take advantage of the rare opportunity to read about draconic magic?" She giggled at her own joke, the sight actually very easy to imagine, considering the mare. If there was one thing that surprised her about Twilight, it was the fact that she did not need glasses with all the reading she heard she did.

"Sorry, Trixie but..." Spike trailed, trying to find the words to gently tell her she had been deceived. "Twilight's not here. Not the real one, at least. The one who visited you was all part of an elaborate ruse by the queen, the REAL Twilight, to spy on us dragons."

"I know I was joking, Spike, but that's just not funny," the magician huffed.

"Look at this face," the young dragon replied. Indeed, his face was deadpan and devoid of any emotion at all. It startled the blue pony; that much was for sure. "I am not joking."

"I call horseapples on this! Vinyl would not be hunting a false bounty, Spike! Besides, there is no WAY that Twilight Sparkle could be Queen Eos."

"She practically confirmed it. I have over two dozen eye-witnesses to support my claim. Queen Eos made a golem of Twilight, stuffed her memories into her and then sent her off to fool everypony and spy on us all!"

Silence hung in the air for many minutes, the tension so thick that the sleeping owl had woken up to figure out the source of it. Trixie surveyed the baby dragon from spines to tail, boring holes into him once their eyes met. "What. Did you. Do with her?" she asked, speaking very deliberately through clenched teeth.

"The GOLEM is being... coaxed into cooperating with us on a matter that is of no importance to you, pony."

"Pony? PONY!? How DARE you, Spike! I thought we were friends, you scaled little cretin! Then again, I shouldn't be surprised, since you're TORTURING the very pony that raised you from a hatchling! Let me tell YOU something, you over-grown lizard! If she's a golem spy sent by the queen, then how come she knows things about me that I have never told any living soul about!? And don't you dare say she used a mind-reading spell because unicorns can feel when one is being used on them, and I didn't feel it!

"She's from another world, another timeline or...or somewhere odd like that! There is no way the Twilight Sparkle I sent over to you, the one you have been torturing in the dungeons, is Queen Eos!"

"Oh yeah?" Spike asked, his tone becoming defensive and childish. "Just prove it!"

"Gladly!" she nearly shouted. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is the heir to nopony other than The Great Hairy Hoofdini. She has told nopony this because... well, she feels ashamed that for the longest time she humiliated ponies rather than having them love her magic! That librarian knew it, even how I FEEL about it! Did you know that HE gave Trixie this hat and cape?

Twilight did, and I never told anypony about that either! She didn't hear my beloved Bella's NAME yet she still told me it off the top of her head! She IS Twilight Sparkle!"

"Y-you're kidding, right? Please, tell me you're joking!" The young dragon cried out as realization began to hit like a ton of stone.

"Look into my eyes, Spike," she added sternly. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is NOT joking."

Spike stumbled back and collapsed on his bed, his jaw open in a mixture of shock and disgust, mostly towards himself. "Oh, my gods! W-what have I DONE!?"

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Overall, it had been about five days since the capture and examination of Twilight Sparkle, just the day after Trixie arrived to do her show. Although the baby dragon was not privileged to know her status, he overheard two dragons working on Operation Jormungand. Through their coded speech, he came to the conclusion that they were ready to go: waiting only on the king's approval to test fire the weapon.

Wisps of smoke and flashes of magic filled the throne room earlier that day as the showmare put on her best for the dragon king. Much to her chagrin, he was amused by the performance, but nowhere near impressed by the illusionary prowess of the unicorn. Trixie had even adjusted her stories to be more in-tune with dragon culture by placing the dragons on a higher pedestal than the ponies.

"... stupid, arrogant and all around ill-mannered!" the magician ranted in her friends' room. "He didn't even clap derogatively! What a cranky old, over-grown lizard!" Spike, meanwhile, just sat on the edge of her bed, letting the azure pony go, since he felt much the same way. For a long time, the king had hinted that he only kept him around because he was useful. Yet, if Jormungand was complete, he would not need him anymore... and when he did not need someone anymore, they usually wound up dead.

"Trixie?" he asked through her rant. "Are you about ready to go? I mean,

if we want to do it, we'd better do it now, before it's too late." The blue pony stopped, looking out the window into the inky blackness of the night sky, only interrupted by the hundreds of stars on its canvas. Owlowiscious had flown on ahead to her caravan so they would not have to contend with unnecessary questions.

"Yes, The Great and Powerful Trixie is ready to go," she responded before her horn started glowing. Her body bubbled and twisted as she took the shape of a high-ranking dragon: one who had unlimited access to Jormungand, but whose presence at that time of night would not rouse immediate suspicion. She towered over Spike, bearing orange scales, large wings and a bad attitude. "How's this?" the dragon impostor growled.

"Perfect!" Spike chirped. "You look JUST like old Sabretooth! I just hope it's enough."

"We just need to get in for two minutes, little one. It will not be of consequence for long."

A chuckle overcame the baby dragon, despite the apparently old and imposing dragon in front of him. "You even have his mannerisms down! How did you DO that?"

"Years of experience, Spike," she growled. "Trixie has a gift for reading ponies just by their appearance. It works most of the time, but for ponies like Twilight... Let's just say I never expected her to wield so much power." Without another word, the disguised unicorn and the baby dragon walked down the halls of the castle. The pony could not help but smirk as the draconian and pony servants alike bowed to her like royalty.

However, a nagging thought in the back of her mind made her silently panic at the possibility that the REAL Sabretooth might make himself known, or that the guards would know where he really was. Still, it was far too late to turn back now, especially when some horrible, unknown fate awaited her sister. Sister: the word was so foreign to her, yet she could not deny that it felt... right.

She calmly followed Spike down into the basement, doing her best to maintain the illusion that she was leading him instead. A couple of the guards quirked their eyes at the pair, but mostly towards the baby dragon

than the impostor. It was only then that Trixie remembered that most dragons could detect lies, causing her to gulp silently as they approached the guarded door at the end of a long hallway.

"Lord Sabretooth," the guard nodded. "What is the little one doing with you at such a late hour? Should he not be asleep on his little PONY bed? Or are you down here to beat some sense into him?" The guard and his partner chuckled at Spike's expense, the baby dragon not amused in the slightest.

"No nothing like that," the impostor chuckled. "I simply wanted to show the pony-lover what has become of his very first catch." She made a toothy smirk, eliciting some more chuckles from the guards. If only she could get a break, she would be a star on Broadway. "Now, if you will excuse us, we will only be a couple of moments, just long enough to let it sink in."

"Of course, sir," the second guard chortled. With a casual flick of their wrists, the door opened to reveal a second set immediately behind them. Once the door shut, she looked to the baby dragon. "Double lock system? Who knew?" After speaking, the second set of doors opened to reveal the room beyond. Both the baby dragon and the imposter's jaws dropped at the sight that met their eyes.

A massive dragon head hung from the ceiling, the gaping and toothy maw grinning at them. For a brief second, they both thought it was real and fully-grown before the lights kicked on. Its eyes were dark, vacant sockets as the head glistened and shimmered in the light of the magical torches. Elaborate designs were etched into the bronze plating, every scale crafted in painstaking detail. The mouth of the beast held runes and devices the unicorn could never hope to understand.

Shaking themselves from the awe, the duo carefully checked the room to find that no creature else remained inside. Since their work was complete, the dragons working on the weapon did not need to stick around after the lab closed down for the day. Once convinced that they were alone, Trixie dropped her illusion as maintaining the spell was beginning to tax her. The hunt for Twilight commenced.

Immediately behind the face of the dragon was a mass of strange looking machinery all centered around a glass tube. Trixie's heart jumped in her

chest as she raced up the metal catwalks with Spike in tow, their hooves and claws clanging loudly on the corrugated metal. They ground to a halt at the top, looking inside the tube: what they saw made them gasp and take a step back in shock.

Inside the tube was the shape of a pony unicorn, although it was hard to see how it could have ever been the lavender mare. Every inch of her body was a dull brown, almost like hardened clay, including her orderly mane and tail. She lay on the floor dejectedly, her eyes half lidded and absent their normal amethyst hues, darker lines of clay under her eyes which showed where tears still flowed from the empty pools.

Attached to her body were large suction devices, with black tubes connecting them to the rest of the machine. Despite the arcana-obscuring glass, Trixie could sense they were sucking out all of her magic, leaving the golem just barely alive so that she could produce more, obviously the machine's literal source of power. "This is... This is barbaric! We have to do something, Trixie!" Spike cried out, tears streaming down his cheeks.

With a charge of her horn, a tiny purple unicorn doll floated out from under her levitated magician's hat. Since her beloved Bella looked so much like her anyway, it did not take a lot for her to shift the doll's appearance into a vivid doppelganger of Twilight Sparkle. After the illusion was complete, the lavender doll shimmered and glowed as a portion of the azure mare's magic was poured into it. "There," Trixie panted. "That should buy us some time, since I'd bet my left hoof an alarm will sound if it doesn't get any magic. We'll have to move quickly."

Nodding his head, the dragon used all the strength he possessed to lift the thick and heavy glass wall between them. Trixie manipulated the magically-charged doll into roughly the same position as the (now brown) unicorn. With a flick of her horn, she quickly manipulated all of the suckers off of her body and onto the fake Twilight. Yet, her horn did not die down as she quickly cast an invisibility spell and a featherweight spell before lifting her onto her back.

"I should have just enough magic to spare to put that illusion back up for a minute or so. Let's move!" Without another sound, the mare and dragon rushed to the door with the golem on the other pony's back. Just before passing through the double set of doors, the azure mare activated her

disguise, laughing as the door opened. "Soon we'll win out over the ponies, just you see, Spike!" the impostor slapped him roughly on the back as the young dragon began to chuckle uneasily.

Sure enough, the spell lasted just long enough for them to round the bend and emerge from the basement, Twilight still invisible on her back. Thanking their lucky stars, the two saboteurs fled the castle as quickly as they dared without drawing attention to themselves. The dragons at the checkpoints paid no mind to either of them, as they were more concerned with keeping ponies out, rather than not allowing them to leave.

Hooking herself up into her caravan, the azure mare pulled away from the castle in a light canter, sweat running down her brow from the magical and physical effort she just put herself through. Meanwhile, Spike attended to the still invisible Twilight Sparkle, both of them hiding under the stage in a crawlspace the showmare designed to house her lights and to safely launch fireworks.

No further checkpoints could detect the trapdoor in the stage, as with every checkpoint she had to cross before. Trixie smirked as they left the town and castle behind, although she had to admit that a small part of her regretted leaving her oldest and dearest foalhood toy behind. Yet, life would not be what it was unless it required a few sacrifices.

Chapter 10

Dreaming on the Buffalo Plains

Blinding white soon yielded to softer tones of grey before her tired eyes. She felt incredibly stiff, yet she found she could move with more fluidity and agility than she thought possible. Twilight Sparkle rubbed her eyes to be rid of the annoying blur that refused to bend to her will and tell her just what was going on. The last thing she remembered, those cursed dragons dragged her into some sort of glass tube after she failed to respond to pain anymore.

Yet, as much as she wanted to, she could not feel the pain from her injuries... or anything at all, once she put her mind to it. Did they kill her in that machine, or was she simply dreaming between the nightmares again? Every detail felt fuzzy to her, despite how cold and sharp she could remember them being. She stood in the small room, contemplating it before the door opened of its own accord.

"Hey! Get out of there!" called the voice of a pony. The lavender mare jumped at the sight, before automatically obeying after seeing she had somehow ended up in a broom closet. "She's my date!" the stallion chastised before grabbing the mop that had sat beside her. With a huff and an upturn of his snout, he trotted down the hall, whispering things to the broom that one did not repeat in front of other ponies.

"Okay, new theory," Twilight spoke to herself. "I'm either dreaming, dead, or CRAZY."

"Well, we're ALL a little crazy sometimes," a voice giggled behind her. The librarian jumped at the sound of the voice, nearly impaling her horn in the tall ceiling before landing in a heap. It carried a disturbingly familiar tone and mirth: so much so that she almost chastised the pony by the name of her pink friend. However, as she pulled herself off the floor to get a good look, there could be no way that it was Pinkie Pie. "Hi there! My name's... hmm... I can't remember. Ah well!"

She was a pure white Pegasus with a golden mane and equally golden

set of eyes. In many ways, it appeared as if her Blueprint disguise and her pink friend had merged! But that was preposterous. "Are you... in some sort of disguise, Pinkie Pie? If you are, I'm rather impressed about how you managed to make wings like that."

"Pinkie? I'm not pink, you silly filly! Wait, Toasty! Come back! Sorry but I gotta go, bye!" With that, she was off, chasing an animated toaster down the long, vaulted hall. Twilight felt her eye twitch and jaw drop at the possibility of a fully sentient inanimate object, but a flush of cold washed through her body after a quick glance at her own hoof. After gathering her composure, the lavender pony started walking down the halls.

The building looked identical to Canterlot, except for the fact that it changed colour every so often (or a mix of them) before an eye or a multi-coloured hoof would suddenly jet out of the wall. In fact, the only thing constant seemed to be Twilight herself, as turning down a bend in the hall, she found everypony walking on the ceiling while carrying buckets of water up-side down... or was it right-side up? Either way, the mare could not seem to bend reality to her wishes, as she had been trying to induce a lucid dream for years and knew all the signs to look for.

"...And I'm leaning more towards crazy, now," she spoke, breaking her inner monologue. "Well, if I m dreaming, then maybe it is trying to tell me something. Right now, I can only think of is 'don't get captured by dragons who want to use you as a power source for an ultimate weapon.' But, somehow I think that might be a bit difficult to get across in a dream."

A sudden chuckle echoed through the hall right before a large trapdoor in the middle of the hall opened under her. She let out a quick cry of surprise before falling through countless visions she identified as her memories, some she could recall, but most looked foreign to her. Although she fell at speed, she could make out a couple of the unfamiliar ones: a crying filly that looked like Trixie, and the princess walking towards her in a dark, cold room made of stone with utter contempt on her face. The coldness in her eyes made her shiver involuntarily.

Twilight landed with a soft thud onto a precisely stacked pile of red velvet pillows. Dazed from the fall, she barely registered the sound of hooves against marble as a pony approached. When she could finally gather her wits, she looked to the source of the hoofsteps with a little trepidation, not

quite sure what to expect due to the circumstances. A series of emotions blew over her suddenly when she registered who she was looking at, awe fading to fear before degrading to shame and anger only to settle on frustration in, as Rainbow would put it, ten seconds flat.

It was a tall and regal mare. Her coat was a soft canary yellow. Her mane started off as a bright, sunny yellow before fading into a deep, shimmering black with points of flickering white to represent the stars as it billowed softly in an unseen breeze. Upon her hooves were purple, star-studded shoes that tied in to the tips of her mane, contrasting the the glowing white crown on her head.

"Let me guess," the unicorn spoke dryly to the regal alicorn queen before her. She knew she should have probably paid more respect to her, but things were becoming tedious and annoying, so the venom in her voice seeped through. "You're here to tell me to stop thinking Eos is evil? Well, I'll tell you what I told Luna: I've seen too much to believe she is anything more than a demon. So, if you will kindly send me back to my torture; that would be nice."

"Do NOT think you can anticipate my motives, Twilight Sparkle!" the mare scolded. Twilight recoiled a little at the sudden shout. "I sense a little of my dear Celesta's ARROGANCE in you, I daresay. Once upon a time, she too felt she knew better than I, her own mother. She reaped her reward for doing so," Queen Notia sighed sadly.

"I'm sorry, your highness," the lavender pony replied quickly with a deep bow as she stood, the pillows having suddenly vanished into thin air.

"Please, just call me 'Grandmother,' Twilight. Actually, that is why I am here, not to put too fine of a point on it. You see, I have heard from a very reliable source that you are... hesitant to embrace your royal blood. I do not blame you for doing so, considering Celestia's past sins and your nature. You are a humble mare, yet you often let your humility get in the way of doing what needs to be done. It still does you credit, much as your insightful nature."

"So, um... why ARE you here, your highne- Grandmother?" She could not help but blush by calling a former queen of the country by such an informal title. Queen Notia chuckled at her plight before ascending to the throne,

which had become as plush as a cloud and an acidic green in colour.

"That was not so hard, now was it?" Turning around to sit, she looked down upon the lavender mare with that same air of warmth that Celestia would give: as if all was well with the world, no matter how dire the situation. "I am here to tell you something you already know: you just need to be reminded in order to handle the task ahead. You have to have faith in your friends; they love you for who you are. I also know that Celestia loves you too, even more than life itself.

"It hurt her to lie to you for all those years about your nature, there is a lot of love that she holds in her heart, and it is out of that love that she did not want to hurt you. Granted, her initial plan was a little monstrous, but coming from her, it was actually quite benign in comparison. I am sure that you would cause her insurmountable pain and suffering if she EVER thought that you did not return her feelings for you."

"But... I do. I do love her. I just... I don't feel like I've earned the right to be called her daughter. Not after what I did that day," Twilight sighed.

"If you earnestly feel that way," the old alicorn spoke, "Then go out there and mend the wrong done upon you and the nation. By doing so, I assure you that you will earn the right to be called one of our bloodline. Despite the fact that you are a golem, Celestia's blood courses through your veins: never forget that, Twilight." Before the lavender mare could utter another word, the world turned into a white void of warmth.

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The Great and Powerful Trixie sighed to herself as the light began to fade from the sky. Pretty soon, they would have to stop and make camp again. A cool breeze swept through the trees as the twilight hour descended upon her and her fellow fugitive friends. For the last couple of days, the ponies (and one baby dragon) journeyed through the outlands, since they had to head west to reach Appleloosa.

Certainly, going to that neck of Equestria was risky for them, since Applejack had a mean streak about as long as the plain she now inhabited. But between the mountains, contested passes and the bounty hunters that watched the tunnel, there was no other recourse. The only other way

around the mountains was to go east and down the coast towards the city of Manehattan. Due to the city's size, it had the most dedicated and well-equipped police force in Equestria, so it was out of the question to go there. That left lawless Appleloosa as their only option.

"Spike?" she called back into the caravan, the yoke for it strapped around her midsection. "How's our passenger doing? Is there any change from this morning?"

After a couple of moments of silence, the tired sound of the baby dragon sounded from beyond the wood, muffled by the walls. "Yeah, there is, actually. Her coat is its usual colour, but she's still fast asleep!" he updated. The azure mare heaved a sigh of relief as she continued down the dirt road. Just two days ago, they had rescued her from the spiny clutches of the dragons. Over time, she slowly began to resemble a pony more and a lifeless construct of magic less.

But how did Trixie feel about all the events spiralling out of her control? Out on the road, she had nothing but time to think. Formerly, she used it to wallow in her own self-pity between shows and justify her obnoxious behaviour. She would be the first to admit she could be self-centered and indeed had an ego to match any dragon out there, but when it came to the lavender unicorn, she could not help but want to give her all to her.

But, now she knew that she was actually a golem the whole time; that she was not actually her sister after all! So, why did she do it? Why was she sticking her head out for this nopony when she could easily sell her out to the queen and not have to travel around in fear? It was... strange for The Great and Powerful Trixie, but she could not deny that she had grown to care about her, either from her genuine encounters, or the tales she heard about her over the years. Still, it was quite necessary to make tracks, since the dragons would be furious when they found their power source missing. She had no doubt that they would connect the dots between their disappearances.

Unfortunately, even as she walked down the path, she could not find a suitable place to camp for the night, or even a good place to get off the road from. The shadows of the trees grew longer as the queen began to set the sun and usher in the night. Traveling on a road in the dark was never a smart idea, since there was no telling what roamed the woods or the simple

fact that other ponies (or something worse) could also walk into them.

Of course, the worst just had to happen as the light of the sun finally died for the day. A bellowing roar sounded all around them and shook the trees free of fleeing birds. "Horseapples," Trixie breathed before breaking into a gallop. One bad thing about being so boisterous and flamboyant had to be how recognizable she and her caravan were. With the nearest trees several hooves away from the road, the large wagon could easily be spotted from the sky.

The beating of thick, webbed wings filled the air over the sound of the azure mare's panicked hoofsteps. Another roar filled the air, shaking the fleeing mare to her very core. A sea of vivid red scales filled the star-speckled sky directly overhead, a sign that the dragon knew they were there. Sure enough, the flying lizard banked to the left, putting his spines and spiked tail on full display.

Trixie's breathing became shallow and erratic as she pushed her body to the very limit. Her muscles screamed in agony as she pushed herself and pulled the cart with all the speed she could muster. Sweat dripped from her brow and into her eyes, nearly blinding the mare. She knew she could not outrun the faster dragon, but she could see an opening into the woods up ahead that would afford swift escape.

Suddenly, her cart lurched upward, nearly taking her with it. Twisting her head back to look, she saw two sets of massive claws dug into the sides of her caravan. The dragon tried to take off with the entire cart, so she stopped him by magically compressing the air between them for a brutal blast of pressure. He roared in surprise, ripping the top off her caravan to reveal the scared baby dragon and the unicorn passed out on her bed.

Although shaken from the pursuit, the dragon returned with unparalleled fury. However, with the extra weight removed from the cart, the magician picked up speed. The dragon bellowed again impotently as she dragged the cart beyond his grasping talons. Spike cried out and hid himself under the bed at the sight of the fully-grown lizard's angry gaze.

Summoning as much magic as she could, the showmare slowed down to cast a spell just before the break in the trees. The dragon grinned and inhaled deeply as he swiftly gained on the pony and her tacky little cart. He

would make them regret stealing their weapon! It would be a shame that they would not be able to torture the blue one for her crime, but not even a dragon could get everything it wanted.

A belch of fire quickly erupted from his jagged maw as he released his breath, the tongues of flame lapping at the wooden carriage the pony pulled. The conscious passenger screamed as the caravan became encased in the torrent of cleansing fire and wove wildly on the dirt road, the showmare too pained to watch where she went. Satisfied, the dragon flew past and arced around when they slammed into a tree. He extended his arm, ready to pluck the golem from the wreckage. Just as his claw made contact with the clay pony, the wooden cart evaporated into thin air.

Trixie held her breath, going as fast as she dared through the woods with the noisy cart. It would not be long until the dragon figured out their deception and she did not want to stick around to see. Unhooking herself from the destroyed (and still smouldering) caravan, she levitated the sleeping pony onto her back before the baby dragon piled what he could onto a small wagon she used to carry larger, magically resistant props.

With a quick gallop, the three ran deeper into the woods: the perfect cover from the areal hunter until they could reach the Appleloosan Plains. The tightness of the trees would also prevent griffons from joining the hunt for the lavender mare as well. Plus, the dragon would not be likely to burn the forest down, since it could take several dragon cities with it. Although her legs screamed at their exertion, she refused to listen, running at full tilt for an hour, until she was sure they were safe.

"I think... this place... will make... a good... camp," she puffed as she slowed to a crawl. Breathing heavily, she plopped onto the ground with as much dignity as she could muster. Trixie ignominiously dumped Twilight beside her, having given up on dignity for her load. "Can you take first watch, Spike? I'm beat."

"Sure, Trixie," the young dragon puffed as he pushed himself up from his laying position. He left to gather some wood for the night's fire. There was still a little bit of light left in the sky, so there was no extreme rush to get things going. Once finished with the task, he grabbed a blanket he salvaged from the cart and placed it over the two sleeping mares before huddling up to the campfire. He smirked when he saw Trixie

subconsciously cuddle up to the purple pony: he would make sure she never lived it down.

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Gentle chirping passed across her ears and the cool breeze blew around her and tangled up the hairs of her mane and coat. Her nostrils flared a little as the fresh scent of roses and morning dew rode on the gentle wisps of wind. It had to be a trick: her mind probably trying to deal with her situation by not dealing with it. The moment she opened her eyes, she would be back inside that horrible room, attached to that awful machine.

Twilight refused to let herself be disappointed by the world again, even if she was too depressed over her best friend's betrayal to really care about anything anymore. That was why she caved in to those foul demons called dragons: she just did not care anymore. All of her friends saw her as either a tool to be used, or a monster to be destroyed. No pony on the planet honestly cared.

"Well," spoke an arrogant voice from the darkness. "We'd better get moving again. Trixie is honestly surprised that we made it through the night without being attacked!" A couple of sharp bucks on a tree echoed through the lavender pony's ears. "Let's pick her up and get moving. As much as I hate the idea of going near Appleloosa, it will be far safer for us then here."

Although she would regret ending the dream of being asleep in a relaxing field, the purple pony opened her eyes only for them to go wide at the sight before her. Sure, she was not in a field, but it was close enough. The small grove in the middle of the forest served as an adequate shelter from any patrolling griffons or dragons overhead. Soft hoofsteps approached to her left, making her turn her head to see Trixie approaching.

"Oh, good," she spoke to seemingly nopony. "She's awake. Trixie must admit that it is no easy feat to lug you around on her back, even with a featherweight spell, Twilight Sparkle." The azure magician could not help but let a grin spread across her face as she walked, relieved that she regained enough magic to stay conscious. "Not to imply that you are heavy or anything, but as a librarian I doubt you get much physical exercise."

With a little help from the younger mare, the scholar managed to get to

her hooves once more causing her legs to shake a little from lack of use. She took a deep breath and sighed, not in any sort of mood to argue with her over anything. Twilight felt lost: like she was stumbling about in a fog of ignorance with nothing to do but scream at the shadows as they crossed her path. She could not even fake a smile when she saw the worry evident in Trixie's eyes.

"I'm not going to ask the obvious question," the blue mare started, "since we both know that you're not okay. No pony would be after what you just went through: Trixie doesn't even want to pretend to understand how you feel."

The librarian avoided her gaze and nodded her head solemnly. Then she saw the young dragon out of the corner of her eye. Spike kicked at the ground dejectedly, unable to meet her eyes. A surge of emotions rushed through the indignant unicorn: she wanted nothing more than to punish him for his betrayal like he deserved. Yet, she could not bring herself to let loose her righteous fury upon him. It was not worth the trouble.

A couple of minutes later, the group set out. Due to the events of the night previous, Trixie led the way, staying off the roads. Years of traveling had given her a nigh infallible internal compass, so she felt confident that they could reach the plains in a day, or two on the outside. Meanwhile, she remained ignorant of the melodrama taking place behind her.

For the entire morning, Spike kept to the back of the convoy to give Twilight the space she deserved. As much as he dreaded Twilight confronting him, the lack of punishment or even acknowledgement of his existence hurt him even more. Meanwhile, the purple unicorn kept her head low to the ground, her eyes half-lidded in contempt for her surroundings and for the void she felt in the pit of her heart. She knew no pony cared about her now, that they all saw her as the hunk of animated clay that she was. Why did the universe seem to insist upon her continued survival?

At about noon, the troupe stopped at the banks of a river to eat, drink, and rest for a while before they continued with their trek. Twilight sat and rested herself, but she did not eat or bother to drink. She felt constantly weak and weary, most of her magic still gone, but she was recuperating slowly. Trixie and Spike snacked on some of the plants lying about and drank from the stream before joining her to rest.

"Twilight, if you don't eat, you won't recover your magic before we get to Equestria," Trixie spoke in a motherly tone. It surprised the unicorn a little bit to see her acting like that.

"Why do you care?" she croaked from lack of speaking. "Or, wait... let me guess: you want to use me as well and are only acting civil to me to gain your trust? Well, you can forget it, Trixie! Everypony's made it clear to me that they don't give a buck how I feel: just as long as I have my magic. Well, you know WHAT? I DO have feelings, you rotten little... so-and-so! JUST BECAUSE I WAS NEVER BORN DOESN'T MEAN I CAN'T FEEL!"

Trixie leaned back where she sat, a hoof raised in pony instinct, ready to flee from danger in an instant. However, when her tirade ended, the azure mare eased herself and sighed. "Trixie is... I'm sorry, Twilight. I should have figured that mentioning your abilities would be a sore spot for you right now."

"Go stuff yourself!" she rudely replied. "I don't need you OR your charity, or ANYPONY at all! I CAN FIX THIS ON MY OWN! Just leave me ALONE! I just... I just..." Sobs escaped her throat painfully as she began to cry, lowering her head in shame. Sudden warmth came over her as she found herself in the tight embrace of the other unicorn. "Who am I kidding? W-what could I possibly hope to accomplish on m-my own?"

"Shh," Trixie soothed with a pat on her back. "You still have me, Twilight. I was the one who convinced Spike that you were you and not some spy, so we could save you. Plus, you still have Owlowiscious and our mother. We all feel lonely sometimes, but when life gets dark, you just have to think about what you DO have and love them all the more."

The lavender mare continued to sob for another couple of minutes until they dried into naught but sniffles. She gave Trixie a little squeeze and broke off their hug to dry her eyes with her legs. Instantly, she wheeled on Spike, who hung his head in shame as she approached. "I might have broken your arm that day, but you broke my heart, Spike," she spoke softly. "I'm sorry... but I don't think I can ever trust you again. I'll try to forgive you, but... I just can't right now."

"That... That's fair," the baby dragon whispered. His eyes went wide as

the lavender mare dragged him in for a quick hug. Tears slipped down his cheeks as he hugged her back, knowing that she still loved him nonetheless.

"Oh PLEASE. Will you two OLD NAGS get a room already!? The Great and Powerful Trixie will not suffer something as girly as these feelings: lest you reap her fury in the form of her awe-inspiring magic coming down upon your head! Especially when you are wasting her time as she tries to save you from the dragon hordes."

Twilight turned around to face her, shocked by her sudden change in mood. "But Trixie, you were being even sappier just a minute ago. How can you go from gentle and loving to callous and obnoxious at the drop of a hat like that!?"

"A mere commoner such as you cannot hope to understand the mystical might that is The Great and Powerful Trixie!" The performer boasted with a flurry of fireworks and trumpet of fanfare. A giggle slipped out of the lavender mare's mouth at how over-the-top her sister could be. "See? It made you smile! If her AWESOME magic can make a sad-sack like you crack a grin, then she is obviously the most talented magician in all of Equestria!"

"Never change, Trixie," Twilight smiled as they gathered everything up to leave.

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Just as the sun began to sink below the horizon once more, the group found itself on the precipice of the Appleloosan Plain: a vast expanse of desert terrain stretching for hundreds of miles in all directions. Thankfully, the town of Appleloosa was not more than a two day trot from the border of the nation. However, the group turned around and headed back into the woods.

The vast plains would lend them no cover, and with no guarantee that they were not still being tracked, they decided to spend the night under the cover of the canopy. After Spike created a fire and Trixie made a makeshift tent out of a tarp and blankets on the ground, the four travelers settled down to have dinner. As Owlowski went out to hunt, the baby dragon

and unicorns stayed behind to gather some berries and leaves in the light of the campfire.

Thankfully for all involved, the librarian's mood had hit a slow but steady upswing from earlier that morning. She still felt upset about her friends and traumatized from her captivity, but she would not let it slow her down when she had a job to do. Sharing her experiences thus far proved to do her a lot of good, since Trixie served as a sympathetic (if grating) ear to chew on as they walked through the day.

Yet, as they ate their meal, a thought crept into her head. Twilight mulled it over for a while, chewing her food methodically before she finally decided she had to explain the situation to Spike and Trixie.

"So... about what I said earlier. You know, right before Spike... betrayed me?" The baby dragon winced visibly at that, the word was so heavy-hoofed, yet there was no other one for it. "Um... perhaps I owe you both an explanation. Just promise me that you won't tell anypony, or it might start a massive panic."

Trixie and Spike shared a slightly apprehensive glance between each other for a couple of moments. Looking back to her, they nodded their heads. "If it's something you feel that you need to get off your back, go right ahead," the blue mare replied.

"Well... you know that rumour about me and the queen?" They both nodded their heads slowly. "It's true."

"WHAT!?" they replied, wild eyed and panicked.

"BUT," she shouted to get their attention before they worked themselves up, "It is also true that I'm not from here. I mean, this timeline, dimension, or alternate reality, or whatever happened. Allow me to tell you the story from the beginning." Taking a deep breath, she recounted the worst day of her life. "On the day of the Ponyville fire, I read a book that contained a passage about golems. Everything about them clicked eerily well with facets of my own personality, even including stress-induced hallucinations.

"Since I was already strung out from days of obsessive research, my insight pushed me over the edge when I pieced together that it was

Princess Celestia who created me. I sought out my friends to help calm myself down after I realized what was going on. When I got to AJ's place, I saw her bucking apples, but they looked rotten and worm-riddled. With Fluttershy, it appeared as if her animals turned into demons. When I went to see Rarity, I found she was making black, tattered dresses that she said were intended for weddings. I fled out of fright and ran into Rainbow, who I thought was... touching Scootaloo.

"I attacked Rainbow for her supposed crimes and went to Sugarcube Corner, where I thought Pinkie was going to bake me into cupcakes! I ran away and, well, broke your arm, Spike," Twilight sighed. "The girls caught up to me and dragged me back, where I got angry after thinking they wanted to eat me, so I destroyed the shop. Up until now, this is mostly stuff you could have guessed, but something happened after that to change the course of history.

"I rocketed into the forest and calmed myself down a little bit, but I soon realized I needed to see Celestia. I needed to know why she made me. Somehow, a magical pair of wings appeared on me, so I used them to fly to Canterlot. To make a long story short, she told me that she had made me, at first, to house Princess Luna's soul once Celestia ripped her from Nightmare Moon. I..." Tears welled up in her eyes as the horrible images came back, her voice choking up under the strain.

"I... I was so mad! She made me to die to save her sister! I wasn't in my right mind, so I attacked her. We fought violently, paying no regard to other ponies. I wanted her dead for lying to me for all those years! But she gained the upper-hoof, only to be felled by Luna being too eager to help and making another mistake. I... I stole her divinity and... and turned into Eos. I'm not sure what happened to kill her here, but I remember she banished Celestia to the sun before Luna brought her... us to my senses."

Trixie and Spike hung on her every word, jaws dropping as she recounted the tale. Tears silently spilled out from the lavender pony's eyes as the memories became fresh in her head and the feelings of betrayal and failure echoed in her waking mind.

The lavender mare continued, barely able to speak, "She snapped me out of it... so I brought Celestia back, but... she was nearly dead. Her body was burnt to nearly a crisp and the doctors whisked her away before I could

give her power back. I was forced to stay in that tainted, demonic body for four WEEKS until she recovered! I nearly killed the pony that made me... I... I nearly killed my MOTHER!"

Silence (except for the sniffles of the crying mare) permeated the trees of the woods as the azure mare and baby dragon looked to each other. Without warning, they descended upon her and hugged her tightly. "We promise not to tell a soul," Spike spoke as they comforted her. "We'll even Pinkie Pie Swear, if you want us to!"

"Indeed," added Trixie. "The Great and Powerful Trixie sympathises with your experience. She still feels guilty about her master and how she could have done more to stop him. It's all in the past, sister; there is no need to cry. She did forgive you in your world, or whatever, didn't she?" The lavender mare sniffed and nodded her head. "Well, then there's no need to beat yourself over it! Yes, it's okay to feel terrible about your actions, but torturing yourself with guilt doesn't help anypony."

"I... I guess you're right... Wait! Did you... why did you just call me...?"

"You might be a golem made by Celestia, but Trixie's birth mother adopted you. Therefore, you are still Trixie's sibling, no matter how vexing and annoying you can be sometimes." Twilight smiled and squeezed her sister a little; truly grateful to know she had at least one pony in the world that still loved her.

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Although a little on the dry side, the plains of Appleloosa were not as dangerous as one would think from the desert climate. Granted, the occasional poisonous scorpion would happen across travelers who walked as opposed to riding the Trans Equestrian Railway. Of course, traveling on the rails would not be possible, considering the lavender mare still had an exorbitant price on her head.

Yet poisonous insects and arachnids were the least of their concerns as they traveled across the flat terrain. Namely, there was no place out there to hide in case any Pegasus bounty hunters, dragons, or griffons came flying along and spotted them. Twilight doubted she could take on a fully-grown dragon, considering her magic was still below par... for her, at least.

Aside from the miles of flat land, the landscape was dotted by small cacti, shrubs, the occasional tumbleweed, and rocks. The land glowed a curious orange hue in the late morning sun, making everything seem brighter and a little hotter than it normally would have been. Beads of sweat ran down the lavender pony's brow as they stopped to rest at around noon. Even a pony as sheltered as Twilight knew it was generally a bad idea to push on during the hottest part of the day.

"So... um... Trixie?" Twilight asked a little apprehensively.

"Yeah?" the azure mare replied, mopping the sweat from her face herself.

"Why exactly did you join the Crusaders? Forgive me for saying so, but... you don't seem like the kind of pony to put her life on the line over something like removing a tyrant from power."

"Trixie DOES take offence to that, Twilight Sparkle," she huffed, genuinely offended. "She joined the Crusaders, at first, because the queen killed the princesses and cancelled the show she was supposed to perform for them! The Great and Powerful Trixie went to the gates only to be told that nopony could enter because Celestia and Luna were nowhere to be found. Of course, later she learned the truth. At any rate, after some time in Ponyville... well, your friends got to Trixie and she saw that she was not the only one suffering."

"Oh, so you did have a selfish motivation to start, but you saw how bad others had it and sympathised with them?" The azure unicorn nodded her head and passed her a bottle of water from inside her bags. With nothing else to do or say, the librarian took a drink before she passed it along to Spike.

Everything suddenly began to shake, as if an earthquake was beginning to rip the land asunder. Twilight knew they were nowhere near a fault line, so that eliminated the possibility that it was a natural disaster. The travelers looked around, panicked by the sudden vibrations. Turning her head to the left, the lavender pony could see a cloud of billowing brown dust forming over the horizon.

Shapes began to crest over the hill, large and powerful as they

stampeded down and towards the group. "I think it's the buffalo tribe!" Spike exclaimed in realization as he stepped forward. Indeed, as the cloud approached, the individual silhouettes became clear through the haze. They seemed to spot the group of travelers since they changed course in their charge and slowed down.

"Look! It's Spike!" cried one of the buffalo as they came close, the call making the entire herd come to a crashing stop. Twilight looked around nervously as they were quickly encircled, not quite sure if they were friend or foe. Although they huffed from their stampede, she could see no hints of hostility in their eyes and on their features. Spike walked closer to one of the females of the group.

"Little Strongheart?" he asked, only to smile when she nodded. "It's been so long! How are you!?" He ran forward and gave her a light hug. "Oh, right. You know Trixie, of course, and Twilight, right?"

"Of course I do: it's so nice to see you all again after so long. We heard that you had come back to Equestria, Twilight, but we didn't believe it until now! We've been waiting for you for a long time to reunify the resistance movements so we can finally take down the queen! So... do you have a plan yet? What are we going to do and where are we going to go?" the young buffalo asked out of curiosity.

"No offence," Twilight started, "but why do you want to know? I mean, why do you care about what we're up to?"

"She's had a rough time. Sadly, she learned that her friends regard her as nothing more than a tool," the baby dragon explained to the look of shock on the buffalo's face. He then turned to face Twilight. "They're affiliated with the Apple Clan, but you can trust them, Twilight."

The lavender mare had to resist narrowing her eyes at that statement. The baby dragon knew she was unable to trust anyone, considering the last time she placed any of it into someone. "Sorry, Spike, but I just can't. Not after everything that has happened to me in the past few days. However, I don't mind saying I have no clue what I want to do or where I am going from here. I'm just... trying to get away from creatures who want to use me."

"Well, you're going to have a hard time doing that, Twilight. You might not know it, but a lot of creatures are looking to you to lead the charge against that monstrous witch," the young female buffalo replied. "Several of our best warriors are with the Apple Clan, as is Chief Thunderhooves. Many of them have gladly died in the pursuit of our Celestia-given rights. You can't tell me that you don't have a plan because you don't CARE, right?"

"N-no, of course not. I care a lot about what happens to EVERYBODY, not just ponies. I... just don't know what I'm going to do! Not when I've been thrust so suddenly into this whole mess!"

"If you want to, then I SUPPOSE you can run with us until you think of what you need to do. We won't tell the Apple Clan you are with us, if only because you helped us end our stupid feud with the Appleloosans, and have earned our respect."

"Well, when you put it that way, I guess we can run with you for a little bit..." the lavender mare trailed, looking to her companions. Trixie nodded her head in understanding. Without another word, the herd started off again with Spike riding on the back of a buffalo while the two mares ran alongside. It was hard work to keep up with the strong, athletic tribe, but as soon as the initial burn in their muscles faded away, it was not all that bad.

For hours, the group proceeded in silence while doing their best not to slow down the buffalo too much. However, by the time the sun began to set, the herd decided to stop for the night to rest. Twilight yawned as she found a soft spot to lie down, the others staying up to have something to eat. The lavender mare, however, was not used to walking for so long and so far. As much as she wanted to eat, she could not guarantee that she could stay awake through supper. Besides, she doubted she could stomach the food they had prepared, since it reminded her disturbingly of the gruel she ate while imprisoned.

She shuffled around on the blanket while trying to get comfortable on the hard ground. Knowing that the nights could get cold; she draped a second over her with her magic and curled into a tight ball to conserve heat. After closing her eyes, the mare listened to the sounds of the chatting buffalo and the ambient sounds of the desert before sleep claimed her.

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Twilight stood at the very top of the world, her one eye locked upon the horizon as she used her other to watch the land below, although it was blocked from sight by a sea of grey clouds. Snow fell all around her, played with by the piercing wind, locking them in an aerial dance around the lavender pony. Although she could not feel the bite of the wind upon her skin, ice accumulated in the loose strands in her mane and on her eyebrows.

A sigh passed her lips for an unknown reason: perhaps it was the solitude she felt in her heart, or maybe it was the fact she could feel nothing? Shrugging it off, the lavender mare turned around to face a taller peak directly behind her, poking through the sea of clouds and into the haze. She squinted her eyes to see its peak, able to make out vague shapes atop it: a pony standing in front of some strange building.

Somehow, she craved the attention of the pony on the opposite mountain, as she would crave a bale of hay when suffering from starvation. The unicorn spread her new-found wings and took flight towards the peak. The wind threw her off course, occasionally; however, she kept her eyes glued on the building beyond.

Sudden downdrafts and updrafts caught the novice flier off-guard as she strained to keep aloft. It felt as if nature itself demanded she remain on her mountain top and leave her to forever wonder what lay ahead. However, she was not the kind of pony to refuse her curiosity, for better or for worse. With one last stumble in the air, the unicorn face-planted into the snowy slope before the building.

With a slight groan, she stood up to find the pony she spotted was missing, yet the door to the building sat ajar. Wooden beams coated in peeling red paint flanked a large wooden door. The roof arched gracefully to catch all of the falling snow, but distributed the weight evenly. Although it looked small on the outside, Twilight could only imagine that it was built into the mountain itself. Or not: she had been wrong about such things before.

The lavender mare struggled to push herself up on her hooves, still winded from her hard landing. With a quick shake to dislodge some of the white powder from her coat, she waded through the chest-high snow.

Reaching the door, she raised her hoof to knock before entry, only for the strange portal to open of its own accord. Taken aback, the mare crossed the threshold with some trepidation, not sure who awaited her beyond.

If the outer appearance of the building was curious, then the interior was enigmatic to Twilight. A thick, red carpet spread out from the door across the foyer and past the arch ahead, on top of a gleaming marble floor. Curious items, such as a pit of raked sand and paintings with words in a strange language adorned the room, giving the place a warm feeling despite the lack of a fireplace. Of course, she also noted that the building was far bigger than it looked, meaning they had built it into the mountain as she suspected.

"Uh... hello?" she called out into the empty building. "Is there anypony here?" However, nothing responded, which prompted her to journey further into the building. Torches came to life as she passed the arches, leading to a stairway going down into the mountain. She fearlessly followed the torches down the winding spiral steps, watching her hoofing since there was no column in the middle: a sheer drop down an unknown depth.

"Hello?" the lavender mare asked again about halfway down, causing her voice to echo. It came as no surprise to her when nothing replied to her, as they did not before. *But I could swear I saw a pony come in here!* Self-musings aside, she took a faster route to the bottom of the stairs and floated down them in what felt like no time at all, only to enter another hall. It was ornate, to say the least: reminiscent of the halls of Canterlot, except restructured for the underground building's needs.

Pure marble adorned the floor, walls and ceiling; it was carved with reliefs of all the different kinds of ponies, including common alicorns, rejoicing before two ponies she could tell were divine, yet not Celestia and Luna. Regal pony-high torches made of granite ignited, bathing the hall with a soft glow. A pair of large, red wooden doors stood at the end, etched with designs of sun and moon. They too opened as she drew close, revealing a black void beyond.

Predictably, they slammed shut the instant she entered, throwing the room into blackness. Twilight sighed to herself as she wondered how she could have fallen for such a trick. A large, circular room suddenly appeared before her eyes as magical runes glowed on the walls, bathing everything

in a soft, blue glow. A large plinth sat in the centre, glowing with similar runes itself.

Taking a deep breath, the lavender pony walked closer to it, intrigued by the room and its purpose. She cautiously ran a hoof over the top of the small platform, trying in vain to read the ancient magical symbols. A light, airy chuckle filled the room which made her hairs stand on end. "Oh, Twilight," spoke the voice, "you have always been so curious when it comes to the mysteries of magic. Indeed, the Element of Magic could not have found a better host."

The lavender pony gasped and wheeled on the spot, taking a good look at the mare behind her. "Princess Celestia!" she cried out, running to her mentor to give her a tight hug. It was in that moment that her mind pieced together that it was all a dream, but she refused to acknowledge it. She did not want to end the fantasy; to stop feeling the beat of her mother's heart, or her soft breath on her mane as the hug was returned.

"I... I can't believe that the queen... that other Twilight... killed you," the purple pony spoke as she pulled away. "Why did you die here!? What happened? What brought about this horrible world!?"

Celestia shook her head before she smiled at her precious student, her beloved daughter. "That is not important right now. In time, you will understand why Queen Eos did what she did. All I can say is that I had it coming to me for a long time. For most of my reign, I was the very definition of a tyrant, and I can never hope to forgive myself for it. But we are not here to discuss my sins, my little filly."

"Please," the lavender pony pleaded, "don't tell me that I should accept Eos after all she's done too! I just can't! She's EVIL!"

"If that is what you think, then you are evil as well, Twilight. Like it or not, Eos is a part of you: sharing the same beautiful soul and mind. Take a look," the princess of the sun smirked as she summoned a large mirror without a frame. The lavender pony cried out in shock, backing away. Staring at her was that horrible pony, a look of shame and sorrow upon her features as Twilight placed a hoof to that of her other self.

"Alas, I am not here to talk about that, Twilight, for my time in your

dreams is coming to an end," she continued before the reflecting glass disappeared. "You want to know where you need to go and what you need to do to defeat the evil queen? Head to the Swayback Mountains, specifically Mount Vicious; there, you will find the monastery we are in right now. There, you will find your answers, Twilight. All I ask, however, is that when you face the queen, tell her that I love her and always will, just like how I will always love you."

She awoke with a start, panting heavily as if she had run a dozen miles in a minute. After taking several moments to calm herself, she noticed something was pressed against her body. Turning her head, she smiled as she saw Trixie had cuddled up to her. For a minute, she considered waking her up to tell her that they now had a destination, but looking up into the sky changed that. The moon hung low over the western horizon, but it was not quite time to get up. Twilight closed her eyes to sleep a little more: she could tell her in the morning.

Chapter 11

The Battle of Appleloosa

"War is war and the Hells are the hells, but of the two, war is the worse. For you see, in the Hells one has sinners: ponies who deserve to be there. Yet, war is rife with innocents, foals and the elderly who have done no wrong. They are punished not for their own sins, but the sins of others. Trust my words, for I had the unfortunate fate to bear witness to both. I pity anypony who experiences the horrors of armed conflict." – Stellar Stylus

A road of iron swept across the plains of the desert: linking cities and towns alike to the fertile new frontier of Equestria. Upon the twin lines of iron rails, a beast of mythic proportions powered across the land and shook the ground while it roared on. The fire in its belly burned hotter than the hells themselves, driving the titan on to reach then unheard of speeds.

A line of acrid smoke billowed from the mouth of the iron horse as it galloped down the track, panting for breath like a dog on an abysmally hot summer day. A loud, ringing whistle sounded from a brass pipe on top of the machine to warn any animals of its approach. A couple of jack rabbits sitting in the middle of the train's path quickly yielded to the marvel of pony technology, knowing it would never stop in time.

"Okay, here it goes," spoke a white mare crouched behind a rock. Judging from the whistle, the train was about to turn the bend. She took a deep breath and counted down, having done the math in her head before. "Now!" she cried, gaining the others' attention. The green-maned earth pony galloped with all her might alongside a blue unicorn and puffing young dragon.

Trixie, Twilight (disguised as Blueprint) and Spike ran alongside the train as it pushed past their rock and on to its destination, allowing the trio precious few seconds to scramble into an open boxcar door. Their owl friend easily swooped into the door, and nudged it open a little more with his beak before clearing the way. Once the door crept up behind her, the architect took a leap of faith and jumped into the open maw of the train car.

With no time to rest, she scrambled into the dark car to allow her sister and friend the chance to jump in as well. A pair of saddlebags flew into the door with a thud before the azure unicorn pulled herself inside, followed by the purple and green dragon. "All of this dirt does nothing to aid The Great and Powerful Trixie's atrociously messy mane," she complained before levitating a mirror out of her bags.

"Just be thankful we didn't need to haul that stupid cart around anymore," Spike replied flatly before shutting the door just enough to let some light in, but not give themselves away. "Chief Thunderhooves could have just wished us a nice trip and let us go on with that... awkward setup. I swear that wagon was about to lose the left wheel!"

Trixie, however, paid him no attention as she continued to study the state of her appearance in the low light. Twili- Blueprint, meanwhile, relaxed against the side of the boxcar. She was not used to such physical exertion, but she could not have teleported them into the car despite its theoretical possibility. The forward momentum of the train probably would have made them break a few bones if she had tried it.

Between Spike's venting, Trixie's brooding and Twilight's musing, the shuffles of the rousing pony did not register in their brains. *Oh great*, mused the waking pony, *more of those stupid train inspectors*. The middle-aged, beige earth pony got to her hooves and stretched, keeping her eyes shut. However, the noise and rocking motions of the car told her that it could only be fellow poor travelers.

"Well, hello there," she spoke, startling the two mares and third unidentified creature. "Are you three riding the rails on the hobony plan as well?" The mare groaned as she cracked a couple joints into place. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see Trixie, Spike and a second pony standing by the door, all three of them staring at her in astonishment.

"M-Mayor Mare?" Spike breathed as he surveyed the former mayor of Ponyville. The other suspicious-looking green-maned mare looked just as startled, despite the fact that she appeared to be a stranger. She simply nodded her head and walked over to the alabaster earth pony with a smile on her face. "Next time, Twilight," she whispered, "Change the style of your mane. If a pony knows you, they won't be easily fooled."

A crimson blush flashed across her cheeks. She had never tested out her disguise against a pony that knew her, and Trixie did not really count, considering how enamoured she was with herself in the mirror at that minute. The white mare did not bother to correct her in order to maintain her appearance: she knew she had a point, but she would worry about her mane later. For the moment, she just wanted to relax from her sprint. "So... what happened, Mayor Mare?"

"Please, it's May Mare now, dear," she smiled. "I was... ousted when the queen appointed Ironhoof as Governor to Ponyville. Same story for every other mayor in Equestria, except I was banished from the town when I was caught sympathising with anti-government protests." A sigh passed her lips, looking much older than the disguised unicorn remembered. "But that's all in the past now."

In the light of the door, the white earth pony could make out the elder beige pony's features. Her once orderly and steel gray mane had turned into a messier and near-white version. Several new bags and wrinkles adorned her face as well, stealing what remained of a youthful appearance from under her glasses. Catching herself staring for a little longer than appropriate, the mare surveyed the rest of the boxcar since her eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

Several other ponies, far rattier in appearance, laid around the fringes of the boxcar: obviously homeless considering their messy state. In the back of her mind, she wondered how many of them had become that way due to the war's effect on the economy. The war: as much as she kept hearing about the nation being in armed conflict, she had seen no real signs of such a state.

"So..." the former mayor spoke to ease the tense silence. "I take it you three are heading to Appleloosa?" Twilight nodded her head in a small reply. "Well, perhaps you should know that the entire town is under a state of martial law. They recently destroyed their governor and threw the entire settlement into chaos, so you'd better watch your step, 'Blueprint'."

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Not more than an hour later, the huffing of the engine began to subside, which caused the train to slow down. It did not take a lot of experience

riding the rails to know that they were approaching their destination. As they traveled, she decided that while the mayor had a valid point, she was not really trying to hide from her friends. However, she did concede and said she would buy a hat once they got off the train to better blend in with the frontier community.

Trixie, of course, flatly refused to wear anything other than her usual attire. "If you want to play dress-up, that is your decision!" she huffed when Twilight suggested she do the same. Although it frustrated her, she could not help but concede defeat since she did save her from a fate worse than death. Spike, meanwhile, thought the whole idea of hiding was stupid since, if she wanted to (according to him), she could take on a whole army by herself.

The train came to a screeching stop just a couple of minutes after it began to decelerate. Spike nervously nudged the door open, checking to make sure the coast was clear for them to disembark. Once the signal was given, the white mare picked up her faithful owl and placed the sleeping creature on her back before jumping down from the height of the boxcar. May gave them one last smile and nod before shutting the door.

After quickly vacating the scene, the three travelers set out to find some sort of store in which 'Blueprint' could purchase a cowpony hat. Still, after stepping away from the train, the disguised unicorn had to do a double take. Appleloosa looked far bigger than she remembered: the dusty streets were choked with all sorts of ponies. In fact, just from the train station, she could tell the settlement was easily twice the size of the town she knew.

It's probably just the nine-year difference in times, the mare mused to herself as they trotted down the dusty street. She could not help but notice the number of ponies looking in her direction. At first, she thought they were looking at her until, however, she saw their eyes rested on her little sister. *Oh, Trixie. Why must you be so stubborn and flamboyant? I'd rather keep a low profile!*

But no: the Great and Powerful Trixie happily trotted down the street, drinking in the attention like a school filly. The white earth pony wanted to sigh and apply a hoof to her face, but that might draw more attention, so she smartly decided to hang back, walking beside the baby dragon.

"Just pretend you don't know her," Spike sighed.

"Who's pretending?" the disguised unicorn replied, averting her gaze from the boisterous magician. "Mental note: Trixie and stealth do not go hoof-in-hoof." The baby dragon chuckled a little to himself as they came upon a clothing store. Trixie obviously walked past it. "Can you corral her back here? I don't want to stay separated for long."

"Sure thing, Tw-Blueprint. Also, nice use of cowpony lingo," he complimented before running after the showmare. The white earth pony allowed a sigh to pass her lips before she stepped inside the clothing shop and out of the dusty, eye-watering street. Once inside, she began to look around for a hat she could buy to better fit in while they got their bearings and supplies. That, and she always wanted an excuse to buy one without gaining some weird looks from either the nobles in Canterlot or AJ herself.

Spurs, (fake) leather saddles, belts, and all other sorts of apparel lined the shelves inside of the small wooden shop. Only a couple of mirrors sat on the walls for ponies to check out their appearances before making their purchase. The stallion behind the counter was a brown earth pony with a black mane and brown hat on his head. His mark was that of a cow-skull tie, which put the disguised unicorn off a little bit.

Taking her eyes off of the... interesting stallion, she turned her attention to the back of the shop, where hundreds of hats sat upon hooks on the walls. Thankfully for her, the choices were limited: felt or leather for materials and brown, black and white for colours. After a couple of minutes of trying on hats (which she found pretty difficult without her magic) she settled on a black, felt Stetson that looked uncannily like Applejack's.

Happy with her selection, she trotted over to the stallion and placed the hat on the counter. "That will be thirty bits, please," the bored cashier spoke without looking at her from his magazine. Reaching into a nook in her mane, she withdrew the bits and placed them on the counter. "For ten bits extra, ah can add a strap to it: colour is yer choice."

"Okay," she replied, bringing out the extra money. "Do you have any lavender, or purple?"

"Just a second," he spoke before disappearing into the depth of the shop.

Blueprint stood there for a couple of minutes and tapped one of her hooves idly while waiting for the brown stallion to return. She must have been in the store for little over five minutes, and Spike had yet to return with Trixie. Had something happened to them while she was in the store? Did the guard arrest them because they did something stupid? Before she could contemplate leaving the store to find them, the stallion returned with a light purple band in his teeth.

After applying a magical adhesive to the underside of the band, he wrapped it around the base of the hat with great dexterity of his teeth. "Thank ya kindly for yer patronage, ma'am," he spoke politely, offering the headgear to her. She accepted it with teeth and gently placed the sturdy item of clothing on her head.

"Thank you very much," she smiled and nodded before stepping out of the shop and back out onto the street. Thankfully, Spike and Trixie were outside waiting for her, no hints of any conflict on either of her companions. "So, how do I look?" she asked as she joined them in the sunlight.

Trixie did not bother to answer and Spike just gave her a quick glance before voicing his opinion. "Eh, if it makes you feel more at ease, I got nothing against it," he shrugged before the three walked away. "So, are there any plans about how to get to Mount Vicious from here, or how we're going to get all the equipment we need, never mind how we're going to carry them there?"

"I have a couple of ideas, Spike," she replied. "We'll ask around, or see if there is a map somewhere. I also know a spell I've wanted to try out that allows for infinite storage with no change of weight."

"Magic is awesome," the baby dragon chirped.

"Indeed I am," Trixie smirked. Both of the other companions rolled their eyes at the comment, although they could not hide that they were a little surprised that she could hear them in the first place, considering the noise level of the dusty prairie street and the distance between them. Although, thinking on it for a brief second, the disguised Twilight smiled, since despite being a loud-mouthed braggart, she cast a spell to hear them, just in case (or so she hoped).

Unnoticed by the three travelers, a grey earth pony stallion had been following them since a little while after hopping off the train. At first, he had no clue who the strangers were. However, the grating attitude and flamboyant appearance of the azure unicorn told him that it was none other than the former General Trixie, followed by the baby dragon known as Spike and a second, unidentified earth pony mare with a blinding white coat and emerald green mane with a black streak.

It was reasonable for him to have his doubts, but after a couple minutes of observation, he became certain the only reason the former two would step hoof in Equestria again was only if Twilight Sparkle was with them. So, he went out on a limb and cleared his throat. "Pardon me, ma'am," spoke the stallion with the yellow mane. "But ah was wonderin' if y'all could help me with this year's Applebuckin' Season. You see, ah've been up fer a week straight and ah'm beginning to hallucinate."

"Um..." the white mare paused in mid-step, turning her head to look at the stallion who approached her from behind. "So, you need me to help you with Applebucking Season? Why me?"

"Well..." he trailed, taking off his hat, "Ah'm all alone doin' it this year, and ah could sorely use the help. In fact, the more hooves helpin' me out, the better!"

Trixie walked back towards the others, scowling. "What is the hold up here?! The Great and Powerful Trixie thought we were going to get a map and supplies!" The stallion had told the disguised unicorn that he had been up all week for Applebuck Season and that he was alone that year? Either it was a strange coincidence, or it was code for Applejack wanting to see her.

Going to see the workhorse proved to be an issue that she had to face as long as she was in Appleloosa. Yet, if it meant that she could get some help, information and supplies out of her old friend, then she would happily go see her of her own accord. Besides, she had the suspicion that if she did not, she would find her on her own, despite her own wanted status. So, she put on her biggest, most friendly smile and tilted her Stetson back. "Why sure, I'd love to help you, kind sir!"

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Trixie muttered darkly under her breath as the group walked out of town and into the hills where the apple orchard blanketed the rolling mounds of earth. The distinct possibility that it was a trap set up by the hayseed had crossed her mind at least a dozen times since one of her lieutenants approached them. Twilight, naturally, was far too naive to suspect such a thing, so she followed him blindly.

It was amazing to her just how much her older sister could trust a complete stranger. Obviously, she had to be from another world, timeline, or some other trickery if ten years in the Everfree Forest did not toughen her up. How could the fate of Equestria be dependent on such an easily-manipulated and weak-willed mare? Sure, she possessed great magical power, but that was about all she had going for her, or so Trixie mused.

Apple trees and farmers passed by as they walked down the dirt road in the middle of the orchard reserved for the buffalo stampede. Many bucked at the trees while others carried baskets and whisked them away to the red barn at the top of a nearby hill. Twilight looked around; keeping an eye on the pony they followed. She almost wanted to call him out on the ample number of ponies, but she did not if only so she looked like she had no idea what was going on.

Of course, she had no idea that Trixie knew they were going to see Applejack. *She sure doesn't look happy*, she mused to herself. *It must be the idea of having to do some manual labour for a change that has her so riled up. Then again, she'd probably use her magic to get it over with as soon as possible.* Offering a quick glance back at the azure mare, she gave her a silent look of apology to her for dragging her into the situation, as she had 'volunteered' them to assist as well.

Eventually, the group wound their way out of the grove and up towards a huge, red boulder of a mountain just on the outskirts of the farm. Near the base, they came to a large rock jetting out of the side of the sheer cliff. With a swift buck to the right rock, the boulder slid out of the way with a noisy grind, revealing the cave beyond. "As you might have guessed," the worker pony drawled, "We ain't here to buck apples."

"Gee, you think?" Twilight replied sarcastically as she followed him inside, her sister and baby dragon in tow. Lanterns hung from supporting

wires on the wall, occasionally disturbed by the odd brace or two to keep the cavern from collapsing upon the inhabitants. Hoofsteps echoed off of the walls before the sound of voices began to reach their ears. There was no telling how deep the sloped path went underground, but the disguised unicorn had a feeling it had to be at least as deep as an underground Crusader's base.

The tunnel twisted and turned until they finally came to a solid slab of stone. The worker pony walked forward and tapped a code against the solid stone with his front hoof. After a couple of seconds, the grey bricks shuddered and shook dirt before sliding apart from the middle to reveal the rooms beyond. Unlike the other bases she had been to, the one for the Apple Clan was by far the most dirty and makeshift in appearance.

Wooden braces lined the halls with dangling lanterns strung in between. The floor was naught but the red rock, carved out and made as smooth as possible, but still very off-kilter. Doorways were chiseled out of rock, with doors fitted snugly in the gaps. They were led past dozens of the doors and down some carved stairs before coming to a set of double doors with a pony on either side to guard the contents of the room.

"What have we here?" asked one the guards in a gruff tone of voice. "You know the general is not taking audiences... especially with FORMER allies."

"General Applejack gave me orders to look for one Twilight Sparkle. Ah believe ah may have found 'er, so please do not delay us any further." The sentries looked to each other for a brief moment before one opened the doors and disappeared beyond the threshold.

The assembled ponies waited patiently for the stallion to emerge from the door, nodding his head to the pony leading the mares. "She is expecting you. Pass," he spoke briefly before opening the door wide for them. "However," he added with a glare, "Only Miss Twilight may enter. All others are to remain outside unless summoned."

Trixie and Spike traded nervous glances with the disguised unicorn. She did not like the idea of being separated either, but if push came to shove, she knew her old friend Applejack would be tough enough to take what she could dish out. Even if she really did not like the idea of fighting with her. With a smile and a nod, the apparent earth pony advanced towards the

doors, doing her best to hide her own discomfort at walking into the lion's den.

Twilight jumped as the heavy wooden door slammed shut behind her, echoing throughout the room. It was a simple, but large space containing a large oval of a table under a bunch of hanging lamps. Several maps and plans were pinned to the walls on cork-board, some with big red lines drawn across them. Large braces held the ceiling back, turning into a network of beams at the top to help support the load.

Sitting at the head of the table, at the other side of the narrow oval, sat her dear friend Applejack. She looked as normal as she remembered, except for the addition of a few off-orange scars. On her head was a brand new brown Stetson, the edges frayed and slightly burned from the many skirmishes she was rumoured to have weathered. Her apple-green eyes bored into the white pony as she approached, as if she saw past the illusions to find her truth.

The silence was uneasy as the orange farmer walked around the edge of her table to face the alabaster mare, a frown replacing her usual smile. "Ah know you're gifted with magic, sugarcube," she spoke, "But you don' have ta keep that disguise up in front of me. If it makes any difference, ah'm sorry about yellin' at you durin' the meetin'." She looked to the ground slightly and scuffed her hoof on the solid stone.

"It's okay, AJ," the white pony soothed as she approached. She turned back into her old self with a flash, albeit still wearing the hat. "I'm sorry for thinking of such a stupid plan. Both you and Fluttershy were right to be mad at me. I still can't believe I thought it was a good idea to bring back ponies from the dead! I should have remembered that no spell can do that. You must have thought I went crazy, or something, when I suggested something so barbaric."

"Yeah... Ah thought the girls had gotten to you," the orange farmer sighed.

"So... it's true that they want a pony to steal the queen's divinity and merge their soul with the stars?"

"Ah'm afraid so, Twi," she replied solemnly. "Trixie told you, didn't she?"

"No, it was Fluttershy," the librarian said. An eerie silence crept over the room as the name of the yellow Pegasus echoed off of the hard, reddish stone. The farmer's face scrunched up in frustration and anger over the news. She wanted to yell and cuss out the formerly kind Pegasus, but she did not, if only for the librarian's sake. "She also said some rather hurtful things," the unicorn continued. "For example, she said that... well... that all of you no longer care about me as a pony, but as some sort of tool to be abused!"

Applejack blinked in surprised. Sure, she expected the strange yellow mare to be candid with her, but not so much as to risk losing her loyalty by spilling such a secret. "A-ah don't know what she's talkin' about, Twi," she replied with a twitch in one of her green eyes. "We all missed you somethin' fierce!"

She was never a good liar, despite experience removing her tells, but she was still ineffective against a pony who used to know her as well as Twilight did. They sat in silence for several uncomfortable minutes as they each tried to puzzle out what to say next. It is hard to talk to strangers.

"AJ," the purple pony broke the silence, "How could you expect me to accept such a lie? Yes, I am a golem: I admit it. But that does not mean I am an unfeeling tool. It hurts me to see you all at each other's throats, but it hurts me even more that you no longer think of me as a friend! Well, I refuse to give up on any of you. I need your help to get rid of the queen, but we all need to work **together!**"

"What's the point in workin' together!?" Applejack fumed. "Rainbow's dead and that damned Rarity is a buckin' traitor! Don't even get me stated on Pinkie Pie, and you -know- Fluttershy is none better! Ah ain't workin' with any of them, sugarcube, and that's all there is to it!"

"I suppose it would be too much for me to ask for some supplies and directions and then expect you to let me go. It's clear to me now that she was right. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a tyrant to topple." Twilight strode towards the door, her back to the orange farmer, and a tear creeping into her eye.

AJ growled in frustration. She galloped ahead of the unicorn and blocked

the door with her body. "Ah can't let ya go, sugarcube," she spoke sternly. "Not when ya so willingly walked into mah center of operations... Don't make me hafta hurt you!"

Just as the lavender pony was about to retort verbally, the ground, no, the entire mountain began to shake, loose pebbles from above crashing onto the two mares. The farmer looked up in awe, although still confident in the stability of the braces. With every passing second, the rumbling and the vibrations intensified until the two mares struggled desperately just to keep themselves upright. "What sorta magic is this!?" the farmer shouted angrily.

"Don't look at me!" Twilight shouted over the rumbling, her voice shaking from the vibrations. Ponies screamed on the other side of the door, calling out to their leader for aid. A large crash echoed behind the lavender mare, making her wheel around with damned curiosity only to freeze up at the sight. A large, purple claw dug through the rock, paying no attention to the fact that it thrashed blindly into a room. The tunneling dragon moved to dislodge some rock in front of it before pushing it to the side, too focused on its goal to care.

Twilight's mouth hung open in fear and awe: she never knew dragons could dig like that before! Thinking on her hooves, she turned back to her friend and galloped towards the door. It was no stretch of the imagination to think that the dragon was looking for her, and that it was just a couple of seconds shy of realizing it had found her. Thankfully, Applejack decided the need to escape outweighed the desire to keep her former friend in line. She bucked open the door and shouted to one of her guards as the unicorn galloped onwards. "Get everypony outa here! We have to evacuate! Now!!!"

They did not need telling twice. Even Trixie and Spike began to flee when they saw the claw in the room beyond and joined the stampede to get outside. Along the way, the massive shape of her brother, Big Mac, and her cousin Bareburn flanked a doorway, helping ponies get out safely. In a way, it comforted Twilight to see them acting the same as she always remembered.

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Ponies of all shapes and colours stampeded out of the narrow tunnel between the relative safety of the outside world and the slowly collapsing

network of tunnels behind them. One misstep would be enough to kill, as the poor pony would be trampled to death under the uncaring hooves of dozens of terrified equines. Despite her lack of athleticism, Twilight found the prospect of a dragon chasing her to be enough to motivate her to greater speeds.

When the tantalizing glint of sunlight sparkled through the end of the curving hall, the lavender pony found herself breathing a sigh of relief. It was so beautiful that she could ignore the taste of dust from the unkempt floor that drifted into her mouth. Although she would be out in the open, it had to be better than staying inside.

However, such thoughts left her mind when she finally passed beyond the threshold. The town of Appleloosa burned as three large dragons circled round the town in the skies above. Even though the town proper was a good mile from the edge of the orchard, screams and cries of anger rang through the ears of everypony present. Occasionally, the shape of a griffon would emerge from the din carrying a shape up high into the air before letting it drop. The scholar silently hoped that they were just sacks of flour or debris.

"Well, what are y'all waiting for?" Applejack shouted as she climbed to the top of a rock cropping. "Grab yer rifles and give them feathered fuckers a run for their hides! Artillery: to yer stations! Ah want those dragons distracted while the rifleponies tackle those griffons! Ah also need the scouts to make a run for the buffalo reserves: they should be just beyond the next hill! Go, GO, **GO!!!**"

A flurry of activity replaced the stillness from just a minute previous. Ponies scattered about to get themselves in order to defend their homes at any cost. Trixie, Spike and Twilight stood around uselessly while everypony else got busy, until a brilliant idea wandered into the mind of the stage magician. "Twilight!" the younger blue mare whispered to her sister. "We can use this to our advantage! Spike and I will... 'liberate' some supplies in the confusion for our trip. You keep out of trouble in the meantime. The hays- I mean, Applejack, isn't likely to let anything happen to you yet. We'll meet outside the other end of town."

Before she could even protest, they were off, hurtling through the winding trees and ducking under the low-hanging branches as they made for the

battle at top speed. It was a risk leaving Twilight behind with the militaristic zealot, but it was a far better option than letting her sit in the open fiddling with her hooves until another dragon scooped her up! Or she had just made another epic blunder: Trixie always did prefer to think positive.

In no time at all, the duo was upon the besieged town as the battle began in earnest. Ponies galloped into the streets carrying muskets and flintlock rifles on their backs. The showmare detested the vulgar simplicity of how the weapons were used, since magic was superior in all respects. But, if it made the Earth and Pegasus ponies feel better, then more power to them.

Fires raged as the attacking griffons lobbed burning bundles of sticks into houses and businesses in a classic strategy of crippling the defending settlements' economy. Together, the mare and baby dragon dodged the attacking soldiers as they scoured the streets in search of an untouched (or as close as they could get) general store. "Woah! Watch out!" Spike cried out suddenly as a griffon tore out of a building across the street.

With only seconds to react, The Great and Powerful Trixie launched herself into the air with all the power her legs could spare. She hung in the air for what felt like an eternity as the feathered menace soared beneath her, no doubt unaware that the tempting target had moved out of reach. Gathering magic into her horn, the blue mare let loose a concussive blast of pure magic square into the enemy's chest, causing him to hurtle into a nearby building uncontrollably.

Landing smartly on her hooves, the magician hit the ground and quickly sped back into a swift gallop after buckling a little under the sudden weight. Spike, meanwhile, kept an admirable pace next to the rather fit magician, trailing behind by only a pony length or so. At first, the baby dragon was impressed by her speed and endurance, but he was hardly surprised. After all, one did not pull such a heavy caravan for so many years without building some strength and stamina.

Arriving at the main street of the small town, the two allies found it clogged by duelling ponies and griffons and bodies of the dead all around. Still, that was not the main focus, as they both spied an emptied shop not yet set ablaze by the enemy forces. Taking a deep breath, they charged ahead, literally dodging bullets and spears in their flight, only changing course when a skirmish moved in front of them.

Neither of them stopped running until safely covered by the cool shadow of the building against the heated veil of the desert sun. Their vision was plunged into an eerie darkness, but they did not have the luxury of time to adjust. "Just grab anything that looks important!" Trixie shouted to her companion over the din outside. They ripped through the wares on the shelves and stuffed what food and fuel they could into the magically altered saddlebags. With no time to give a real look, the two abandoned the shop once satisfied.

Between the time they entered and the time they exited the shop, the number of griffons in the street had been significantly reduced. The ponies were evidently managing to beat them back, accompanied the sound of cannon fire overhead. "Applejack sure loves those cannons," the blue mare mused to herself before the overgrown purple lizard kicked her in the leg. "Sorry," she apologized before getting back up to speed. A battle was never a good moment to have one of her musings.

Thankfully, the dragons above were too distracted to see the single pony and her dragon accomplice flee from the quarantine zone, and with all the griffons being engaged, the two managed to flee with relative ease. Trixie skidded to a stop once they had made it some distance from Appleloosa. Her frame heaved with every puff as she struggled to regain her breath. Now, it was up to Twilight to find her way to them: the part that worried the blue mare the most.

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"Wait, Trixie! Don't leave me!" Twilight cried as the azure mare suddenly turned her back on her, leaving her hoof outstretched in vain to catch her friends. How could she just tell her to stay out of trouble and leave her with Applejack like that? She wanted to be mad, but she had to cast the thoughts loose as ponies began to charge past.

Startled from her silent fuming, the lavender mare found that the orange farmer was gone, leaving her to fend for herself. Given the situation, her rational mind spun into overdrive. *If I stay here, I'm out in the open. That means it would be easy for one of the dragons to spot me and...* A shiver ran up her spine at the simple thought. There was no way she could allow herself to be captured again. *My best bet is to head into the town. Even*

with a skirmish going on, at least I can get lost in the confusion, and maybe help save lives!

With her mind made up, the scholar set down the road into town at a brisk pace. Granted, going into the heart of a battle was a normally stupid notion, but it was not like she had any choice in the matter. Besides, Trixie would be waiting for her, so she had to go through the town regardless. Even if it went against just about every fibre of her being, not to mention every ounce of sense she possessed.

Finally arriving at the edge of the small town, she found the sight before her eyes shocking. Buildings smoldered or were otherwise badly damaged as the skittish mare made her way through the streets. Cries of fury and pain caused the hairs on her body to stand on-end as she slowly made her way deeper into the heart of the battle. It was truly a surreal feeling.

Every time she encountered an enemy, or a member of the town guard, the purple mare quickly backtracked down an empty alley or backstreet. Naturally, considering the size of the town, she was not really going to get anywhere particularly fast using that method. She considered donning her Blueprint disguise again, but that would only eliminate the guards as potential enemies and would not be worth the effort she would have to exert.

"Okay, Twilight. You can do this," the pony spoke to herself as she stood beside a soggy old rain barrel. "What would a brave pony like Rainbow Dash do in a situation like this?" Taking a deep breath, the answer made itself clear to her. She would not run around hiding like this, she would stand up and fight! If she could borrow just a bit of that can-do attitude, then she might just be able to survive this thing.

However, just as she was about to make her move, the ground gave a sudden lurch, making her lose her balance and topple awkwardly into the barrel of water beside her. A moment later, the scholar emerged from the surprisingly cold water with a gasp, her mane clinging to her body and new hat soaked through. She leaned over the side and started coughing up the small amount of water that had snuck into her lungs.

The sound of cracking wood sounded out over the din, and the shaking of the ground becoming enough to make even the most sturdy of ponies

collapse into a heap. A low roar filled the building in front of her, followed by the tell-tale orange glow of dragon fire. The roof swiftly caught fire as a large, purple claw ripped through, shattering glass, wood and stone alike. Several ponies of the guard and the Apple Clan militia descended upon the scene in mere seconds.

Faced with the choice of hiding in the barrel, or fleeing, the purple pony decided to flee, since the chances of discovery and injury were far greater if she stayed, even if the water would protect her from the inevitable torrent of flame. Even as the dragon broke free of the confines of the building, she jumped out of the rain barrel and made a beeline for the other end of the town. Trixie had to have the supplies by now, she hoped.

Although terrified by the sight of ponies fighting all around her, she could not help but marvel at the strange sticks she noticed they carried. They were identical to the ones the ponies in the refugee camp had, so that solved the earlier mystery of what they were quite nicely. She had to admit that the idea of expelling metal balls at high speeds, while insanely barbaric, was actually very effective against the griffons. With some conjecture, they had to be the 'rifles' that Applejack spoke of during her spiel of orders.

During her flight, she came across a pony of the town guard standing around, looking for something to do or an enemy to fight. Twilight froze up and skidded to a stop right in front of him. At first, he surveyed this new mare quizzically, familiar with her, but not precisely sure from where. Neither side had a chance to voice their worries, however, as out of nowhere, a griffon that had escaped a larger skirmish screamed through the air and scooped up the fully-grown stallion.

The sound of angry cursing filled that air as the guard was hoisted up high into the sky, thrashing harder with every hoof of altitude gained. The lavender pony watched helplessly from the ground since it was too risky to cast any spell she knew that could dislodge them without hurting or killing one or both of them. Her mind raced as she struggled to think of something, anything she could do to help.

A soft crunch and loud thud filled the air as the ground shook suddenly, a spout of some warm liquid splattering against her coat. Against her better judgment, Twilight opened her eyes to see what had happened. The

stallion lay upon the ground, limbs bent at awkward angles as a massive rupture in his side spilled blood onto the dirt street. His head had become detached from his body and rolled into one of her forward hooves. She wanted to scream, as loud and clear as she had for Zecora, but her lungs refused to cooperate.

"Twilight!" cried a voice behind the catatonic mare. "Come on, we have to get going!" It was Trixie! She glanced down at the ghastly sight, but offered no words of comfort, as the grounded dragon's roar and belch of fire erupted out of the street behind them. Instead, she firmly placed her head against her flank and shoved the purple pony's legs into moving automatically, half dragging her away from another shattered piece of her innocence.

Through it all, only one thought floated to the top of Twilight's waking mind. *I want to go home.*

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Applejack rarely found herself on the field of battle anymore, and was often holed up in her meeting room, waiting for news of failure or success to come in. Naturally, this irritated and frustrated the orange farmer since she was always a hooves-on sort of pony. So, when a battle so willingly presented itself to her on her front doorstep, she faced it like a mare!

To sweeten the deal, many of the town's guard and the hoof-selected members of the Royal Guard, chosen by Eos herself, would be fighting alongside her forces. Call her opportunistic, but the offer of killing two birds with one stone proved to be a siren's call to her. So, to that end she would gladly stick out her neck in front of the guards, if only so she could have a shot at theirs the minute they turned on her and her militia.

"About time ah got the rust off of this thing," she smiled to herself as she dug up a box near the barn. A short dig under the dirt revealed a soggy and muddy cardboard box with several strings of twine wrapped around the cover to secure it. Nipping at the ropes, she opened the box to expose her sword to the light of day once more. Back in her days with the Crusaders, a blacksmith among their number gladly crafted the sword for the workhorse.

Taking the grip into her teeth, she shook the sheath off and let the steel

sparkle in the sunlight. Satisfied her old friend had not changed one bit, the orange mare wheeled around on the spot and made for the town at full gallop. Even half a mile away, she could hear the roar of cannon fire as the artillery division finished moving into position to antagonize the dragons. With any luck, things would finally start going her way.

The instant she entered the confines of the town, she was beset by at least half a dozen different griffons. Annoyingly, several of the other fighting ponies jumped on them and distracted them. It was not nearly as fun unless she was outnumbered by at least two to one. *Well, since it is mah first battle in a while, ah guess one-on-one will have to do. 'Sides, can't very well lead if ah'm dead.*

Running down another street, however, the farmer came upon an enticing target: a griffon with its back to her, trying to face down three town guards and a couple of her own ponies. Both sides fought valiantly, but the ponies were obviously at a disadvantage next to the razor-sharp claws of the half eagle, half lion hybrid. Granted, it was a little on the easy side for her, but she needed to warm up with something.

Seizing her chance, Applejack pounced upon the winged fiend. The beast cried out in surprise and tried to buck off the unwanted passenger, but to no avail. "Yee-haw!" the orange pony cheered through her clenched teeth. "Ah haven't ridden a buckin' bronco fer far too long! Get along, little doggy!" She crept forward, unrelenting in her hold upon the winged enemy. She twisted her neck once she got far enough, and plunged her thirsty steel into the base of its neck.

The body went limp and slumped to the ground with a heavy thud. Blood poured out of the fatal wound when she withdrew her sword, but it was not quite enough to settle her down after being cooped up underground for so long. However, a shout and growl around the next bend caught her attention, especially when half a dozen ponies ran towards the source of the commotion. She could not suppress the grin that spread across her face.

Hopping off the slain enemy, she ran towards the source of the excitement to find herself both a little giddy and a tad scared at what she saw. A massive, juvenile dragon was busy clawing its way out from under one of the houses in town, belching fire at anypony who ventured too close.

Pieces of wood and stone flew all over the place as the home slowly caught fire. "Circle it! If y'all can get an artillery pony, **do it!**" the general ordered her troops.

Much to her surprise, even some of the town guard followed her orders, either too stupid to realize she was number two on the Most Wanted list, or too scared to really care. Either way, it was all ponies willing to die to defend the town, so she was not going to complain. As well, a number of griffons decided to congregate around the slowly escaping wingless dragon. So many prime opportunities to strut her stuff!

Out of the corner of her eye, the farmer noticed a shadow moving towards a pony in front of her at blistering speed. Obviously, it was a rookie, since the angle of approach was far too low. Well, they would pay for that mistake. Applejack rushed right into the line of flight, as if she were going to sacrifice herself to save one of her subordinates. As the griffon approached, she could see that satisfied smirk on its vile beaked face, absolutely clueless.

Just as it was about to hit, the orange mare rolled out of the way and twisted her body around. Raising her sword, she tightened her grip with her teeth as she felt the steel make contact with the tough, bony base of the creature's right wing. The speed, plus the sharp edge resulted in a nearly perfect cut as the wing toppled to the ground, the griffon once attached to it careening uncontrollably into a building.

A loud roar behind her told her that the dragon had finally broken free of the building it had tunnelled into. "About time too," the orange mare said to herself with some spite. With a loud whistle from her mouth, a series of loud blasts sounded through the town as the cannons beyond the town limits all fired at once, peppering the ground inside the circle mercilessly.

The young dragon took in a deep breath and puffed out its chest, ready to unleash another unholy torrent of flame before one of the cannonballs found its mark and struck the dragon. A loud crunch filled the air as the heavy ball of solid iron impacted it square in the back of the skull, possibly shattering it into a million pieces, and killed it instantly. She held her hat over her heart as she watched its great hulk fall to the ground with a deep rumble. Truly majestic, she thought. Then she cleared her head with a shake, and put her hat back on at a jaunty angle.

"Alright everypony!" Applejack cried to her troops far and wide, "Finish off them griffons! Ah want all artillery focused on those flyin' dragons, right now! Let's show them not to mess with us ponyfolk!" For now, she was savouring the delicate taste of a great battle. However, it would not be until later that night that she realized her REAL prize had slipped away.

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Gentle crackles from the warm campfire filled the air as Luna's... as the moon hung at a shallow angle over the eastern horizon. Despite the early hour, the group felt exhausted from the activities of the day, to say the least. Ever since escaping the battle that was waged in the streets of the frontier town, they had not spoken more than a few whispers. In fact, Twilight had not said anything at all since right before the horse apples hit the fan.

Trixie could not help but frown at her melancholy, as the lavender unicorn refused to cozy up to the fire, or eat any of the food they managed to swipe from the store in the confusion. Spike did not seem to fare much better either, since it must have reminded him of when he betrayed her and pushed her already fragile emotional state over the brink. *This whole situation is going from bad to worse*, the azure magician sighed to herself. "She's going to be a millstone around our necks, isn't she?"

The baby dragon perked his head up at the sound of the unicorn's voice, wincing a little as he sensed her annoyance and general anger. "Well, I wouldn't say that, Trixie," he calmly replied. "I mean, sure she's a little... frail right now, but I'm sure she'll bounce back and be the same mare I've always known. I mean, we need her and Twilight never lets anypony down, ever!"

"Says the overgrown lizard who caused the worst of this," the azure pony spat. "The Great and Powerful Trixie knows depression when she sees it, and she was teetering on the brink when she visited her in her caravan. Your **betrayal** wasn't so much the straw that broke the pony's back, but a sledgehammer to a crippled mule! Yet here you are, naively thinking she can bounce **back** after that? You're delusional."

Forcing herself onto her tired and throbbing hooves, the blue mare slowly

walked over to her purple counterpart who sat brooding in the shadows. By all appearances, she was aloof: lost in her own world of thought and totally disconnected from reality, possibly as a defence mechanism Trixie knew all too well. As she approached, Twilight moved her head around a little, as if looking for Owlowski. Obviously, she was aware enough to know she was coming.

"Twilight," the younger pony spoke as she sat beside her older sister, "Being moody isn't going to do a damned thing to help anyone out. Yes, it was a little... disturbing, to see your first death like that, but it was bound to happen sooner or later." She paused and awaited a response. When none came, she resumed her spiel, a little more annoyed than she intended to be. "I swear to the creators, I am sick and tired of having to be your emotional nanny. I'll snuff you myself, right here and now, if you keep this up! We can't **use** you like this!"

At first, it looked as if her words had not managed to breach the fog of sorrow that seemed to seep from her pores until a chilled sigh escaped her lips. "That's all anypony wants with me. They all want to use me to further their own ends. They don't care about me, or how I feel about the matter. I'm supposed to be their weapon." Tears slowly began to slip from her eyes and stain her cheeks as another breakdown crested over her mind.

At the end of her rope, the azure mare decided the time was ripe for some tough love, since it would be the only kind she would find out there in the cruel world. "Wah, wah, wah," she mocked, "The super weapon golem complains about being treated like an object. News Flash: It's **really** hard to give a buck about a pony as whiny and naive as you when we all feel **dead** inside! We've seen **hundreds** of dead ponies and **dozens** of those die **horribly** right before our eyes. Just because you see **one** does **not** give you the right to carry on like a depressed foal! It's not going to get better either. Not..." Trixie sniffed, letting a bit of her more gentle side through for dramatic effect. "Not unless you **help us**, big sister."

Twilight lowered her head sadly to the ground, the tears refusing to stop flowing from her eyes as she silently contemplated her words. "Why am I always the one thrown into this sort of mess? I... just want to study and read my books. Is that so much to ask? How can I be of any help to anypony? I'm not as powerful as I seem: I'm useless without my friends around."

"Nonsense," the magician replied firmly. "You're a smart pony! If you can't muscle or magic us out of this situation, then think for a while and come up with a plan! I'm sure you'll find a way to reunite your remaining friends in time, but for now... well: we just have to keep moving. Can you do that for me, Twilight? Can you keep moving, no matter how bleak things might get?"

The lavender mare took a deep breath and let out a long, ragged sigh as she contemplated the situation. Talking, she found, always helped make her feel better. As a filly, she would often find the princess to seek her counsel. No matter how bad she felt, her teacher could always cheer her up. That was when something clicked in her mind. "Sure," she replied, "As long as we head to Mount Vicious as soon as possible."

"Okay, sure. Not a problem," the showmare smirked and nudged her head against her elder. "Come and get something to eat. You'll need your strength if we are to get through the range, never mind the harrowing climb up." Twilight nodded her head and followed her sister back to the warm embrace of the campfire. Sure, right at that moment she was depressed, but it helped that she could reaffirm that her sister, at least, would always have her back.

Chapter 12

Waiting in the Wings

Darkness slowly fell over the heart of the Everfree Forest, causing the trees to cast long shadows during the twilight hour before the dying light faded from existence. As with every night before it, the setting of the sun caused alarms to go off in the internal clocks of the most dangerous creatures on the face of the earth. To them, the Everfree was a haven away from the over-controlling ponies, even if their biological memory missed the tasty pastel-coloured morsels.

For all of her experience and connection with the local fauna, not even the chief pony resident of the forest would stray too far from her home during the night. She had learned that lesson the hard way: through many close encounters, wounds, and battles she fought just to stay alive in such a hostile place, let alone the battles she fought for her vision of what the world should be, as opposed to the oozing quagmire of sin it had become.

A cool salve covered the base of her forward hooves as she gave one of the large salamanders at her command a quick, relaxing massage to end the day on a high note. Not only did it help them feel better, but it also acted to dull the natural heat of their skin so they would not accidentally set the entire ecosystem ablaze. Although it had to be done weekly, she never considered it a chore since she genuinely liked to help. Yet, for the past week, she could not help but feel withdrawn and ashamed with herself.

How could she have been so cruel to a pony she once held in such high regard? At first, she was furious that she managed to escape, but as time cooled her temper she realized why her captive abandoned her: she feared her. Twilight, of all creatures in the world, of all the friends she ever had, feared her! Rightly so too, since she had told her all of those horrible things: that nopony cared for her and that the girls would not hesitate to sacrifice anything for their cause.

Yes, the idea of her being a golem, an artificial construct of magical design, still grated at her nerves. Yet, she could not help but feel ashamed of hurting her. A fresh tear slipped from her eye as she finished her work

and slowly walked back into her house. She did not mean to be so crass and sadistic, but she could not help but slip into that mindset when around another pony these days. It was as if something would possess her and cause her to power through her plans with no regard for anypony else. Was that the reason why Zecora would never leave her side? Was she helping her control it this whole time?

Gently shutting the door behind her, the yellow Pegasus went to work getting her tea started. She could remember how she and Twilight would swap and share their favourite teas whenever she came over for a visit. The more sophisticated flavours from Canterlot never really impressed her, but she feigned it, if only because she liked spending time with the lavender mare. Although it came too late, she had realized over the last decade that she was the glue that once held their friendships together.

She could not mope around though: there was still the plan that she and the deceased zebra put into motion years ago. They would educate the well-read unicorn on their lifestyle and how the natural order would make everything right. Then, they would march on Canterlot with an army of critters and sympathetic ponies alike and kill the queen, thus freeing the world from her tyrannical hold! Any resistance to the natural order would be crushed as well.

"*We can't exchange one mismanaged tyranny for another!*" shouted the crackled voice of her friend as the memory of the meeting with the Crusaders crested over her mind. "Perhaps she was right," the healer spoke softly to nopony. "Maybe... maybe none of us should kill Queen Eos. What if... what if whoever wins becomes the evil they sought to destroy? Maybe I should just quit while I'm ahead and join up with Twilight?"

NO! A voice in the back of her head shouted suddenly. *Do NOT lose your resolve, Fluttershy! It's the only way to survive in this cold, cruel world. If you give up now, you will have betrayed EVERYTHING! Even your own values! You did not leave your friends for nothing! They are sinners for daring to go above the natural order of things. You have fought too hard and sacrificed too much to give up now!*

"But...I miss my friends," she spoke to her own thoughts.

Who NEEDS friends anyway? All they would do is slow us down! You're

far too soft when you're around those other stupid ponies! Your ideas would just be swept to the side and disregarded with little to no interest, or care for your feelings! Just like before. Real friends would not do that. A true friend would seriously consider what you had to say: not ignore you outright!

"Well... what if I'm wrong? What if... what if my vision for Equestria just doesn't work? I mean, what pony in their right mind would want to go back to being a common item of prey after having cities and families and friends? Wouldn't they miss waking up in the morning knowing they'll live to see the next?"

All a foalish fantasy created by our ancestors to blind us from the truth! The world is cruel and nature can never be held back. Why do you think everything has gone to the Hells with that stupid EOS in charge instead of Celestia? She, at least, knew the inner nature of ponykind and could work with or against it to her own ends.

"I suppose... yes. I HAVE come too far to just give up. I will continue to walk this path," she resolved as she sat down at the table with her steaming tea. In a world where nothing was certain, the only thing a pony could do was to just keep moving forward. Forget about the mistakes of the past and keep their eyes glued on the bright horizon. Night would have to lift some time, and when that morning light finally did shine, it would be all the sweeter.

Perhaps later, she would apologize to Twilight. Not for telling her the truth, but for being unnecessarily cruel to her. The poor thing had to be confused and scared since, like herself, she had been a hermit for the last decade or so. Tomorrow would be a new day: she would worry about it then. After finishing her tea, the yellow Pegasus and her white rabbit friend went into the other room and quickly drifted off to sleep on her bed of hay.

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Everything around the orange mare lay in ruins. Applejack would be quick to note that it was a lie of exaggeration, though. At any rate, a lot of property was damaged and a fair number of ponies were now injured or dead in the aftermath of the attack on Appleloosa. Buildings still smoldered as bits of dragon fire lapped at the wooden structures. She had no way of

understanding why the combined forces of dragons and griffons attacked her town and her ponies, but at the moment, she did not really care.

Granted, it was quite the feat to forcibly remove three stubborn dragons and about a dozen of those winged jerks, but it did not matter. In the midst of the battle, they had lost something infinitely more valuable than a few good ponies or bits in property damage. Twilight Sparkle had managed to escape in the chaos and confusion surrounding the confrontation. On a deeper level, she felt a sense of awe and pride that the unicorn had managed to pull it off!

She stood in the midst of her former office and surveyed the damage. Chunks of rusty red rock littered the floor with massive cracks in the walls. Ponies gathered as many personal belongings as they could since the structure was compromised by the tunnelling dragon. There was also the fact that the remaining guards and soldiers could converge on them at any moment. The converted mine had been her home for the past three years, and she had to admit that she had become attached to the place. It was just like the day she had to leave Sweet Apple Acres all over again.

Applejack sighed in relief as she overturned her long conference table to find the Communication Orb undamaged. It was a very useful tool, but she doubted Dinky would ever make her a second. She lowered her head in sorrow as tears began to crest her eyelids: reminded of the last time she saw her little sister and how cruel she had been to her. All she wanted to do was stay behind with her friends and she had to bite her head off before fleeing. "Why must Celestia test us like this? Ah know she has a plan, and we're all but pawns in it, but why does it always have to hurt?"

This is Princess Celestia, she reasoned in her mind, she wouldn't do something like this without reason. The pain is just a test and so is havin' to use Twilight. All the ponies who died are the ones who failed her and deserved to do just that! Ah have to keep strong for everypony's sake and keep movin' forward: it's the only thing TO do. Just keep at it, Applejack and everything will sort itself out. Then, she can end this cruel test and fix things in a second!

A resounding series of knocks on the door snapped her mind back to the present moment. At first, she wondered just who in their right mind would want to see her at such a time as she slowly walked to the door. After

grabbing the brass handle in her teeth, she pulled, revealing a mustard yellow earth pony stallion with a brown mane and the mark of three horseshoes on his flank. In that instant, she recalled that she had summoned him.

"Oh, Caramel," she greeted. "Come on in! I have a job fer ya." The stallion obeyed his superior and quickly made his way into the remains of her conference room. Applejack always liked him, no matter what other ponies would say about his memory or his quirks. That was why she decided to entrust the task to him, knowing he would either succeed, or die trying!

"What's the job, General?" he asked with a sparkle in his eyes. Obviously the chance to prove his worth was very important to him.

"Ah need you to do somethin' of top priority, Caramel. Don't worry: you won't need to handle any seeds." The two laughed quietly at their private joke. "Ah need you to get Twilight Sparkle an' bring her back here! Yer the only pony resourceful enough to handle that mare without goin' overboard and she's less likely to use a lot of power against ya because yer an earth pony. Not to mention the fact that she wouldn't hurt ah fly if she could help it."

The yellow stallion could not help but drop his jaw at the assignment his commander had given him. Did she really trust him with such a task, or did she know he would fail and just wanted him out of the way? It was a very complicated situation, but if he turned her down, he might seem incompetent and foalish. Caramel knew there were rumors swirling around about him and if capturing Twilight could quell them: well, he had little choice anyway.

"Of course, General! You can count on me!" With a forced grin, the colt saluted before trotting out of the room with nervous energy. Of all the ponies under the farmer's command, the yellow pony was just about the most dependable one she knew. Even if he was not the smartest or most helpful stallion to ever walk across Celestia's green earth most of the time.

"This is just another one of Celestia's tests, Applejack," she told herself once he left the room. "Everythin' about this here mess is just one big test the Princess gave us: to see if we could carry on even without her !" She let

another sigh pass her lips as she realized she was alone. "Now yer talkin' to yerself, ya silly pony!" Shaking her head free of the troublesome thoughts, the blonde mare continued to sift through her possessions: they were on a deadline and she was lagging far behind.

Sure enough, just a couple of minutes later, her big brother walked in and started giving her the look. He was a stallion of few words, which somehow made the mares go crazy for him. Granted, he was very fit and she could see that he was a mite handsome. Over time, she became immune to their noises when they would walk through town together: back when they had a town to call home, anyway. "Uh, AJ? We're runnin' behind," he drawled.

"Yeah, yeah, hold yer horses, big brother," she answered. "Ah'm just finishin' up now. I had to assign a pony to track down Twilight fer me while we move base."

"Who?" the draft crimson stallion asked.

"Caramel. Ah know he's a bit of a long shot, but he's the only pony ah know who won't quit, no matter what. I'm sure he'll be fine. He has to succeed." Taking a deep breath, she loaded her saddle bags onto her back, nearly buckling from the weight of all the tools and items she desperately needed to keep her clan going.

"Eyup."

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Harsh magical lights hummed nosily in the otherwise oppressive silence of the room, casting their glow upon every surface like a choking blanket. If one thing could be said for the room, it was that it was sharply efficient and as blank as a canvas. White walls surrounded a simple desk in a perfect square, placing it and the three chairs that surrounded it in the very centre of the room. Besides those four pieces of furniture and whatever happened to rest upon them, the room was barren and cheerless.

In fact, the only things that offered any colour to the room was a bunch of candy in a glass bowl and a pink pony sitting at her chair on the far side of the desk, facing the door. Her long, pink mane sat flat against her head like a bubblegum shower curtain that obscured most of her face. Her cyan eyes

rested on a small dome in the middle of the table, lost in thought over what had transpired over the last week or so.

So what if Twilight had returned to Equestria? All it meant was that there was another pony on an already crowded stage, many of which needed to be removed from the spotlight soon. It was not like a single pony could turn around the situation so effortlessly: the world had already reached the tipping point. It just needed a little push to be sent over the edge and she was just the pony to do exactly that.

Pinkamena Diane Pie smirked as an idea crossed her mind. *Imagine all the destruction she could cause, she mused, if I could bring her to my way of thinking. Spike has already betrayed her and she loved him like a brother! She's probably already depressed: I just have to string her along into hopelessness. Then, only then can the Cleansing begin in earnest!* The pink pony giggled in perverse delight at the thought, knowing first-hoof that her former friend could decimate an entire town effortlessly.

Yet, a small voice in the back of her mind told her that using her friend like that was not only very mean, but extremely dishonest. With a shake of her head, the pink mare silenced the phantom, prompted by the sound of a knock at her office door. She did not feel like entertaining visitors, but then what kind of a host would she be? "Come on in," she spoke in a cold tone.

It was a light blue unicorn mare with a two-tone mane of blue and white. She timidly entered the pink pony's office and sat opposite of her in front of the desk. "Ms. Pinkamena?" she spoke apprehensively. "The drill for Operation Flood-Manhattan-With-Hot-Lava is almost ready. I mean, since you asked us to keep you posted on its progress."

"Thank you for the update, Colgate," the pink mare replied in as chipper a tone as she could muster. "Come. Follow me." Within less than a second, the two mares stood in unison. The blue unicorn hung back a little since Pinkamena disliked being actually lead anywhere by anypony. Needless to say, no pony dared try to upset her unless they wanted to die a little earlier than the rest of the world.

Although bowing or saluting was not mandatory in the Party Poppers, every stallion and mare that they passed did so out of respect to their leader and to the lieutenant as they trotted down the halls. Contrary to

popular belief, their base was very clean and plain in appearance so that they could spend their time and energy concentrating on the task at hoof. Of course, Pinkamena did not really care if they slacked off a little bit and even encouraged a weekly party on Fridays. She had yet to attend a single one since the group formed, however.

Eventually, the pair of ponies came to a set of double doors that lead into a large, cavernous lab. At the centre sat a shiny, silver drill bit in the process of being painted pink. Lying on its side, the device was easily three ponies high and ten long. Under normal circumstances, it might be considered a feat of pony engineering, but considering its purpose, Colgate had her doubts many would celebrate this masterpiece of death and destruction.

"Do you have any idea how we're going to get it to Manehattan under the noses of the Royal Guard, the Crusaders **and** the Everfree Movement, ma'am?" The blue unicorn asked with some trepidation.

"Not yet, no," the pink pony answered her honestly. "We might be able to drill it there and use that as a sort of test run, but I'm not sure if that would work out real well. I'm sure you will all figure something out though! In the meantime, we can simply bomb some more buildings. What does everypony think of that!?"

A few ponies around them took a pause from their labours and cheered at the idea, since they all liked a good bombing. Even Colgate gave a little cheer at some good, old-fashioned destruction instead of sneaking around and being lied to like she had while she was in the Crusaders. "I think that would be a spectacular way to boost morale, ma'am," she spoke with a smile to the pony beside her.

"Well then, since you've all been working so hard, let me get you all a treat! Wait right there," the pink pony chirped before trotting out of the room. Only where the door shut did all the ponies present look at each other. Pinkie never got excited like that unless something fun, or funny, was about to happen. Considering her definition of those two, it was all too likely that somepony was about to get hurt.

Just a few short minutes after leaving, the leader of their group returned with a bowl of candy clenched in her teeth. A collective sigh of relief quietly

filled the room, since she would never do anything to her own candy bowl! "Well, come on!" she spoke impatiently. "Everypony take one. Please!" With a smile, each pony took a candy from Pinkie and popped them into their mouths.

Colgate, meanwhile, turned her candy over in her mouth. It was watermelon, no doubts about it, but it had a strange tang to it that she could not quite place her hoof on. Before she had time to reflect on it, the outer shell melted away, exposing a fluid that suddenly surged down her throat, setting it on fire. Her eyes went wide and she gagged on the sweet, quickly spitting it out onto the floor. Pinkie had a look of disappointment behind the Cheshire grin on her face.

"Aw," she whined. "Colgate got the poisoned candy! I really liked you too." The pink mare dropped her grin and pouted as a look of horror came upon the dying unicorn's face. "Don't worry. It will be over quick! See you on the other side!" White foam began to froth from her mouth as the blue unicorn's eyes rolled up into the back of her head. Everypony watched in abject horror as she slumped to the ground and gurgled sickly before she became silent. Just like that, Colgate was dead.

"That game wasn't nearly as fun as I thought it would be. Can somepony please get her out of here?" Pinkie asked before turning away, leaving her dumbstruck followers behind.

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Ever since news arrived that the pony known as Twilight Sparkle had been captured by the dragons, the atmosphere became incredibly tense. Ponies nervously checked behind their backs while they talked, just in case she happened to trot past and hear them. She had always been a little irritable, especially in the morning, but now Queen Eos was a ticking time bomb, just waiting to go off. No pony felt safe anymore, unless they were completely stupid.

Sunlight poured into the throne room that day. In a rare occurrence, the queen decided to extend court beyond the usual lunch period. When asked, all she would say was that it was for a special staff assembly and that attendance was all-inclusive and mandatory. "Very well, I shall look into it," the queen spoke to the final petitioner for the day, "You are

dismissed." Without another word, the stallion bowed before the ruler of sun and moon and made a beeline for the door as fast as he dared.

"Captain," she called to a Pegasus guard, "Summon the castle staff for the assembly." The gold-clad white pony nodded his head and went into a back room behind the throne. Eos remained atop the seat of power with her mane billowing in the solar breeze. Her amethyst eyes had become cold and hard permanently where before they still held some softness and warmth. Thankfully, the insufferable voice had decided to clam up for the moment. It was a great comfort to the alicorn to have less meddling in her life.

Slowly, ponies trickled in the massive double doors before her, no doubt curious why she called the entire staff to such a sudden general meeting. Little did any of them know just what was about to happen. *Oh yes, this will be an educational experience*, the royal mare thought to herself with a smile. The ponies before her stepped to the side and took seats flanking the carpet that bisected the room to create the traditional central aisle directly facing her.

"Attention, all members of staff," spoke the Pegasus over the loudspeakers. "Attention: please make your way to the throne room immediately for a mandatory general meeting. Any ponies that are absent will be punished. That is all."

Eos sat patiently upon the symbol of her power as the ponies started to flood in after the message. Even if she was in no mood to care, she would still allow them a leeway of... perhaps about five minutes? Then, if they were any later than that, and made her delay her announcement... Truth be told, she had not come up with a fitting penalty yet. But what would be the best way to go about it? She could not make it too harsh, or else be feared even more. But if it was too relaxed, then she would get no respect.

"Your highness?" the ever-present mouth of her adviser Stardance spoke. "Everypony is assembled as ordered. Might I ask why you have called this meeting?"

"All in good time, adviser," she replied in a chilled tone. Eos surveyed the crowd, looking for the pony she wanted to single out that afternoon. Sure enough, she sat as close to the front row as she could manage and nearly

in the middle of the right-hoofed side. Equestria's liberator grinned widely, causing a few of the ponies in the front rows to shiver in fear.

"Greetings, everypony," the monarch addressed her subjects. "We are gathered today due to forces beyond our control. It is no secret that war changes ponies, yet it is the manner in which they change that we have found disgusting as of late. Sadly, we must announce that there is a certain pony in our midst leaking valuable secrets into the hooves and claws of our enemies. In more simple terms for the less learned of you; a pony in this room is a vile traitor and must be held accountable for their crime!"

A collective gasp filled the room as the sentence echoed off the vaulted hall of the chamber. As she surveyed the room, she could see a couple of ponies shift nervously in their seats: she would deal with THEM later. For now, she wanted to call out the most grievous assault on her hard-earned trust. She would make an example out of them, and hopefully scare those other shuffling ponies back into line.

"The pony in question had the very rare privilege to say that they once held our unconditional and complete confidence and trust. However, we now know such trust was misplaced. She fed national and military information to rebel groups the likes of the Crusaders and occasionally to the allied forces of dragons and griffins. Therefore, it is with a heavy heart that we call her to stand before us of her own volition and face the consequences like a **mare!**"

No pony dared to make a move or a sound once the queen's powerful voice subsided. Eos sighed audibly, hoping she would have some honour about her. "**Jade Buckingham, come forth!**" she commanded. All heads turned to the green unicorn, who was doing her best to make a stealthy exit at the time. Guards swooped upon her in an instant, receiving a struggle and a string of curses that would make a sailor blush before they dropped her on the elevated throne before the fuming monarch.

"Before we pass sentence, Jade," she asked softly. "We just want to know why you betrayed us."

The unicorn looked upon her with a cold look in her cyan eyes, no longer hiding behind her facade of shallow flattery and comments. "It is hard to betray a pony when you were never on their side, your **majesty!**" the minty

mare spat. "So what if you caught me? I'm happy to die if only you die as a result of my efforts! You can't keep the common pony down for long. Not with our shining beacon lit for all the land to see! Stars save the queen; her end is nigh. The Crusaders forever!"

"**SILENCE!**" the queen shouted, shaking dust off the top of the rafters which gently floated onto the marble floor below. Not a pony dared to sneeze or cough, especially after such a brazen display of resistance from the former secretary to the War Council. "Jade Buckingham, we hereby sentence you to torture until such time as you reveal the location of every Crusader base: especially their main base, which I **know** is somewhere in Ponyville. Guards! Take this traitor down to the dungeons and begin immediately!"

A pair of white guards swooped down beside the queen and advanced on the green mare. They roughly clamped shackles to her hooves and slipped a ring of Mythril on her horn to stop the unicorn's magic. Either out of blind heroism, or foolish optimism, she was lead away without argument. Several members of the crowd looked open her in either false distaste or awe as she walked through the doors. It would be the last time she would ever be seen in public: alive, that is.

"You are all dismissed," the queen spoke bluntly before she turned on them and exited through the back door.

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Soft music echoed through the room that afternoon, carrying with it a melody of sombre reflection in between raspy, hollow breaths. Soft, red velvet curtains were drawn on the windows into the room, immediately behind a modest desk befitting for the eyes, ears and mouth of the queen in the small town. It was considered a status symbol in Equestria to have a window behind a pony's desk: the bigger the window was, or the more a pony had, the more important they were.

Governor Ironhead of the Township of Ponyville did not really consider himself of any real importance in the grand scheme of things. In fact, he knew comfortably that he was the only governor to have any sense of humility. For instance, Tungsten Tail in Manehattan had an ego as big as the skyscrapers the town boasted. Furthermore, Lead Hoof in Trottingham

created a holiday to celebrate his 'glorious visage,' the vain prick.

Ah well, his grievances with his peers were the least of his worries for the moment. The increased presence of the Royal Guard had stalled agricultural production fifteen percent since their arrival, despite the fifty percent gains the local bars and social clubs reported. As well, the local guards and the town police were complaining about being overstepped constantly by the national authorities. It was a logistical nightmare to keep the citizens from rioting for the Sorrel Hells of it.

Yet, he could not let his reputation of level-headed leadership slip over a few mild unforeseen consequences. Even if his letters to the queen, stating that it was highly unlikely (or logical) for fugitive number 10239, aka 'Twilight Sparkle' to remain in the area, went unheeded. Even after news that she had been captured by the allied forces of the griffins and the dragons! In fact, a lot of things seemed to be changing at an alarming rate, and not just in his little corner of the kingdom either.

Reports from his fellow governors told him that the three rebel groups were picking up significantly in activity, most likely in correspondence with their infamous anthem and the return of said criminal. Alas, all of this pondering was beginning to hamper his schedule, and he refused to be tardy for anything. Standing up, the artificial pony laboured for breath as he slowly walked across his office and out the front door.

"I'm going to meet Captain Starbolt," he rasped to his secretary in the foyer. "You may close the office for the day. No new orders for the night guard."

"Of course, sir," the blonde mare at the desk replied, no doubt elated at the extremely rare early leave she had been given. Ironhead had to give her some credit for not revealing just how happy she was to get out of there. Even though he was a golem, he could tell the ponies of Ponyville treated him with hostility, visible or not. This was especially true when he exiled their mayor for being a traitor sympathiser.

Shutting the door behind him with a little more force than intended, he trotted heavily across the cobblestone square, hooves clunking loudly as he went. Naturally, heads turned as he walked, singling the nopony out from the rest of the crowd as they moved out of his way. There was a lot of

speculation flying around about him, but truth be told, he was not bothered by their avoidance. He knew he was different from other ponies, but he did not truly care. If he did, that would get in the way of his job.

Of course, he did have some emotions: if only one thing could bring them out, it would have to be dealing with the difficult members of the royal guard. Just because they served the queen directly did not give them the right to be obnoxious. He was even closer to Her Majesty, but he did not flaunt it like they did. Captain Starbolt was especially vexing, since he had an ego to match some of the governors. The former Wonderbolt was the only creature who could make him angry. Still, he scheduled an appointment, so he was forced to see him.

"Yo! Ironhead!" the voice belonging to the obnoxious captain cried. The aging yellow Pegasus with the hazel and blue mane did a quick loop before landing smartly in front of the poker-faced golem, surprisingly spry for a stallion his age. He did everything in his power to try and elicit some visible emotion from the governor, but thankfully had yet to succeed.

"I hope you appreciate that I closed the office early for your little meeting, Starbolt. I sincerely hope that I have not wasted my time."

"Grim and proper as usual," the former acrobat sighed. "Fine, I'll give you the short version, since you're such a stick-in-the-mud. Why are we still keeping an eye on that stupid library if the fugitive is not even in the area? I mean, what are a bunch of stupid books going to do? Grow legs and walk away? It's ridiculous, and I'm sure you know it! I mean, yeah, you have a thick head, but not in that way!"

"Her Majesty has her reasons for keeping an eye on the Books and Branches Library. It is not given to us to ask why, but to enforce her will. You would know this if you are as loyal to her as you claim, Starbolt. Even I do not know her intentions in that regard, but if they were critical to my job, then she would have informed me. For now, the standing order is to keep the library under surveillance. That is all, Captain."

The middle-aged Pegasus looked agitated for a split second before he took flight to rejoin his squad who hung out nearby, just in case things got dicey. In the absence of the queen herself, **he** was the ranking officer and he was not going to let them forget it ever again. "It is about time I put a

leash on those ravenous dogs," the golem spoke aloud. "They are becoming far too difficult to handle."

Taking a deep, ragged breath of a sigh, he loudly trotted down the street and took a left off the main road into town. The mayor's residence did not distinguish itself from the other buildings in town, but it was far roomier on the inside than it appeared. Thankfully, it remained unvandalized that day, where there would usually be an obscene note or gang symbol painted on the door. He would enjoy a hopefully quiet night alone before resting and preparing for another gruelling day at the office. Trying to lead a town that hated him was just about as easy as it sounded.

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A dull blue glow coated the world as the light of the moon bathed the desert. The stars above twinkled in a constant yet ever-changing dance that spanned across eons. At least, that is what the mare imagined as she huddled closer to the fire she made. The air was cold, but the hot fire provided a small buffer zone where the temperature was bearable. It was in that narrow circle that Vinyl Scratch sought refuge from the deadly desert night.

It was certainly no small feat that the intrepid bounty hunter had picked up the trail of her prey once more. Although, with the dragons and griffons in a panic, it was merely a job of keeping pace and using her brain a little bit. She had her doubts Twilight would go east to Manehattan since the guard and police there were more than equipped to handle her, and thought it unlikely she would go through the tunnel that her fellow bounty hunters loved to loiter around, so that only left lawless Appleloosa. From there, it was simply a matter of picking up her trail after a few rounds around the town. By her conjecture, she figured she was heading to the Swayback Mountains.

As she planned out her future, her mind began to wander back into the past as the wisps of sleep gently crested over the white mare's tired body. Her eyes gradually became heavier and heavier until she could hold them no longer and passed out. Darkness danced before her as the gentle cracks of the fire turned into white noise, which eventually became a gentle tick. Vinyl moaned and opened her eyes, finding her vision had become sharp once again, able to make out the time on a nearby clock that showed

it was ten before twelve in the morning.

Dream logic took over, pushing all questions that she could see out of her mind and she grumbled and rolled out of the blinding light, noticing a half-finished bottle of Vodka on the nightstand. "I'm never drinking again... until Friday," the mare muttered as she pulled herself out of bed. "I hate waking up early." Being the top DJ in the region proved to be a great boon since she was regularly invited to the most exclusive clubs in Equestria to perform. Of course, this also meant she had to assume a nocturnal sleeping pattern.

DJ P0n-3 wandered slowly over to the bathroom for a quick shower. She was the kind of pony who simply could not fall asleep again once she woke up and she refused to really try. Besides, it made it easier to fall asleep the next night if she lacked a little sleep from the night previous. "Morning, Scratch. Up before the crack of noon, hmm?" sounded the voice of her aristocratic roommate and best friend, Octavia. She sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea at her hooves and a newspaper sprawled out before her (the culture section, of course). Normally, that condescending tone of hers would drive the disk jockey up the wall, but at that time in the morning? She was more or less a walking corpse. So she shrugged and struggled to find that magical elixir known as "coffee".

"What is the matter, Vinyl? Has the cat got a hold of your tongue? Or was it simply the decadent quantity of alcohol you consumed last night? I had to pick up at least a dozen bottles just leading to your door! Stars know how many are in that rat's nest you call a **room!**"

The white unicorn winced visibly in her hung-over state at the loud noises she was making. "Pianissimo, 'Tavia! Pianissimo! If you're gonna play that tune, do it softly, please! It's like you're popping this hardcore techno beat in my head right now and it's not cool, 'kay, filly?" Sitting at the table, the DJ rubbed her blood red, bloodshot eyes before taking a sip of the black liquid in her cup.

"Fine, but it is your turn to get the groceries. I have practice this afternoon, so I cannot go," the earth pony replied in a softer, but still unyielding tone. The white unicorn simply gave a couple quick nods with her head before rubbing her aching temples with her hooves. Anything, even going out to get their groceries while she went to work, was better

than sitting there and taking the brunt of her rapier wit while she herself was disarmed.

So, without any protest and a quick brush of her mane, the unicorn decided to get it over and done with so she could grab a quick nap when she got back to their Fillydelphia apartment, since the earth pony would be at her practice by the time she returned. Grabbing her trademarked sunglasses (partially to protect from the glare of the sun on her hung over eyes), the famous DJ ventured out into public where she was accosted by the usual ecstatic fan or two as she shopped: over all a routine experience.

Coming back home, however, was something quite unlike anything she had ever seen before. Dozens of ponies she identified as tenants in her building fled outside, screaming and carrying what possessions they could. "I bet I'll get blamed for this," the white DJ spoke aloud to herself as she approached. It looked like there was smoke coming out from one of the windows. Had she really forgotten to turn off the stove, or coffee pot, or some other device that could cause a fire?

The heavy tint on her sunglasses made it nearly impossible to see as a rogue cloud drifted overhead, casting the area in shadow. She lifted the purple glass from before her eyes, exposing their blood-red tint for the entire world to see. Members of the Town Guard were out in force that day, trying to keep the crowd of ponies behind the yellow tape. "Stay back, miss!" One of them shouted as Vinyl pushed herself to the front of the crowd. Of course, she had no intention of trying to cross. Octavia would have a fit if she got arrested again.

Out of the doorway into the building, a pink mare with a bubblegum mane hopped into the middle of the perimeter. "Hi!" she chirped with a smile, looking at the guards. Each of the law ponies looked to each other with wild incomprehensible looks in their eyes. They quickly snapped back into focus and pounced on the pink mare, creating a massive pile of ponies as they tried to force the one into submission. However, the pink pony squirmed her way out on top of the pile and quickly hopped away.

"Well," the musician spoke over the din of the still raging fight between the town guards, "you don't see that record bein' spun every day." Then with a blinding flash and echoing roar, the world was gone: stolen by the claws of peaceful darkness, only for waves of searing pain to register in her

mind moments later. The white mare lay on the ground screaming in pain as she regained consciousness, a warm liquid spilling onto her hooves when she went to cover her aching eyes.

All around her, there were other shouts of surprise and pain in the scary dark world she had been thrust into so suddenly. She could hear the sound of hooves clicking rapidly against the cobblestones until she could swear they were right beside her. "Scratch!?" came the echoing cry of Octavia. "S-somepony! Help! M-my friend! She n-needs help! **Now!**" Before she passed out, Vinyl could not help but notice she had never heard her friend that worried before.

Next thing she knew, the white unicorn sat in the middle of the doctor's office. The cool wax paper on the table pressed uncomfortably against her flank as she squirmed. She knew her friend was there for her, but all she could see was a brownish blob, having just had her eyes tested after the gauze protecting them was removed. For the past month, she had to experience the world without any sight at all as her eyes healed from the surgery to get all the glass out. Her ears perked up as soon as the sound of a shutting door filled the room.

"I have some good news, and, unfortunately, some bad news, Miss Scratch," the doctor spoke to the blinded mare. "While we were able to save the eyes, despite the injuries, I am afraid you will never have twenty-twenty vision again."

"H-how bad is it going to be, doctor?" Octavia asked with a quaver of fear in her voice.

"Significant, I am afraid. Somewhere around twenty-sixty, but that can be corrected with glasses. However, severe cataracts have developed. This means that everything will be blurry and out of focus. Normally, we would be able to fix this, but with the cost and the war eating up our funds and resources, we cannot remove them. Maybe when the war is over something can be done, but it will still cost somewhere in the neighbourhood of ten thousand bits per eye for the surgery.

"I can get the money easy, doc," the white mare spoke up. "But, well... will I be able to work? I... kinda need to see playlists and album covers to spin the tunes and pull off rockin' shows. If I can't play those records I... I

don't know **what** I would do!"

"I am sorry, Ms Scratch, but in this state, you will be lucky to be able to read a street sign."

Later that night, the disk jockey would lock herself in the spare room of Octavia's parents house and sob her heart out in between bottles of whiskey she lifted from her father's cabinet. Being a DJ was all she knew, all she wanted to be, and now it was robbed from her by that miserable, evil pink pony! Come Sorrel Hells or high water, one day she would pay her back in kind for all she had done, but until then, she just wanted to wallow in her own self-pity.

Back in the present, the white pony stirred from her slumber, as she always did when she dreamed of that day. "Stupid past," she muttered angrily. The bounty hunter rolled onto her back, casting her damaged eyes skyward, their vivid ruby red tones dulled to an off pink from the cataracts. Still, as bad as it was to have her world blurred by an eternal smudging hoof, it was a far sight better than what could have happened. Scratch shook her head and closed her tired eyes again: tomorrow was a new day, ripe for the picking and she would not be left behind!

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Although not considered a part of the Everfree Forest proper, the southern end of the Whitetail wood was not as peaceful as it appeared to be. Tales from the villages in the area spoke of restless spirits and demons that roamed between the trees at night, since time immemorial. Arcane rituals, murders, and other unspeakable acts took place in the haunted wood, or so the rumours claimed. It served as a beacon to the supernatural, drawing in ponies sensitive to the strange reality.

Despite the hard times for the adults, their worries sailed over the innocent heads of their children. So, it was no surprise that two young fillies ran off into the woods in pursuit of adventure. The magenta and lemon coloured foals played a game of tag as the light of the sun shone through the canopy. In the midst of their merriment, the laughing ponies had not noticed they had strayed far beyond their normal playing grounds until they were impossibly lost in the forest.

"Oh great," spoke the older, yellow Earth pony. "Thanks for getting us lost, featherbrain!"

"I did not!" squeaked the young Pegasus, "You're the one who decided to go out further than Fort Rusty. 'Oh, won't it be fun!?' you said!" However, as they argued, they ventured out even further, the sunlight faded as the canopy became thicker, blocking out most of the light. The yellow pony shivered as a blanket of cold suddenly draped over her body. Her eyes darted around in the flash of twilight, noticing the trees became more gnarled and sinister as they went.

"I... I don't like this..." the elder shivered. "I think... we might be in *Everfree* by now." The younger filly shivered and nervously clung to the flank of the elder. All around them, a haze of darkness developed, the trees beginning to ooze sticky, black, unnatural gunk. It was as if the world itself had turned dark when the ground began to succumb as well.

"Children!" cried a young, masculine voice from beside them. An adult earth pony stallion approached the duo of startled fillies, who jumped in fright and backed into a tree, staining their flanks on the muck. He was a pony of normal height, sporting a black coat, mane and vivid emerald green eyes which coldly gleamed with worry at their plight. "What are you doing so deep in the woods unescorted? You are no more than a quarter mile from the Everfree here!"

"We're so sorry!" the two chimed before embracing the stranger. He looked taken aback, but he smiled at them nonetheless, almost like a father.

"Now, now, there is no need to worry," he soothed in his distinct Trottingham accent, "I am sure your parents will be relieved just to see your bright, smiling faces once more." He picked his head up and surveyed the dark and dripping surroundings. "Although, I am a little curious about something: have you children seen a pony in here? Well, it is not really a pony, but it looks like one."

They both shook their heads, the adorable confusion in their eyes more than enough to convince the stallion of how innocent they really were. It was almost enough for him to salivate over. "Come along. Let us depart from this evil place." True to his word, the enigmatic grown-up lead the two

foals away from the scary black gunk and back towards the light of the setting sun.

Although, no matter how far they trekked away from the sludge, the black pony continued to track it along, long after the two stopped leaving a trace. Somehow, despite leaving the scary place, the cold continued to press against their bodies, the steam of breath escaping their muzzles as they breathed. The young ponies looked to each other before the younger, magenta Pegasus found the courage to speak up. "Mister? Um... thank you for leading us away from the creepy place, but... we can find our way from here. I recognize that tree."

"Good," the stallion replied, sending chills up the two fillies spines. While his voice still had the soothing Trottingham accent, it had become scary: not louder than a whisper in volume but carried more power and authority than even the Princess. The pony turned on them, looking them square in the eyes. Those brilliant emeralds had turned from cold and worried to simply cold in a heartbeat, and even glowed slightly in the shade. Both the young fillies could not help but have visions of horrible things pass before their eyes.

"Tell me, children, do you know the origins of Nightmare Night?" The two ponies predictably nodded their heads, eyes still transfixed on his. "No, you **do not!**" His voice had suddenly become deeper when he shouted, followed by a small, feral growl that caused the two to shriek and shiver in their hooves. "Nightmare Night is not for Nightmare Moon, as the lore tells. It is for a greater being who **made** her what she was! Over the years, the tale became perverted as the lie took hold over fact.

"You see, children, long ago there existed a spirit called simply 'Nightmare.' He is the creature that brings out the worst in ponies and thrives on the inner darkness in the heart of ponykind. And he has an appetite for foals, in particular. Nightmare Night used to be the one night of the year he could come to the world of the living and demand the sacrifice of one foal from each village, if they did not supply enough of their own food." His mane and tail stood on-end, eventually becoming naught but black flame given shape, yet the terrified foals stood still: just like always. He smiled, revealing rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth, like those of a shark, that gleamed in the sunlight and into their eyes as his muzzle jutted out to become more canine in shape.

"**But**, there is one thing I like about your perversion of **my** holiday. It is a simple rhyme, which I find awfully fitting. 'Nightmare Night, what a fright... give me something sweet **TO BITE!**'" A deep, ferocious roar came from his mouth as he dove upon the two stunned fillies.

A long way away, at the very edge of the Whitetail wood, a couple of bloodcurdling screams echoed through the nearby village, directing the search party in the direction of the missing foals. "Oh, sweet Celestia! No!" cried one of the parents when they arrived in the clearing. Tears stained the cheeks of everypony around as they found the pair of ravaged bodies, so close to home, yet so far.

Out of the corner of one pony's vision, they noticed a black earth pony stallion with emerald eyes watching from the sidelines. Eventually, the others took notice as well, staring at him with hatred and distrust as he was the sole stranger at the scene of the crime. He smiled at them, grinning with his bloodied teeth. Several of the more brave stallions brandished weapons and charged, only for him to reform in another spot in the clearing from the shadow of a tree.

"Tell the world!" he ordered the crowd. "Tell the world that I, Nightmare, am free once more to come and go as I please! Try to lock up your loved ones if you want. I will find them, eventually. Oh, and thank you all kindly for the delicious snack. I will remember your pitiful village, come next Nightmare Night!" With a cruel laugh, the pony evaporated into black mist, leaving them to grieve over their foals.

It was good to be back.

Chapter 13

Before Creation

Silence, except for the sound of her breathing, filled the air of the room she sat in that evening. At least, she thought it was evening; it was really hard to tell when one had been underground for so long. No, it was just another distraction separating her from inner peace. Dinky Hooves sat alone in the dark solitude of her office, attempting to meditate away some of the stress she had been feeling.

Thankfully, by some stroke of dumb luck, Twilight had managed to escape from the fortress of Wyvern Castle, albeit with the aid of former General Trixie and her old assistant Spike. How the two ever managed to cooperate was beyond her, but the good news was overshadowed when they found out she had been to see Applejack on her home turf. If she was reluctant to return to them before, now it was pretty much out of the question.

Of course, there was always the option of force. Maybe hold her library for ransom and threaten to burn her home to the ground to coax her into cooperation? *Argh! More distractions!* Dinky pressed her head to her desk and quietly groaned in frustration. She could not seem to focus on anything for more than a few minutes during the past few days, and she suspected she knew why.

Sweetie Belle had become far more vocal and vicious about being left out of the loop. It was becoming apparent to the others too that a tipping point had been reached and that they either had to dispose of their friend, or call off the operation and trust in the sister of a well-known traitor. Naturally, they could not do the latter, but she had been their friend once, so feelings would make the task hundreds of times harder than killing a run-of-the-mill spy.

Just when she thought she could not become any more distracted, a series of grunts and loud noises sounded from outside her door, prompting a sigh from the blonde unicorn. "What is it now?" Before she could get up to investigate, the door burst open, the shape of a unicorn silhouetted

against the blinding light from the hall. Not a second later, the door shut again, plunging the room into blackness.

"I know," spoke the mare in the darkness. "I know all about 'Operation Blackout,' Dinky." The lights suddenly flickered on to confirm her suspicions, the overgrown marshmallow standing right in front of her with a sour expression on her face and a visible chip on her shoulder. "I'm not angry, just disappointed in the lot of you. Didn't all those years we spent together mean anything? Aren't you my friends anymore?"

Her pistol was in a drawer of her desk: it would be so easy to pull it out and end her right then and there. A clean kill in self-defence: for the pressures of war made her assailant snap. It would be the perfect explanation: it would leave her faultless and remove a real threat to their operation. Still, even a snake like her deserved the truth. "We intercepted a letter that you sent to your older sister Rarity who is now directly employed by the queen. You are a royalist traitor, and that is why we are keeping you in the dark!"

"When was this letter sent, Dinky?" Sweetie Belle asked in genuine surprise.

"About two years ago. We cracked your code and figured out how you were feeding her information about our operations!"

Her jaw hung agape, obviously distraught over being found out so easily. "Have you intercepted any letters after that one?" She asked, turning more aghast when Dinky shook her head in reply. "That was the only letter I ever sent! If you were half as good at going through my mail as you are at infiltration, you'd KNOW I never got a reply, nor did I ever send any more! Furthermore, if you actually read it, and not just between the lines, you'd see it was my first attempt to talk to her! I... I missed her, and I still do!"

Tears began to slip from her eyes as she sobbed openly before Dinky, which was surprising because they all rarely cried anymore. Either Sweetie Belle was a talented actress, or she was being genuine. The blonde unicorn did not know which possibility disturbed her more.

"Just because you didn't send any more letters doesn't mean you haven't met, or found some other, more secure method of communication. Don't

take us for foals, Sweetie. The queen has always made that mistake, and we're about to bite her in the flank for it! Why not tell THAT to your darling older sister the next time you have a chat?"

"I wouldn't lie to you, Dinky, or to any of our friends!" Sweetie sobbed, "It hurts that you would think I would ever betray you." A soft gasp escaped the blonde unicorn's mouth as her white counterpart's neck began to glow red! She could not sense any magical build up coming from either of them, but the feeling was uncanny. It was as if they were in **her** presence again! It was almost like...

"Loyalty," Dinky whispered as a chill ran down her spine. When Rainbow Dash died, the Element of Loyalty needed a new bearer, but never in a million years did Dinky think it would go to the one pony she suspected of being a traitor the most. Suddenly, she felt very dirty about her actions and her plans. "Sweetie... I can't say that I'm sorry for Operation Blackout. We did what we had to do, and I'm sure you understand, but... as a friend... I'm sorry for treating you so badly all this time."

"It's okay, Dinky. I would have done the same," Sweetie replied, placing a hoof on her friend's side.

"I'll end Operation Blackout, but... I can't say I trust you. Not completely. So, from this moment on, you are on probation, okay?" The shadow of tears built on the edges of her eyes, and not just because of the revelation that she was the new Element of Loyalty. She had been truly ready to murder her friend based on one miscommunication! How could she ever call herself a true friend to anypony anymore?

"Thank you for being candid with me, Dinky. I really appreciate it. I'll do my best to earn back your trust and the trust of the others. Just please... don't leave me in the dark like that ever again. It hurt a lot, thinking we weren't friends anymore." The alabaster mare left her room to leave her alone with her thoughts. Who was she to force her to become the sacrifice? How could she have put one of her best friends through the hell of not knowing why they did not trust her?

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In the span of two days, they had traveled from the centre of a boiler into

the depths of an icebox as cold as any mid-winter's night. Even though they were relatively low in the mountain range, snow smacked against their faces as the wind carried it down from the endless white void above. Although the shops in Appleloosa had most of what they needed, parkas were predictably not among their inventory.

Twilight shivered as a breath of cold wind played across her coat and pierced through her skin. Although she did not show it, she was sure that Trixie was just as cold as she was. Either out of practice, or stubborn refusal, she marched on ahead with the map aloft in a soft glow of light blue magic without so much as a quiver at the sudden icy gust. The same could be said for the small dragon taking up the rear, but she doubted he could even really feel the cold with those thick scales. In a small way, she envied him in that moment.

She could not let her mind wander for long, however, as a sharp drop off the side of a cliff lay immediately to her left. Although not as narrow as the path to the tunnel, it was still nerve-wracking to climb. She had maybe a pony length on either side of her as room for error and she needed every inch with the driving wind and blinding snow. Because of that, the going was slow through the chest-high snowdrifts.

"Are we almost there?" Twilight half shouted over the whistling wind.

"Yes! I can see the path widen just a little bit ahead!" Trixie called back, using the wind to aid her voice. The valley they traveled above was not more than a large chasm, serving to funnel the wind and amplify the intensity. Once they got clear, the lavender pony had no doubt that things would warm up and become far more bearable. Of course, even though the clouds obscured it, she could tell the sun was beginning to set, meaning they would need to set up camp for the night.

The clearing was not more than a semi-circular, flat ledge in the middle of the path. Of course, without the driving wind, the snow fell gracefully to the ground, distributed evenly along the clearing. Using their magic, the two unicorns moved a sizable amount of snow off of the ledge so they could properly set up camp. While Trixie set up their tents, Twilight got to work conjuring a magical fire since they did not carry off any wood with them during the chaos and confusion of the battle. This was a better method anyway: the fire would be smokeless, not go out in the middle of the night,

and keep the snow at bay.

Sighing in relief once her task was complete, she lay down in front of the fire and took a rare moment to relax. Although her magic had come back to her fully, she could not help but notice it was missing some warmth and power behind it. She had a sneaking suspicion it had to do with the state of her friends, and how she could not sense their elements within them.

Shortly after nightfall and a quick dinner, Twilight felt the exertion of the day catch up with her, robbing her of any energy she had left. Rather than sit around the fire and entertain each other, she quietly excused herself and went into her tent. Trixie and Spike had decided to give her a separate tent to respect her want for privacy as well as to double the odds an infiltrator would not find her inside. She was not sure she liked the idea of being part of a shell game, but she did not care enough to complain.

Crossing the threshold of the enchanted heat of the tent, the mare suddenly felt a hundred times drowsier than she did out in the cold of the Equestrian night. After zipping the flaps closed in a flash of purple-blue magic, she circled around a large sack of a pillow before curling up in a tight ball. Although it was uncomfortable for her, it made her feel safer than any other sleeping position as of late. Her mind still half expected cold metal to cut into her chest to stop her sleep. Thankfully, she was so exhausted that she drifted off to sleep the moment she shut her eyes.

As Trixie and Spike chatted into the night, they did not notice the yellow shape stalk around just outside of their camp. Twilight Sparkle was nowhere to be seen, so she had to be in one of the tents towards the back of the ledge. Although he was cold and hungry from the long journey, Caramel did not dare advance yet. Too many ponies (as well as his honour) were depending on his mission's success.

So, he waited quietly, pressing his body as deep into the snow as he dared while keeping his line of sight unobstructed. When one has a yellow coat, stealth in the snow is nothing short of miraculous. Thankfully, they were not on high alert, or he would have been spotted moments ago. Eventually, the mare and young dragon tired of their unknown discussion and retired for the night, leaving the fire to burn. They were either foolish to do so, or it was a magical flame, so there would be no danger.

Yet, he remained still and quiet, even as they zipped their tent shut and extinguished the light within. Inside his head, he slowly counted to thirty-six hundred to approximate an hour, before he would move in. Puffs of steaming breath came from his muzzle while he waited, going over at least a dozen different scenarios in his head, each more horrible and unlikely than the last, until he ventured into the realm of impossibility. By then, the hour was up.

Twilight tossed and turned on top of the pillow, moaning and calling out softly as her eyes streamed tears. Shadowy figures stood around her, chuckling in vile contempt for her well being. *"Let's see how she reacts to her horn being cut off. Just a bit though, we wouldn't want to damage our weapon!"* one of them sneered. She shivered and struggled against invisible bounds, terrified out of her mind. "No, please... no! St-stay away! Celestia, please... save me!" the mare muttered in her sleep.

Suddenly, she bolted upright, wide awake, and looked around the tent wildly as cold sweat dripped down her coat. Taking several deep breaths she focused her magic into a ball of light at the tip of her horn and quickly looked around her tent. After a quick scan, she saw nothing out of the usual. Just a yellow stallion peeking his head in the tent. "Aah!!" Twilight cried out in surprise as the canary pony jumped her.

Trixie slowly roused to the sound of grunts and moans of effort coming from nearby. For a quick moment, she imagined she was in a seedy motel, until she turned to find the small dragon in the tent with her. "Spike!" she cried out in realization, prodding him sharply. The magician did not bother to see if her efforts were successful when she stuck her head out of her tent in time to see a yellow shape fly out the flaps of her sister's tent.

For a quick second, she thought that it was Fluttershy who had come to stalk them until the stallion stood and shook the snow off of him, sporting a black eye where a well-placed hoof made contact. Despite the darkness, she could tell it was Caramel, one of Applejack's right-hoof lieutenants. "So, I see you want to take this the hard way, hmm?" the former farmer coughed. Trixie felt her legs tense and charged her horn, ready to capitalize on his lapse of concentration and take him out.

Twilight stepped out of the tent and into the cold, shivering a little as the sweat still in her coat met the chilled air. "Wait a minute..." she paused.

"You're Caramel, aren't you?"

"Glad to see that you remember me, Twilight," he smirked to himself for some unknown reason.

"Do we really have to do this? I am **not** going back to Applejack. I am tired of being captured and exploited. If she wants me, tell her that **she** can come to **me** and explain why I should bother to agree with her foolish ideals."

"Sorry, Miss Sparkle," he said flatly. "I am no pony's messenger boy. I'm a **delivery** boy!" Trixie tried not to laugh at his blind devoutness, or the extremely cliché line he just spouted, but she was not afforded the time. The colt bolted forward as fast as his hooves could carry him, making her react as she charged up a spell to stop him in his tracks. However, it was a futile effort as her sister unleashed a spell of her own: a gust of wind erupting in front of her, taking the new layer of snow with it.

Caramel grunted in pain as the shockwave hit him, sending him flying into the air and back a good three meters, before the lower part of his body slipped over the edge. Twilight gasped at the narrow escape from death and ran forward with reckless abandon for her own safety, leaving Trixie astonished. Not only had she just attacked him, but now she was rushing to his aid just after he assaulted her!

The lavender pony skidded to a stop just short of the edge and grabbed onto the yellow stallion with her hooves. She groaned as she felt them both slip across the slippery slope from the weight. "Help me!" he cried out, struggling and scared, helping to accelerate their combined demise.

"H-hold on!" the mare stuttered. "Let me get a better grip!" She focused as much as she could in her panicked state and grabbed onto his tail with her magic, then let the stallion go, leaving him floating in mid-air. However, her heart leapt in her chest as a rip echoed through the valley. The colt cried out as he plummeted down the cliff and impacted upon the jagged rocks with a sick crunch.

Twilight felt numb all over her body, the strands of hair gripped by her magic released to gently float away, played with by the cold and merciless winds. Cold rippled across her body at the sight of what she had just done,

chilling her to the bone. She was responsible. It had worked on Rainbow Dash; why did it not work with him? It was all her fault: none of this would have happened had she not fought back. She had killed him. Twilight Sparkle had killed a pony and used her magic in anger. It took all her strength not to throw up.

Trixie trotted up beside her and sat in the snow by the cliff's ledge, the purple mare set in shock. "Wow," she breathed. "I didn't know you knew any battle magic! Here I thought you were strictly one of those studies-only fuddy-duddies! Either way, that was a nice, clean kill right there! Anypony coming along will think he simply slipped off the cliff. Great job, sister!" With a slap of the hoof on her flank, she suddenly seemed to come to her senses, bolting for the tent while sobbing. "...was it something I said?"

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A flash of sparks and clash of blades was all that she could discern over the flurry of colour and the wisp of air passing her ear. Twilight landed on her hooves just in time to counter the next blow of her assailant before letting loose a torrent of pressurized air at the mass of white. The other pony landed on the other side of a massive grey room, a sword of gilded gold clenched in her teeth, as her body exuded a powerful aura unlike any the purple pony had ever felt before.

A blast of cannon fire echoed through the room as the other mare's spell rocketed forward: a literal wall of yellow flames. Timing her magic carefully, the student stomped a hoof into the ground, causing a wall of grey rock to jut out in front of her. Chunks of burning rock flew past when the spell made contact with the wall of solid rock, a couple of dull shards just grazing the sides of her face.

"That is enough," spoke her opponent as the dust cleared. Princess Celestia walked forward as the magical blade vanished from existence, her alabaster coat absent even a slight smudge. Meanwhile, Twilight had become dusty and sweaty from the ordeal of keeping up with the living goddess. "I am proud to say you have improved by leaps and bounds since we started your self-defence training, Twilight."

"Thank you, Princess Celestia," the young mare chirped as she followed her teacher out of the training room. Although hesitant when they began six

years previous, Twilight had to admit that she liked spending the extra time with her mentor, even if they never really talked during their spars or sessions of meditation. It was worth all the pain of pushing her muscles to the limit, but she still preferred learning about magic through her books.

The door leading into the training room slammed shut behind the two ponies before magically fading back into the smooth, cool marble of the unassuming hall of the castle. As usual, when they finished the combat magic session, they retired to the Princess's suite for a cup of warm tea and light conversation. Hopefully, a bath would be in the cards for the purple mare, as a trail of smoky debris lay in her wake.

"So, how have your classes been going, my most faithful student?" The princess asked in a bid to get the conversation rolling.

"They're going well, Princess," Twilight smiled before recounting her latest news and gossip. Celestia smiled back and gave her student her rare undivided attention. The movement of time's hoof had always been cruel for her, but seeing the golem she crafted from clay grow before her eyes was something else entirely. Where she cared for the coming and going of her servants, she found herself truly dreading the loss of Twilight. Yet when she first had arrived, all she saw of the precious filly walking beside her was a tool waiting to be used and then discarded after it had served its purpose.

How could she have ever been so heartless?

With a casual flick of her powerful magic, the door to her suite yielded before her. "Perhaps you would like to take a moment to refresh yourself, Twilight?" the powerful alicorn asked. "I need to put the tea on anyway, so it will be a few minutes."

"Oh, yes please, Princess," Twilight replied with a smile before trotting through the door leading into the monarch's personal bathroom. Celestia brought over a cushion and fluffed it before placing her royal flank on the soft velvet. Why could she not see past the crown and simply call her 'Celestia' in private? She had asked for such on a number of occasions, but the awkward mare refused her time and again. Perhaps, she figured, it would be for the best if she never learned that she was her mother.

After a couple of minutes, the efficient unicorn stepped out of the bathroom, giving her wet mane a good brushing as she sat opposite of the princess. The kettle sat above the fireplace behind the snowy princess, slowly being brought to a boil as her ever-present smile radiated in the room, bringing Twilight to peace of mind. Although she would never say it, she could spend an eternity alone with the princess and felt safer than she ever had in her life, despite the looming reality that, if she ever wished, she could crush her like a bug underhoof.

"Twilight?" The princess started once more.

"Yes, Princess Celestia?"

"I have been doing some thinking and I have noticed that you are now of age," she replied, gaining a slight nod from her student. "I also know how you are not a big fan of the more... rigorous aspects of your training. So, should you wish to, we can say that your combat magic lessons have concluded. I have taught you all I can, but should you wish to continue, then I would be happy to keep doing this. Alas, the ball is in your court, Twilight."

To her credit, the lavender pony mulled the decision over for a good length of time; long enough for the kettle to boil and the tea to be poured into her cup. Just as the Princess was about to re-start the conversation, she spoke up. "With... all due respect, your majesty, I would rather not. I mean, I am grateful for all the extra instruction and time with you, but... I would feel more comfortable with my books in regards for this vein of magic, should I retain interest."

"Of course," Celestia nodded her head with a smile. Although she was a little disappointed she wanted to spend more time with her books, she had to respect her decision as a fully grown (if not fully mature) mare. "But it would be in both our interests if I were to remind you of what I said during that first day of training, Twilight. I would be greatly disappointed if word ever came to me of you using the skills I have taught you in anger and not self-defence as intended."

"Oh, no," Twilight gasped. "I would never DREAM of using any of that magic just because I was angry! A pony could be hurt, or even worse!"

"Well then, with that bit of conversation over and done with," the princess continued. "Please, go on about that book you were reading last week." With a smile, the young pony dove back into her story, and how fascinating she found the content of the text on Starswirl the Bearded. Although, she would never know just how much she disappointed the princess; not for want of teaching her combat magic, but for want of time to spend with the pony she considered to be most precious in the world.

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The ever-present howl of the wind and blinding snow finally subsided the moment she escaped the jaws of the narrow mountain pass. Most ponies would find the noise annoying and disorienting at worst. She, however, found it near deafening as she needed to rely more on the sounds to guide her through the whiteout conditions. *Some days, this job just isn't worth it*, Vinyl Scratch thought to herself as her damaged eyes adjusted to the new weather. *Today, I think, is one of those days!*

With a rough shake of her body, a heavy blanket of snow fell off her coat and onto the ground. She could feel the ice in her mane with every step as it would impact the side of her head. Of course, she did not really mind, since she preferred the cool embrace of winter over the sticky heat of summer, since one could always add more layers if they needed to. Even if she did care about the weather, it would not matter in the slightest to the white unicorn, for her prey was within her grasp once again.

Although it was hard to make out against the endless field of white, Vinyl could feel the level of the snow drop sharply, indicating there was once a campsite there, and not too long ago either! Yet, as she felt around, the snow moved in interesting ways. In one spot, it was as if a sudden and powerful gust of wind had ripped across the platform, but with a point of origin to it: a struggle, or scuffle. In-fighting or another hunter after her prize presented themselves as possibilities immediately.

If she had been captured yet again, then Vinyl needed to know what she was dealing with. *Stars help me if it was Pinkamena*, the former DJ shuddered. Using every ounce of her tracking skill, she noted hurried hoof prints in the snow that lead right to the edge of the outcropping. Looking down, even she could see the outline of a snow-covered body, although the large pool of blood helped.

Her imagination quickly filled in the blanks. It was a full-grown stallion, maybe about thirty years of age with a yellow coat and brown mane: it could only be Caramel of the Apple Clan. From the snow levels at the edge, she could tell that one of them, Sparkle, no doubt, had rushed forward in order to save him from the fatal fall. The whole scene looked like a rather unfortunate accident.

Vinyl smirked as the challenge finally made itself known. "It looks like Tricky Trixie has struck again," she spoke to herself. "I had a feeling she was hiding something. Ah well, I kind of expected it: siblings and all. Still a little disappointed she lied to me. Then again, serial killers aren't known for being honest."

It was no secret to anypony that had met her that "The Great and Powerful" Trixie had an ego second only to the queen and a temper about as short as a field cricket. What nopony dreamed, however, is that the mare would be more than capable of murder. Then again, she was a former general of the Crusaders, so she was well-versed in killing ponies stealthily. Her version of stealth, however, amounted to making the murder look like a perfect accident.

In the beginning, Vinyl thought of her as no more than a vicious rebel rogue who deserved nothing more than the hangmare's noose for her crimes. But, as she hunted the magician down, she came to realize that Trixie always gave her targets a fair opportunity to run or to fight back; they were just rarely successful at it since her talent was illusionary magic. In that sense of honour, they found some kinship and became reluctant to do harm to the other over time.

Eventually, it culminated into one last epic battle on a mountainside. They both threw their most powerful spells at each other, but Trixie earned the upper hoof and knocked her back, almost over the ledge. When she approached, Vinyl was sure she was going to push her off, but instead the blue mare offered her hoof. That was when the bounty hunter found out the connection between all of her victims: they either wronged her or wronged others and got away with it.

That was when she tabled her proposal to the mare: leave Equestria and never come back under assumption of being killed, or be taken in to face

the consequences of her actions. The rest, as they say, is history. Vinyl escorted her out of the country, and took some hairs from her tail as evidence to claim her demise. In hindsight, it was probably a bad idea, but she did not care for anything but the money for the bounty.

Unfortunately, she could not claim the same bounty twice, so trying to kill Trixie would be a waste of her time, especially when the much greater prize of Twilight Sparkle sat just in front of her muzzle. With that bounty, she could finally stop and pay for that operation regardless of the state of the nation! Who would argue with that much cash?

"Another rookie bites the dust," Vinyl spoke down to the corpse as the wind ruffled her two-tone blue mane. With a quick nod of respect, she decided it would be wise not to linger any longer and returned to the trail. Looking to the path ahead (at least she hoped so), the former DJ broke into a light canter through the shallow layer of snow. With every second she delayed, the ultimate payday moved further away.

Thankfully for her, the name and explicit warning of her magical prowess kept ponies from pursuing her bounty. For the moment, Vinyl Scratch was the only mare foolish enough to actively chase her, although she had no doubts that any other pony would be happy to sell her up river if they were given the chance. In fact, from what she heard, a former member of the Crusaders had done just that. Thankfully, she was just as slick as Tricky Trixie herself.

All she needed now was a lucky break.

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There were two major things playing on her mind as she climbed the steep hill just before the mountain. Less than a day ago, she had used her magic in an act of self-defence and accidentally killed her assailant. The second and most distressing of them all was the fact that she did not feel anything because of it. A pony was dead by her own hoof, yet she did not even feel sad. Yes, she cried like a filly at first, but... all things considered, it was incredibly brief.

Was the weight of this dark and twisted world turning her heart into ice, or did she simply not care anymore because it already had? Twilight did not

know the answer to that question, nor did she think she ever would. She was far too tired and weary to really give it any sort of thought. Perhaps that is why she did not feel anything over Caramel's death: she was just too emotionally exhausted to give a buck anymore.

Trixie, meanwhile, welcomed this change in attitude from her older sister. Her naïveté and innocence were really beginning to grate at her when such attitudes were liable to get a pony killed in their world. It was as far from perfect as one could imagine, but they had to make do with what they had and the purple mare was on the brink of realizing that her ideals were no longer practical. Still, she too yearned for the peace their nation once enjoyed.

Reaching the top of the hill, the azure mare, her sister and their young draconian charge took a breather. Sitting before them was a towering mass of rock that pierced through the layer of clouds overhead, as if vanishing from the world entirely. "That's it," Twilight spoke after regaining her breath. "That's Mount Vicious! I remember it from my dream!"

"Well, that's nice, but..." Trixie trailed. "I don't see a way to get up there, do YOU?"

"Um... we could try walking around the base. There might be a way up around the back," Spike suggested.

"Sounds like a plan to me. What do you think, Trixie?"

The Great and Powerful Trixie sighed, unable to think of a better way to climb the mountain. "Sure, why not?" she shrugged before continuing down the other side of the hill. Through the whole ordeal, the baby dragon had kept to himself out of shame over his betrayal. Not that Trixie was complaining, since in the past he had a habit of being whiny when it came to just about anything that was not eating or sleeping.

Mount Vicious was a tall, jagged hunk of grey rock that called itself a mountain. Reaching for the Equestrian sky, it, along with the other mountains in the region, made the winds unpredictable and thus flying treacherous, if not deadly. The steep slope of the range made climbing it straight impossible; therefore, the monastery at the top needed some sort of path to allow access.

Thankfully, the path up the face of the mountain was not difficult to locate. In fact, a wooden arch painted in faded shades of red, green and gold sat at the beginning of the sloping walkway. From there, the walk up was extremely easy and routine, save for the sections of collapsed stone, where the path would narrow so much the ponies needed to squeeze against the wall of solid stone and slip across the yawning gaps.

"This path sure is weathered, isn't it?" Twilight spoke over the mounting winds swirling around the mountain. The clouds were not more than a few hundred hooves above their heads as the light of day began to fade. She hoped they could make it to the top before nightfall, or else it would be a harrowing night on the face of the cliff.

"No kidding," Trixie called back as she, typically, took the lead of the group, with Twilight in the middle and Spike bringing up the rear, absent their owl friend. According to the dragon, Owlowiscious had decided to head back to Ponyville, since he knew he could not stand the cold of the mountains. Still, it was of little consequence to the two mares, for they needed to live in the moment if they were to make it up to the monastery.

However, a few short minutes later, Trixie suddenly stopped dead and almost fell over the cliff when Twilight ran into her rear end while lost in a sea of thought. "Watch it, you dolt!" the magician scolded.

"Sorry, Trixie," the elder apologized with a blush. "What happened to the trail?" Unlike any of the other harrowing passages before it, the trail suddenly vanished from existence, creating a sheer and deadly drop to the path below. What stuck the purple pony as odd, however, was the fact that the drop looked as if it was carved out intentionally.

"Well, if Trixie knew, she would have told you!" the blue mare snapped back. Taking a deep breath, she calmed herself down before speaking again. "It's probably some sort of test, since Trixie can sense a spell at work. It's very old and faint, but definitely an illusion of some sort. Give her a minute to see if she can dispel it." Closing her eyes in concentration, the blue mare reached out and felt the spell with her magic. After a couple short minutes of working her magic, the illusion dispelled.

Before their eyes, a set of stairs appeared before the group. Alas, it was

not a set of stairs in the conventional sense, but one made of clouds. Trixie stepped forward and slowly put her hoof to the surface, only for it to go through effortlessly. "Perfect. Unless one of us grows wings, we're stuck!" Trixie fumed.

Twilight, meanwhile, pondered the puzzle before her. "Hmm..." *What did Princess Celestia say about the place in the dream? Nothing about any sort of test, nor do I recall any stairs made of clouds before entering the build-wait a second!* "Trixie?" she voiced. "I think I know how to get up the mountain! Did you ever hear about the Best Young Fliers Competition from Rainbow Dash?"

"Of course," the blue mare sighed. "She would never shut up about how she saved Rarity and three members of the Wonderbolts while pulling off a Sonic Rainboom simultaneously. Why do you ask?"

"Well... I just remembered the Cloudwalker Spell I used on myself and the others to watch her!" Charging up her horn, a bright flash enveloped the two mares and baby dragon. "Try stepping on it now." Looking at the set of cloud stairs with some trepidation, Trixie gingerly stretched her hoof over the precipice and pushed down. Instead of falling through, the hoof made contact with the springy cloud as if it belonged to a Pegasus! Excited, she boldly left solid earth and put her full weight on the clouds.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie has to admit that your versatility in magic is finally paying off on her little adventure. Come, sister, let us not delay any longer!" With a smile and silent giggle at her enthusiasm, the purple mare followed her up the stairs and to the top of the imposing mountain.

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"Finally!" Trixie breathed as they reached the top of the stairs, her legs buckling unceremoniously to the ground at her exertion. They had to have climbed over a thousand hooves in the space of an hour in their rush to beat nightfall. But, for better or for worse, they had managed it as the orange orb that was the sun sank below the exposed horizon over the oppressive sea of clouds below.

The air was noticeably thinner and the temperature cooler than at the base, meaning they had to take a moment to rest and acclimatize. Yet,

when Twilight stepped off the final cloud step, she could not contain her excitement, for the building was just a quick trot away, exactly as it was in her dream. The building was painted in vivid and gaudy shades of red, green, gold, and blue, all worn in places to reveal the wood underneath.

"We're here, we're here, we're here!" Twilight cheered, finding the strength to jump for joy around the worn-out and irritated magician. She growled in contempt, but the purple mare ignored it and trotted over to the doors. "Come on, Trixie! We can rest inside. Besides, you'll get hypothermia if you stay out there!" Seeing her point, Trixie pushed herself out of the blanket of snow and walked over to the aging wooden doors to her sister and Spike, who had overtaken her.

Inside the building, however, was a little different then she remembered. Sure, there was the strange pit of sand and paintings with text in a foreign language, but there was also a large painting on the wall leading in. It depicted a large clock tower, eerily reminiscent to the lavender scholar, but in front of it was engraved an enigmatic figure, as if it were singing. It was a strange creature, comprised of many parts: the head of a pony, an eagle claw, a lion's paw, bat wings, Pegasus wings, and two different kind of horns.

"What IS that thing?" Trixie spat, pressing her face towards the painting. "It looks like it got hit with the ENTIRE ugly tree!"

"Well, you're no looker either, oh Great and Powerful Trixie!" the image smiled. The azure mare jumped back, hairs on end as the phantom cackled and disappeared in a flash of light from the painting. Twilight charged her horn with an attack, just in case the creature was hostile. *"Oh, I've done that three hundred and seven times and it NEVER gets old,"* the voice continued as it appeared in one of the foreign landscapes.

"N-no pony mocks The Great and Powerful Trixie!" The magician fumed as she charged her horn as well.

"Well, lucky for you, I AM nopony. So, by that means, I can mock you as long as I wish with no recourse! Choose your words wisely, next time, Trixie!" The strange painted creature leaned on the mountain and inspected his lion's paw for dirt as her spoke, disinterested in the charge of magic from the two admirable unicorns. *"Oh, but DO forgive my manners,*

your highness. Allow me to introduce myself!"

In another flash, the creature appeared before the two mares, chuckling all the while as apparel appeared on his body. On his lion's arm, he wore at least seven watches, all of which spun at different rates. In his eagle's claw, he summoned a staff with a top of spinning and clicking gears. Finally, on his head, a simple, black monocle appeared over his smaller eye to magnify the iris to a roughly proportional size. "My name is Chronus, Spirit of Time and Guardian of the Regenes Machine! I hope we are still well-met, Princess Twilight," he spoke with a bow.

She faltered, growing flush in colour as the charge in her horn dropped. Twilight had suspected the instant he called Trixie by name, but now she was certain. "You... you're a Draconequus!" She had only read about them in her books, but they were an elder race, older than ponies: the first creatures to walk the Earth after the Creators themselves! They were godly beings more ancient than anything, and she had one bowing to HER!

"Perceptive, as always," Chronus smirked as he raised his head. With a glance at his wrist, a mild look of panic came over him. "I am sorry to rush things, but I am afraid we are running late, your majesty. If you will kindly follow me, I will show you in." With another flash, he appeared in front of the doors leading further in, which opened immediately to his presence.

Dazed, the trio of travelers followed, neither quite able to speak before the enigmatic elder god. As with the dream, they turned sharply after the doors and descended down a spiral staircase, Chronus speaking as they went. "It's quite refreshing to have company for once. They never stay long, and it's always a long time between visits. In fact, the next visitor isn't due for another three hundred years. I keep to myself, mostly, and pursue my hobbies like meditation and painting! Of course, you don't care, and I realize that I am being irrelevant like your friend Pinkie, so I will stop yammering."

After descending to the hall at the bottom of the stairs, the trio walked down its length as the Draconequus whimsically jumped from carving to carving, manipulating it to get them to, Twilight figured, lighten up. "So, you're not the one Princess Celestia sent me to see?" she asked when they came upon the Mithril Door.

"I daresay, no," he replied with a smile as he reappeared in front of them. "My Master is the one she wishes you to meet. Surely, a pony as perceptive and intelligent as you can piece it all together!" With that, he took his staff in hand and inserted the mess of clockwork into a small hole in the centre of the door. Gears groaned and clicked with age, the two halves separating with a great thud before sliding gracefully into the walls, revealing the chamber beyond.

However, as the three took a step forward, Chronus raised his hand to stop them. "My apologies, but only one of you may enter. It is Master's policy and since it is Twilight who needs to see Him, only she may pass these doors. I am sorry if this is an inconvenience, but the protection circle is only big enough for one and anything but a dragon, elevated Alicorn or Draconequs will die in his presence."

"Oh... okay," Twilight replied sheepishly. "But if something goes wrong, and I start screaming, I want Spike to come in after me."

"You can count on me, Twilight!" the young dragon replied enthusiastically, obviously eager to regain her trust. Taking a deep, bracing breath, she walked past the Spirit of Time and into the familiar chamber. Everything was blue, illuminated by magical leylines and runes on the floor, walls and ceiling of the perfectly circular room. If it were not for the light spilling in from the hall, she would barely be able to see in the dim glow.

"Stand on the dais to get the ball rolling, your majesty," Chronus called into the room. "Mind your manners and try not to be afraid. Oh, and good luck." With that, the door slammed shut, startling the mare and making her yelp in surprise as the room was plunged into semi-darkness. The clockwork of the locking door filled her ears, making her heart race. She lively stepped onto the dais, just to get the whole affair over with.

As soon as her hoof made contact, the runes and leylines of the dais turned lavender. With her full weight on the raised circle, off the centre of the room, a barrier of blue surrounded the platform and extended to the ceiling. More clockwork ticked and groaned as the platform descended. A ripple of magic flowed across the room as soon as it became flush, turning the blue and lavender into a bright gold. In the centre of the room, on the ceiling a dazzling display of arching, golden electricity filled the air before a blinding spotlight hit the centre of the room.

A ball of pure, unrefined magic gently lowered itself to the floor before all Sorrel Hells broke loose. It exploded in a blinding and fiery display that made her choke. Not from combustible gases, but from a magical force so powerful that she would have died from exposure had the barrier not been in place. It felt as if she were back in the Pool of Midnight: constricted from every possible angle. Yet, unlike the pool, she did not feel a bone-chilling cold. Rather, she felt as if her coat would combust any second from the unimaginable heat! Yet, as quickly as it came, the blinding light faded.

Twilight chanced to open her eyes and beheld something she would never forget. Standing before her was a pony wreathed in golden flames with eyes as black as the abyss. It was an alicorn stallion, tall and graceful with a crown of pure solar corona. Had she not been utterly terrified as the weight of her sins fell upon her back, she would have been in awe of the raw power and clout He produced. But she could not deny she felt the sword of judgment dangle precariously above her head.

Before her stood the Lord Creator Genesis.

With no other option before her, Twilight bowed as low as she physically could, pressing her body to the floor with all of her might with her eyes welded shut. "Oh, exalted creator of Sun and Ponykind!" she spoke with a tremble in her voice, doing her best not to show her fright.

"Do not pay me honours, for my time in this world has passed. Arise, Twilight Sparkle, and know me better," Genesis spoke, powerful, yet kind in his tone. She swiftly followed his orders, somehow managing to push her body up despite the enormous pressure. Twilight could not bear to look at him directly, so she chose for an imaginary point above his head and to the right, at a loss for words, or how to explain her situation.

"So... uh... you... the princess wanted me to see you?" The lavender pony shuffled nervously.

"Apparently so, since you stand before me. I had heard from her that you may arrive to ask something of me. Am I correct in my assumption?" She could only quickly nod her head in reply, mentally kicking herself for not having the stones to speak. **"So tell me, dear**

Twilight, why ARE you here?" Twilight took a deep breath, determined to speak with conviction and not be a cowering filly. It did not reflect well on herself to be a snivelling mess of a mare.

"I want to kill Eos."

"If that is your goal, all you need to do is impale yourself upon your own sword," he spoke with tangible disappointment on his face and in his voice.

"Ha-ha," Twilight sarcastically replied, too annoyed with this view of the murderous horse to care she was being disrespectful to a creator.

"Your sarcasm intrigues me. Only my beloved Rachana has ever been sarcastic to me. Please, explain."

"It's just..." she stalled. "It's just that everypony is telling me to accept Eos: to love her and snuggle with that damned demon! Well, I find that notion to be utter HORSEAPPLES! She's EVIL! LOOK AT THAT DESPICABLE OTHER EOS FOR THE PROOF! SHE'S **DESTROYED** EQUESTRIA!!!" There was a pause as the realization that she just yelled at him passed her waking mind, making her freeze in horror.

"I, for one, will not tell you to love and ACCEPT your goddess. I would ask you to only TOLERATE her for the time being. By my count, she HAS saved your life twice now and aided you several other times, both here and beyond the magic of the Pool. What you must know is that all ponies have a deity inside of them. But while they may be sleeping, they serve a vital function as the ponies' conscience. You are a kind, tolerant and polite mare. It only stands to reason that your Eos is as well."

"Okay, okay. I get that I have a lot of power, but... do I have to become somepony else to use it? Or, will it just drive me crazy and force me to lose my personality? I mean... I don't like killing ponies. Even if it's an accident; I feel so... so dirty. Is... is it wrong to kill at all, or is it okay under certain conditions? All I know is... is that I don't trust Eos."

Genesis pondered on her question for a couple of minutes before the way

to answer came to mind. **"You and Eos are two sides of the same coin. You might look and speak differently, but at heart you are the same being as ever. Equestria is in... a difficult position. In order to survive, you have to be ready to defend yourself and loved ones. So long as it is for either one of those, for the moment it is of no penalty to kill. Alas, we have digressed enough."**

"I agree" Twilight nodded, swiftly growing tired of that vein of conversation.

"It is not mine to judge why you want to slay Queen Eos, but in order to defeat her and restore the kingdom, you have three choices. One: Venture to Canterlot and face her now, as you are. Two: Descend unto the Sorrel Hells themselves and retrieve the Shoes of Rocinante from the jaws of the Fortress Edophious. Three: Make peace with your Eos, learn to cooperate and reunite your living friends before you face her."

"Th-thank you, Lord Genesis. I shall consider the options," she bowed deeply to the Creator as, even then, she went over the disturbing options.

"Safe travels to you, my beloved descendant," Genesis spoke softly before the spell faded, the barrier dropping as the leylines returned to glowing blue over yellow. It would be hard for her to choose, as she figured was the same with Stellar Stylus all those years ago. Still, she knew at least one option she would never go through with, for obvious reasons.