

Spark

And

To Be an Alicorn

by AVeryStrange



Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	21
Chapter 4	36
Chapter 5	50
Chapter 6	58
Chapter 7	68
Chapter 8	79
To Be An Alicorn	96

Chapter 1

Rainbow Dash lay on a cloud, head in her hooves, looking out at nothing in particular. She had to keep her gaze down to keep the sun out of her eyes, and ended up pony-watching. Nothing in particular was going on; it was early enough in the summer that the heat hadn't gotten bad, but after planting season. Ponies went about their business in the late morning, a few deciding on an early lunch while most ran errands or still worked. Nothing special at all. At least, until she saw Fluttershy rushing through town with full saddlebags. It was odd enough to see Fluttershy in such a hurry, let alone with her packs. Rainbow Dash decided to see what her longtime friend was up to and took off from her cloud. She easily caught up to her Fluttershy by flying just above the ground.

"Hey Fluttershy. What's up?" she asked, making her flight look casual next to the hurried pony.

"Twilight said it was an emergency!" Fluttershy explained. It really came out more in gasps; Fluttershy was hardly an athlete.

"Huh? Emergency? What's going on?" Rainbow Dash knew that somehow or another, Twilight managed to get herself in the middle of a lot of crazy problems - whether it was relocating dragons or grumpy ursa minors, or even the return of a psycho-goddess, something always seemed to be happening to that pony. This would certainly make her day more exciting.

Fluttershy shook her head, not sparing the breath for more of an answer. With a slight frown, Dash whisked ahead. What emergency could she have contacted Fluttershy for? If it was anything more dangerous than a mildly clogged sink, Fluttershy would probably turn back around and go hide under her bed.

Of course, Rainbow Dash made it to the library in a matter of seconds. What most of ponies considered to be "on the edge of town" to her was "not-quite-instantaneous to get to". She didn't exactly burst through the door, but she certainly didn't stop and knock. It was a library after all.

"Oh, Fluttershy, is that - oh hey Rainbow Dash!" Twilight's head popped up over a stack of luggage. "Do you need help with anything? I'm kinda busy."

"Do I - Fluttershy said there was an emergency" Rainbow Dash replied, looking around. It looked like Twilight was planning for a vacation! What kind of emergency was this? Did she need to borrow a hairbrush for her trip?

"Twilight?" Fluttershy ran in through the open door, sliding to a stop. "I'm here! Is everything okay?"

"Fluttershy..." Twilight said lightly, coming around the stack of luggage that was bigger than her. Rainbow Dash noticed Spike tying a belt around the biggest suitcase, trying to seal it closed. It looked like she was taking half the library with her.

"I'm sorry to worry you. I said there's been a bit of an emergency at the castle. Since you're both here, I'll explain. Princess Celestia told me that Princess Luna has come down with something. We're not sure what, but she's pretty ill. Princess Celestia wants me there to help take care of her sister, since she can't be there all the time."

"Why you?" Rainbow Dash asked. "You're smart, Twi, but you're no Nurse Tenderheart."

"I think it's just that...I think it's that Princess Celestia wants to be there, and it hurts that she can't. I think she wants me because I'm one of the only other ponies to know Princess Luna."

"So...why'd you need Fluttershy?" Rainbow Dash ask, nodding towards her friend. Twilight had turned away, and seemed to be counting something in her head as she gazed over her luggage.

"I don't know how long I'll be gone, and I need a house-sitter. I remember Pinkie Pie saying you two were good at it - which is surprising, actually - and I could only get a hold of Fluttershy." she finished her count and turned back to the two pegasus ponies.

"I was also hoping to get some advice from Fluttershy. Not medical advice, precisely, I have my books, but my bedside manner is...well...."

"Doesn't exist?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Yeah, that."

"Oh, I'd be happy to help. I mean, I've never cared for royalty before...unless you count

Philomena." Fluttershy responded.

"We can definitely look after the library for ya, Twi!" Rainbow Dash told her. Twilight looked relieved.

"Great, thanks. Owlowiscious is going to stay behind to help with keeping the library running. Rainbow, why don't you two get acquainted while I compare notes with Fluttershy." Twilight pointed a hoof to a desk by the window. There, on a wooden perch by the desk, a brown owl opened his eyes and turned to stare right at Rainbow Dash. Straight. At. Her. Rainbow Dash trotted up as she heard her friends chatter.

"Hey, I'm Rainbow Dash." she told the owl.

"Who."

"Rainbow Dash." Rainbow repeated.

"Who."

Rainbow Dash's brow furrowed. "Me. Rain-bow Daaaaash. Champion speedster? Only pony to do a sonic rainboom, and twice? Future Wonderbolt?"

"Who."

"Argh!"

On top of a pile of suitcases, Spike gave the scene a flat look. "Been there sister." he muttered to himself. "We're all ready to go, Twilight!" he told his friend. Twilight looked up from her conversation with Fluttershy.

"Great. That's my number one assistant. Could you start loading them into the balloon please?"

"Me?" Spike asked. There were a half dozen suitcases (mostly filled with books, as Rainbow Dash had guessed), all of them bigger than him. By a sizable margin.

"Number one assistant." was all Twilight said before returning to her conversation. Spike dropped his arms and sighed. He clambered down the pile and sized up his adversary – a pale blue suitcase four inches taller than he. He tugged on the nearest handle, moving the suitcase all of....nowhere. He gave it another go, putting his weight

into it. Given he was a baby dragon, this made about as much of a difference as one would expect. Finally, spitting in his palms and rubbing them together, Spike prepared for the mother of all heaves. He gripped the handle tightly, took a breath, and pulled with all his might. And the suitcase moved! Up!

"Sorry Spike, I got it." Twilight said, levitating all the suitcases with ease. Spike whistled and dropped from the suitcase. Twilight didn't seem to notice it, but when they had first come to Ponyville, Twilight couldn't have moved six books at once, not with any coordination. Both her power and finesse had taken a sharp upswing in the eleven months they had been here. Now she trotted out with the suitcases in tow like they weighed nothing at all.

"Thanks girls! Let the others know I'm gone, would you please?" the balloon was as of yet deflated, just a basket sitting out back. Spike shooed away a couple of birds that had started picking at the weaving. Twilight placed the suitcases inside.

"I hate to leave on such short notice." Twilight said, giving her friends an apologetic look. Rainbow Dash waved it away.

"Nah, it's all good! What better place to nap than a library? I shoulda started hanging out here months ago."

"We'll take good care of Owlowiscious too." Fluttershy promised. Twilight nodded. and hopped in the balloon.

"I promise I'll find time to write."

"Uh...Twilight?" Spike interrupted. "It's going to take me a while to inflate this."

"Oh! I meant to tell you, I've got an idea. Here." with that, her horn began to glow. The balloon lifted overhead, Twilight even going so far as to force it into shape. She turned to Spike.

"A little heat, please." she said. Curious (even upright, the balloon wouldn't be going anywhere without a lot of heat), he breathed his best flame upwards at the mouth of the balloon's envelope. To his surprise, however, the flame didn't dissipate. Instead it began to swirl into a little ball in midair. A faint purplish glow told him that this was Twilight's doing. That ball of fire made its way into the balloon. Twilight focused (she didn't even seem to be straining) and Spike heard a whoomph of flame. With that the envelope billowed out. Twilight released her telekinetic hold, and it began to rise.

"Hop in Spike!" Twilight said. Spike recovered from his amazement (she had definitely not done that before) and scrambled in.

"Bye girls! Thanks again!" she waved to her friends. Both waved back, and Twilight only turned away once she saw Rainbow Dash turn to Fluttershy to talk.

"Excited to go back to Canterlot?" Twilight asked. Spike nodded and looked up at the balloon. He decided to give it a puff of flame for safety's sake.

"The last time we went was the gala, and we all remember how that went."

"A-heh." Twilight smiled. She looked off towards the horizon and her expression dropped.

"I hope Princess Luna is going to be okay. I didn't know goddesses could get sick."

"Yeah, what's with that?" Spike asked. "You'd think that anypony who can survive a thousand years on the moon could deal with a cold or whatever."

Twilight shook her head. "It may be because she's spent a thousand years on the moon. The world's changed a lot, I'm sure."

Spike had nothing to add to that, so instead decided to watch the scenery, occasionally adding heat to the balloon. Twilight said nothing, her gaze barely moving from the same spot on the horizon. She knew where Canterlot was, but they wouldn't be in sight of it for a while yet. Spike watched as her expression struggled between worry and excitement. Canterlot was still their home, in a way. Twilight knew the palace halls better than her own house. Then there was also the matter of actually spending time with Princess Celestia. Sure, the two of them spoke once and a while at celebrations, and there were of course the letters, but this would be the first time in a while when time wasn't so limited.

"I think Princess Celestia is gonna be real impressed with your magic." Spike said, trying to get Twilight to calm down - or at least settle on how she wanted to feel about this trip.

"Huh?" It took a moment for Twilight to snap back to here and now. "Oh, thanks Spike. This trip is first and foremost about Princess Luna, of course." she said, her tone almost diplomatic. Spike rolled his eyes. He still knew who Twilight would be fawning over

when they arrived. Still, Twilight at least seemed to know how she felt about their trip - she was expectant, eager, leaning over the basket as if to get closer to Canterlot. Spike could read it clearly on his friend's face, not that Twilight ever worked to hide her emotions. He wasn't sure what Canterlot would hold for them, but he knew this would be one interesting trip.

"Princess Celestia!" Twilight didn't even wait for the balloon to touch the ground before hopping out. They had landed in the palace's outer gardens, and the Princess herself had come to meet them, flanked by a pair of royal guards. The guards knew Twilight well enough that they did nothing as the young unicorn rushed up to her mentor. While any other pony surely would have stopped to bow with respect to the Goddess living, Twilight nuzzled against her foreleg like a filly greeting her mother. Celestia had a calm smile on her face.

"It's good to see you again, my star pupil." she said. "I only wish it were under better circumstances.

Twilight righted herself, and gave a worried nod.

"How is Princess Luna? Is it bad?"

Princess Celestia closed her eyes, taking a moment to gather herself. It worsened Twilight's fears, and Twilight was the kind to worry at the drop of a hat.

"Why don't you come inside. I'm sure we have much to discuss." she turned away slightly, gesturing to the Castle's entrance. Celestia's left wing flicked, and the guards moved towards the balloon.

"We'll get you settled in in no time. Come." Spike and Twilight followed Celestia towards the castle. The castle was clearly designed with the sunlight in mind - plenty of tall windows, open spaces for the light to fill, along with openings and balconies every few yards to allow one to see the sky. The light stone floors and bright tapestries further made it feel as sunny and cheerful as the outdoors themselves. Twilight recognized the grand entry hall from the gala. The soft rug beneath her feet trailed all the way up the stairs, winding the length of the room.

"It's been so wonderful to have my sister by my side, after so long." Celestia said, keeping her gaze ahead of her. Spike jumped onto Twilight's back to keep up with the two ponies, and Twilight either didn't care or more likely didn't notice as she kept her

eyes on her mentor.

"I suppose I was there with every change, but to her the world is quite different from how she left it. She's done her best to adapt, but I worry that it's just too much for her." They climbed the stairs together, Celestia's long legs taking them two at a time.

"I have done well enough on my own for the past thousand years, but it is not easy. I am hoping a friendly face will help Luna recover. And I must confess, Twilight, I have my own reasons for bringing you here to Canterlot."

"Hmm?" Twilight hadn't expected to hear that. For a second, despite her smile, Princess Celestia's expression looked downcast, even sorrowful.

"We'll discuss more later. Luna has been very expectant since I suggest you come here. Let's not keep her waiting, shall we?"

Twilight nodded, her brow furrowing. Even during the incident with Nightmare Moon, it had been clear that Princess Celestia had had things under control the entire time. When Philomena had been stolen under her nose and promptly died (death being more routine for phoenixes than most creatures), Celestia hadn't shown the slightest worry. Nothing ever seemed to fluster her. So Twilight's mind churned with worry over seeing her mentor's distress. How bad could things be?

The palace was intimately familiar to Twilight, but like any child who comes back home older and (perhaps) wiser, Twilight noticed slight changes, things that didn't match up to her pleasant memories. There seemed to be more guards about. Sometimes she caught only a flank or hoof here or there from beyond a pillar or inside a doorway - as if their presence was not something to be noticeable. Of other castle staff there were definitely fewer. Twilight was used to seeing tour guides, maintenance workers, and hordes of clerks balancing an absurd number of papers on their backs. Twilight began to feel like she had swallowed a rock.

"Here we are. Your room is just down there." Celestia raised a hoof at an ornate wooden door three down from the similar door they stood in front of now. Twilight was caught off guard. Shouldn't a princess's room be....somewhere special? More aloof? Apparently not as Celestia knocked on the door.

"Sister hasn't gotten used to being a Princess again, she says. She prefers the quiet side of things." Celestia said, as if she knew what was on Twilight's mind. Twilight nodded. That made sense. She could only imagine how it could feel to be thrust into such a (normally) busy castle when one had had a thousand years of solace.

"Come in!" they both heard. Celestia pushed the door open. The room inside was only dimly lit as the afternoon sunlight pushed its way through silky purple curtains. It was not a large room, nor did it seem particularly lived in. The dresser may have well been untouched, not so much as a brush laying out by the attached mirror, and there wasn't a lamp or candle to be found.

Only half out of bed, Princess Luna looked at them as they came in. She was dressed in a deep blue nightie that just covered her flanks. Something about it seemed...intimate, almost indecent, which was an odd way for a pony to think of purely optional clothing. Twilight looked away out of embarrassment and respect for the younger goddess.

"Ah! Sister! You might have told me that Twilight Sparkle was here!" Luna cried, cheeks going red. She got all the way out of bed.

"Please pardon me." she said, actually bowing down. It was most definitely directed at Twilight. "I'm not used to being up this time of day."

"Uh.." Twilight was taken aback. "The honor is mine, Princess." she settled on quickly, bowing down and trying to make sure she did so deeper and more respectfully than the Princess. Idiot, she thought to herself. Princess Luna hadn't said anything about honor. Still, what was one supposed to say in such a situation? Sure, she felt a certain level of familiarity with Princess Celestia, but they were still princesses, and she had no such relationship with the moon princess. She slowly worked her way out of her bow only after seeing Luna was already getting up.

"I'm sorry to have to trouble you so. Celly simply insisted."

Twilight blinked several times, trying to hide her confusion. Celly? A court advisor? Perhaps a doctor?

Princess Celestia gave a small laugh and tapped one hoof against the ground a few times. "If the doctors insist you get your bed rest, dear sister, I must ensure you have proper company. Besides which, I'm sure Twilight would let us know if there were any trouble?" she turned her gaze to the young pony. Twilight's mouth made an 'o'. Celly - Princess Celestia! She felt almost ashamed to hear such an informal moniker applied to her mentor. Of course, this was still a younger mare referring to her big sister - even among princesses, it made sense. Twilight realized something was being expected of her.

"Ah! No, I mean of course it's no trouble." Princess Luna didn't look convinced, so

Twilight felt compelled to add; "Besides, it's been too long since I've been in Canterlot. It's good to be back." That softened Luna's gaze, and she nodded just slightly.

"We will let you rest." Celestia said. "I hope you don't mind if I take Twilight from you for this afternoon."

"Not at all." Luna said. "You'll see. I'll be better in no time." she turned around and clambered back into bed as the two left.

"Princess, is she okay? Is there anything I should know?" Twilight asked after they had exited. Aside from looking sleepy, nothing had marked the Princess Luna as ill.

"Yes, my faithful student." Celestia said with a bow of her head. "I know you are no medic, though I imagine you've already begun furious study. It is your talent with magic I seek."

"Really?" Twilight could only imagine what the Princess was getting at.

"I have never in well over a thousand years gotten ill. I never knew sister to have, beforehand. I never considered the...poison Nightmare Moon was to her. I would like somepony familiar with such magics by her side, and in all of Equestria that leaves you and I alone."

Twilight found her throat too dry to swallow. Her steps faltered as if she carried a heavy load now. She knew the princess trusted her, but she couldn't help but question her own ability. Before, she had had the elements of harmony with her - along with the less official but all important element of surprise.

"You always were quick to worry, my little pony." Celestia said, watching her. "Nothing shall come of it, but I simply must be sure for my sister's sake. In the meantime, and before I must go to lower the sun, why don't we visit the grand library, while you let me know what has gone on in Ponyville. A letter can only carry so much..."

Chapter 2

"Good evening." Luna greeted Twilight as the young unicorn stepped onto the same balcony as the princess. It had been just beyond their rooms, facing slightly off of south, giving a few of the city below. Canterlot had not fallen asleep yet; carts traveled to their final destinations of the day, couples went about for dinner, shopkeepers began to close up for home. Twilight bowed her head in greetings as she stepped out.

"Celly dotes on me so, it's a little embarrassing." Luna looked past Twilight to the two guards nearby. Twilight gave a nervous smile. She wondered - was this Celestia trying to protect her younger sister, or protect others from her little sister?

"How are you feeling?" she asked to shift the conversation. So far, Luna, while soft-spoken, didn't seem so poorly. Her opinion shifted slightly when Luna hung her head and let out a long sigh.

"So tired. And the night hasn't even begun. Once upon a time I relished this time of day, if only because I knew at least for a few moments, ponies would see my stars, notice the dark of my skies..."

"I...I thought you just controlled the moon." Twilight admitted, looking out over the balcony. She only now realized how little she knew of the other princess. Luna gave a sad smile.

"I can understand why you'd think that. Celly focuses on her sun, though she does have some lovely shades of blue to give the sky. But we control the day and night, darkness and light. Remember the legend?" Twilight thought back. The mare in the moon, darkness in her heart, elements of harmony, banished to the moon; the stars would aid her escape. That was it.

"I...you're right." Twilight nodded. "I'm sorry princess."

"Hmm?" Luna had been looking sideways, watching the settings sun. She turned to Twilight with a curious look.

"I never thought to learn...you must put so much work into these nights."

"Thank you for saying so, Twilight Sparkle. I will never let...I will never let her take over my heart again, but....the loneliness remains."

"Her?"

"Nightmare Moon." Luna whispered the name. "Ahh, it looks like it's time to start. I'm sorry, but it's always easier to see what I'm doing." Luna got up and turned away from the balcony. Twilight followed by her side. She noticed that she couldn't see the guards anymore. She was also much more aware of Luna's weakened state. The dark mare's steps faltered, Twilight's shorter legs easily keeping up. Luna's eyes were half-lidded.

"Celly swears that one day she'll teach me to wear a watch. How unnatural! A little ticking device to tell me the time! Whoever would have come up with that." she had a sleepy smile, almost looking unaware of herself.

"Aheh. I suppose a lot of things must seem odd, after so long." Twilight said. "How do you tell the time then? Most ponies by go the sun and moon?"

"Oh, to us the skies are different. There are paths my moon has traveled for centuries, at as steady a pace as you can wish. So long as I keep my spells the same, the day's length will never change. Apparently...she added two hours to the day, halting the moon. Celly never bothered to catch them up"

"You, ah, you talk about Nightmare Moon..."

"As if she wasn't me?" Luna asked, her expression listless. "Maybe I just wish I could say that that hadn't been me. That I hadn't truly lost myself to such cruelty. I know it is just the wishes of a silly foal who won't admit her mistakes, yet....I cannot help but feel that she isn't me. That everything there was just, well, a nightmare."

"I understand, Princess." Twilight said diligently.

"You do?" Luna perked up, sincere in her surprise. "From how sister speaks of you, I couldn't believe there was any darkness in your heart."

"Ahh..." Twilight realized the hole she had dug into. "I mean to say, I..." she stopped as the princess giggled. It was a surprising sound, making her halt if only to better listen to it.

"Don't worry. You're a sympathetic soul, Twilight."

The halls they walked seemed all the emptier with the descending darkness. Twilight, during her time here, would normally be holed up in the library or her own room, and was surprised to find that the castle took on an entirely different air. The high ceilings and open halls allowed the shadows to gather early and gather deeply. At times entire walls disappeared from view, giving the impression that the darkness stretched on for who knows how long. Twilight didn't feel any fear, but the entire castle seemed lonely, and the sadness bore down on her.

They reached a part where the castle let out eastwards. There was little view this way due to the mountain the castle clung to, but enough of the sky was clear from here. Luna sat down on the balcony and closed her eyes. Twilight sat down next to her, shifting slightly as Luna's wings unfurled.

Luna let out a deep breath that seemed to go on well beyond her lung capacity. Her horn began to glow. Twilight had never seen any unicorn's horn behave as Princess Luna's did. The glow wasn't bright as much as it was a shimmering of something ethereal, a starlit darkness that stood out clearly against the air. And it grew more real as the magic increased.

Luna raised her wings high, and with a single sweep drifted into the air several feet. Twilight had expected it to look like Princess Celestia raised the sun, regal and proud. Luna was entirely different, however. She hung her head, her horn pointing to the horizon. She seemed to just hang in the air, blending in to the descending darkness. Her horn's glow sparkled and an overlay of blue-black void surrounded it.

Twilight glanced over, and saw the moon coming over the horizon. It was a gibbous, mostly full. Twilight could feel the magic radiating from Luna. She had expected to feel like levitation, or perhaps some kind of transport magic. But that was not it, no not at all. No pony could literally lift the moon. The magic had a feel of control to it all the same, but it also had a flow, direction to it. It was unusual to assign such things to magic, which had little or no concept of space, but there was a definite flow to her magic. Twilight tried to follow it. Magic having no concept of space, she instantly found her mind far away. She could feel....she realized it was the night sky. She could feel the night sky itself.

The sensation lasted for the barest handful of seconds. Twilight found herself back in her own head as the magic faded. She blinked rapidly, trying to focus on her surroundings. She realized the moon had risen, now fully above the horizon, if not by much. That 'barest handful of seconds' in her mind had somehow lasted nearly a hour!

"Ahhh..." Luna was drifting slowly down to the ground. Her body hung from her wings like a rag doll. Twilight kept her eyes on the princess, who carefully put weight back on her hooves and opened her eyes.

"I felt your presence." she said. Twilight's eyes widened.

"Ahh, I'm so sorry Princess!" she turned to Luna and prostrated herself. "I was curious, and, and I forgot my place, I'm so sorry."

"What? No, no. Please. It's quite..." Luna's body dipped to one side. She righted herself and blinked at Twilight.

"I was surprised, that is all. It's actually...quite..." she dipped forward this time. With a start, Twilight got up just in time to brace the princess. Luna's eyes were shut and she was mumbling to herself. Twilight waited, praying to the stars above (perhaps futilely, she realized) no one saw the two of them like this.

"Princess? Princess?" could she shake the moon goddess? Was that considered rude? What was one to do when royalty fell asleep on you?

"Princess Luna? Are you okay?"

"Mhmm...twenty-seven minutes..." Luna responded from a dream. Twilight sighed and looked back into the castle. Where were those guards now? Wasn't this the exact kind of thing for them to deal with? Then again, while the guards had always shown such professionalism, Twilight had never known them to have a gentle touch. So, weighing her options and seeing few to work with, she slowly shifted around while keeping the Princess propped up. Her back now to Luna, she used her magic to lift the Princess on to her back. Luna was not nearly the same size as Celestia, for which Twilight was infinitely grateful, but the taller pony's legs still brushed the ground. Levitating the princess was out of the option, as it not only was quite undignified but Twilight couldn't trust herself to be careful enough. Twilight gave a huff as Luna's weight settled on her. Thank goodness that she had helped Applejack during applebucking season, or she never could have attempted to carry such a weight. Not that the princess was heavy or anything, Twilight admonished herself.

Thankfully, Princess Luna hadn't chosen to go far from her room, perhaps guessing but underestimating her weakened state after raising the moon. It was still no easy task, but Twilight was sure she could manage. She wondered at Princess Celestia's words. She

did not want to bring this up with Luna, of course not. The way Luna spoke of Nightmare Moon, however, was quite telling. Perhaps she and Princess Luna could speak more about something similar when she awoke. Hopefully. That would be sooner rather than later.

Princess Luna did awake some time later. A couple hours had passed, Twilight had gotten her into bed, and the moon was higher in the sky, not yet at its apex. Twilight had decided to keep her eyes open by studying. She sat beside the princess's bed, levitating a thick tome detailing the political treatises past and present between Equestria and other lands. Once upon a time, she had learned, Princess Celestia had held conference with dragons, who were more organized back then.

"Twilight?" Luna alerted Twilight she was awake.

"Ahh! Princess! How are you feeling? Do you need anything?"

Luna groaned and pressed a hoof against her head, just aside of her horn.

"A glass of water if it's not too much trouble." she asked. Almost instantly such a glass appeared in front of her eyes, held aloft with Twilight's magic.

"I thought you might need one."

"Oh. Yes, thank you." she took the glass from Twilight telekinetically. After a long drink, she looked around.

"I passed out, didn't I?" she asked, her voice as timid as a filly. Twilight nodded.

"Oh, dear." Luna sighed. "You have my sincerest apologies, I was afraid that may happen but I thought I would overcome it."

"It's alright. That's why I'm here." Twilight told her. The Princess nodded, but her eyes were still downcast. She began to slide out of bed by Twilight.

"Well, I still have most of the night, at least. I can't waste any more time."

"Are you sure-" Twilight stopped as Princess Luna let out a heavy, loud sigh.

"I am sorry Twilight." Luna said, suddenly sounding all her thousand years. "I

understand Celly's worry. And I know you mean your best. But please, I am no young filly. I know my limits. Ah, er, most of the time." she ended on a rather sheepish note, no doubt remembering just how she had wound up in her bed. Twilight kicked at the ground.

"I apologize. I should not overstepped my place." Twilight bowed. Luna shook her head.

"I don't mean - oh, nevermind. In any case, I am simply going up to the grand library."

"The library?" Twilight perked up. Luna nodded.

"I understand the bureaucracy has grown in part because Celly simply cannot be everywhere at once. I'm sure I could aid sister in overseeing the realm - once I catch up on the last thousand years, of course." she gave a weak smile. Twilight nodded.

"That's an admirable goal. Princess Celestia must be so glad to have you back."

"Ah, she always had such patience. I really must be a burden." Luna told her. "I'm merely working to make myself less of one."

Twilight bit her tongue, not wanting to start an argument but feeling that the moon princess could not be more wrong. Princess Celestia was lucky to have a sister like Luna, surely she had to see that. Anyone would be lucky to know her, came an unbidden thought.

"I know you've been up so long already." Luna said to her. "You needn't worry about watching over me."

"I, if you would allow me princess, I would be honored to join you. This would be hardly the first time I was in the library at such an hour." Twilight asked, anxiously but truthfully.

Judging by her eyebrows, Luna hadn't been expecting that. She looked appreciative, which Twilight couldn't understand. The moon princess nodded.

"I would be grateful." she told Twilight. Luna led the way out of her room. She seemed uplifted, gently smiling as her gaze drifted all about the halls.

"It's not so dissimilar from our hold home." Luna said suddenly, drawing Twilight's attention. "I think Celly didn't want to leave, in the end. She brought as much of it with

her as she could."

"You mean your old castle?" Twilight asked. Luna nodded. "Why did she leave then?"

"I have wondered that myself. Have you ever studied the Everfree forest?"

"No, I can't say I have. Ponyville borders it, but it's not somewhere most ponies go. With good reason."

"I have heard so many tales." Luna told her. "I wish I could remember more clearly, but everything from back then is so....foggy. I believe something about the magics released there, all those years ago, something caused the forest to be as it is today."

"You think it has something to do with Nightmare Moon?" Twilight asked. Luna seemed conflicted, and briefly chewed on her lip.

"I cannot help but wonder if there is a reason the elements of harmony resided there. If there was a connection."

"The elements of harmony? But the Everfree forest is so..."

"Dark?" Luna asked, almost daring Twilight to say it.

"Wild." Twilight responded. She made the princess laugh.

"I can understand your doubts. But trust me in this. All power, left unchecked, can cause wild results. And the elements were never complete - the sixth hidden away from even my sister. Such an imbalance...who knows what it could bring. I would love to study the elements one day."

"That sounds like a brilliant plan." Twilight agreed. "I've given a lot of thought into just what it means to be the bearer of the element of magic."

"I'd expect no less of Celestia's favorite student. She loves to read me your letters. I know you've already learned much of all the elements."

Twilight blushed, bashful at the idea of her letters being shared. "I still have so much to learn though." she said, keeping her gaze down.

"So do we all." by now they had reached the library, and Luna pushed the door open.

The library held shelves two stories high, going on so far that even in the light of day it was hard to see one end of the library from another. They had climbed two floors to get here, and were high enough that the grand windows along the far wall of the library gave a spectacular view of the city of Canterlot. Much later than before, now only a few street lamps and house lights twinkled up from below. Luna and Twilight walked in through the wide doors side by side, both took in a deep breath, and let out the exact same sigh of content at the exact same time. They turned to each other in surprise and looked away bashfully. Luna cleared her throat and trotted into the library. Twilight followed behind her.

The princess retreated to a corner of the library near the windows. Where one of the library's many tables stood half-filled with books. Three were open right now, and as Luna approached the table Twilight could see how they were all arranged so she could reference any one at any time.

"I'm afraid it'll be quite dull." Luna said, looking over her shoulder at Twilight.

"Economics have gotten quite complicated over the past thousand years. I appreciate moving away from the barter system of course. It will simply take some study before I can be sure I understand what is going on. It helps to cross-reference some old trade ledgers. I just wish our records were more complete. I can find nothing on international tax law!"

"Oh, you probably want Sterling and Sterling's historical tax law compendium." Twilight responded instantly. Luna raised an eyebrow.

"The library cycles less popular books off the shelves sometimes. It's probably in the back, over here." Twilight started off. Curious, Luna trotted up to her.

"You are familiar with this tome?"

"Oh yes, it's a great read!" Twilight said with a proud smile. Her pride waned after a moment and she glanced at her hooves. "I, uh, didn't get out much before moving to Ponyville."

"And I suppose I'm lucky you didn't." Luna replied. Twilight led her up a floor (still within the library) to the balcony level, which rimmed the library. She lit the way with her horn, not even moonlight reaching in this far, and entered into a small room with more normally sized shelves. Glancing through them, it took her only seconds to pull out a giant faded blue tome.

"There we are, right where I left it. Okay, so I guess it's not that exciting a read after all."

"I'm sure it will suit my purposes admirably." Luna told her, taking telekinetic hold of the book. They headed back down to the table in silence, and Luna found a place to squeeze the book in so that she could prop it up while open. She flipped through the first few pages quickly.

"Ah, this is just what I was after!" she said excitedly. She scanned down a table of contents and flipped the book about halfway in.

"Now, to see if I understand the calculations at play..." a few papers shifted as Luna lifted a device from the other side of the table. Twilight's jaw nearly dropped. She couldn't be serious.

"Ahh...Princess Luna?"

"Oh not you too." Luna said tiredly. "Look, there's nothing wrong with an abacus."

Chapter 3

One very illuminating lesson on abacus use and maintenance and several hours of peaceful study later, Twilight and Luna left the library. Twilight could still hardly believe it as Luna had challenged to beat her with a calculator - and then won hoofs down. All with the help of beads and her own mental faculties she had computed things Twilight had wanted to write down before even getting to the calculator. For the first time in a very, very long time Twilight felt, well, stupid. She often felt foalish, out of place or embarrassed. She had never been made to feel stupid.

Luna had meant only to show off a little though, and Twilight held nothing against her. The younger princess had little enough to be proud of as it was. And that little display had helped the Princess make several insights to current tax regulations. Twilight was honored that the Princess had turned to her several times through the night, using her to clarify what the books could not. And she had gotten her own studying done besides, quite happy to find a seat elsewhere on the table and go through her current subject of medicinal magics. She had had to force Luna to take a break, however, around midnight to eat. It was only as the princess picked listlessly at some bread that Twilight remembered she wasn't feeling well. Still, she had managed the rest of the night without trouble.

Now as they headed out, Twilight tried to stifle a yawn. It wasn't enough though, and caught the princess's eye.

"You've done so much, Twilight Sparkle. I shouldn't have kept you so long."

"No, no." Twilight insisted as she had throughout the night. "I enjoyed it. Besides, I've always been a bit of night owl."

"You realize that I'm going to lower the moon now? You've been up the entire day and night!"

Twilight hadn't in fact realized the time. Still, the smile she gave the princess was sincere, and she kept her head up.

"It won't be the first time. Please, princess, allow me to stay just a little longer, to see you lower the moon."

"Hmm, you sound as if I were your mother to send you to bed." Luna said, her usually serious tone of speech once again getting playful for a few moments. "I am glad to have you, but you needn't worry. It is much easier to lower the moon than to raise it. That is why, ah, she had to use such magic to refuse the moon its course."

Twilight nodded, but the princess's words did nothing to abate her worry. She had never managed to approach the subject with Luna throughout the night, out of a mix of awkwardness in bringing it up and respect for the princess. But if it could hold any information to help the princess, Twilight needed to know more about Nightmare Moon. She had watched the princess struggle to keep her focus, and levitating even simple things seemed to tax her unduly. Whatever ailed the princess, it was no simple sickness. She did not sneeze, she did not cough or moan. But she seemed weakened, drained.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Twilight asked. To her surprise, Luna began to laugh. It was soft but full of joy. A thought flashed across Twilight's mind that Luna must have a wonderful singing voice. The notion was gone as soon as it came, barely noticed. She turned to Luna in confusion.

"You rescue me from my prison, the prison I built myself. Reunite me with my loving sister and forgive me all my trespasses. Now you watch over me with all the attention a mother would give her filly, and you ask to help!" Luna giggled. Twilight didn't know princesses could giggle. She felt embarrassed by the praise heaped on her and looked away. She was surprised by the soft brush against her back. She looked up to see Luna had extended a wing to her.

Your friends are lucky to have you. And I am honored to be worth your attention."

"Princess, i-it is my honor, after all-"

"I know, I know. Celly tells me I do myself a disservice. I am a princess. What does that mean, Twilight?"

"Being a princess?" Twilight didn't understand. She realized Luna's wing still lingered against her. She really couldn't tell how to feel about that.

"To me it means I have a duty to fulfill. A duty I have failed for a thousand years, and still fail every day. Please, do not praise me for what I have not done. It is a hollow title, not worth the mention, and it shames me to hear my name spoken alongside my sister's." she removed her wing, folding it tightly to her side once more. Twilight said

nothing. It felt like the darkness of night was closing in on her, seeping through her skin and into her, laden with isolation and sorrow.

She let Luna walk out onto the balcony alone this time. From what she understood, there was a natural tempo to the skies that both sisters followed, yet it was still theirs to manipulate. It in fact needed their manipulation, perhaps not steady enough. And the twilight was apparently the worst time for it, as far as she could see. She knew Celestia's and Luna's magic stemmed from the same source, her mentor had told her as much, yet they were polar opposites. As one's domain waned and the other's took over, the natural order was strained, requiring constant guidance. Thus came the practices of raising and lowering the sun and moon. Twilight could only imagine the strain Celestia had put herself monitoring magics so at odds with her own talents. And for a thousand years! No wonder Luna felt guilt bear down on her.

Luna did not raise into the air this time. She seemed collect herself. Twilight took a second glance. Not collect herself - she seemed to be collecting the shadows around her. Twilight's eyes strained to make sense of what they were seeing. The shadows behaved something like a fluid, something like a gas, broiling and sliding towards the moon princess. Yet these words were too strong, gave the darkness more of a presence than it had. Only when Twilight stared at the Princess's back could she make out something approaching an outline. The darkness at first seemed just a cloak, but the closer Twilight looked the more she saw the darkness weave its way as part of Luna's being. It was in between the strands of her hair, under her feathers and inside a coat. She was less a pony and more an extension of the night itself. Twilight sat in awe.

She didn't even realize the moon had dipped below the horizon until Luna gasped sharply. It was perhaps her first breath the entire time. The darkness dissipated around her. Twilight rushed to her side as the Princess got on all four hooves and wobbled, unable to catch her footing.

"Twilight?" Luna's voice was so quiet Twilight would have mistaken it for Fluttershy's. "Perhaps there is something more you can yet do for me."

"Yes?" Twilight asked. To her surprise, Luna then stumbled and fell against her. She remained on her hooves, if only thanks to Twilight propping her up. Twilight paused, unclear what to do. Luna nodded towards the hall. Twilight cautiously took a few steps, and Luna followed along, using her for support.

It was slow going through the dark halls, and Twilight hoped they would make it before the castle awoke and everyone could see them like this. She kept her eyes forward,

very determined not to glance at the weakened pony resting on her. It just wasn't proper, she told herself. She wanted to give Luna her privacy to be weak.

"The great and terrible Nightmare Moon..." Luna mumbled. She began to laugh at something Twilight couldn't even fathom. It was not a joyful giggle as before; it was almost terrifying. A mocking laugh, cruel even, and directed at herself. Twilight suddenly very much wished that Princess Celestia would hurry up and raise the sun - she suddenly very much felt the need for a little bit of light.

"Imprisoned...banished...imprisoned in the place banished to...." Luna's mumbling became less coherent. Twilight admitted she was a bit frightened, trying to convince herself it was for the princess's sake. Finally she allowed herself to glance over at Luna. Luna's eyes were mostly closed, her hooves dragged against the ground. Her lips moved constantly even though Twilight only occasionally heard a word or two. It didn't seem likely she knew where she was. This was confirmed as she had to nudge the Princess to take a corner. She very carefully guided Luna back towards her room. Guards were just beginning to roam the halls, along with a few of the clerical staff and other functionaries. Twilight tried to hurry along, feeling indecent. Fortunately, either no one noticed or no one cared, for at the least Twilight didn't notice any glances shot her way. She thanked her lucky stars (not noticing the irony at the time) they made it back to her room without interruption.

"Please, Princess, into bed..." Twilight whispered.

"Stars as my blanket..." Luna replied. Twilight managed to nudge her towards the bed and Luna took the hint. She clambered in and even got herself under the covers. Feeling that any sense of propriety had been suspended, she put a hoof to the Princess's forehead.

"Yow." she said with a frown. It wasn't actually painful, but it was no small wonder the Princess was so discombobulated. Twilight magicked another glass of water.

"Princess, try to drink." she pleaded, holding the glass right to Luna's lips. Luna's gaze slid over to the glass, and for a moment she just stared at it blankly. Finally she leaned forward, and Twilight helped her drink. She drained the glass, and a second later her head hit the pillow.

"Don't worry Princess." Twilight said quietly, putting the glass aside. She took a look around the room. Since absolutely nothing had been touched, not even the desk, Twilight was sure the Princess wouldn't mind her using it so long as she cleared up for

herself.

"Just need to...ahhh..." Twilight tried to stifle another yawn. She trotted over to the desk, and looked around. It had been used she realized, just tidied very meticulously. A slightly open drawer beneath caught her attention, and opening it up Twilight found a couple ink wells, a dozen quills and just as many sharpened pencils. A second drawer (Twilight's curiosity overcoming her sense of privacy) revealed papers, a small book, and two more abacuses.

"How many of these does she need?" Twilight asked herself. A thought crossed through her head that with three abacuses or so, Luna could probably re-derive all the calculus that had been developed in the last thousand years. She pushed that thought aside, closing the drawers. She squeezed her eyes shut, and with a flash of her horn a couple of books appeared in front of her on the table.

"Oh good, I got the right ones this time." Twilight said, rubbing one eye. "Now...let's see...." she opened one book to where she had left a small silk bookmark, and got to work.

"No....don't raise the sun yet...." Twilight mumbled, feeling herself waking up against her will.

"I'm afraid you're far too late to stop me, my faithful student."

"Wha-huh?" Twilight raised her head. Celestia removed the hoof that had nudged the young unicorn awake.

"Princess Celestia!" she realized, eyes going wide. "I'm so sorry, I must have overslept, and I, I..." she looked around, realizing where she was. Princess Luna's room, at her desk to be precise. Twilight spared a glance at her book. Good, she hadn't drooled on it. She had trained herself not to most of the time.

"I hope sister didn't keep you up." Celestia said, a smile on her face. Twilight was quick to shake her head.

"No, not at all. I insisted. I never, I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"One cannot be a day and night pony. You've missed most of the morning."

"Yeah Twilight! Where were you?" Twilight looked down to find her draconic assistant tapping his food. Twilight smiled at his indignation.

"I'm sorry Spike. I guess I got carried away studying last night." she turned back to Celestia, but forgot what she was going to say. Celestia's eyes were on her sister. Twilight turned to look; Luna was sleeping but restless, her brow furrowed as she tossed about. Twilight feared what nightmares Luna could dream up.

"She has a fever." Twilight said. "I think it just came on last night."

"How was she?" Celestia asked. Spike caught on to the sudden turn in conversation and tried to peer up at Luna.

"Weak, but quite lively." Twilight couldn't help but smile as she thought back to Luna's passion for both mathematics and history. Celestia nodded and sighed. She seemed so old for once. How much did she have to watch over? How many did she already care for?

"Perhaps I shall speak with her later about helping with the moon." Celestia suggested. "She will need her rest."

"I, I'm sure it's just a passing fever." Twilight said, though she knew her words to be empty. Nonetheless, Celestia looked warmed by them. She turned to Twilight with a pleasant smile, her face so serene that Twilight caught herself wondering how she had ever thought of the Princess as looking old.

"She isn't the only pony in need of rest. I will have breakfast - or at this point, perhaps lunch - sent to your room. I must return to my duties, but perhaps we will be able to speak more later."

"But Princess-!"

"Now Twilight, come along. It will do no pony any good for you to wear yourself sick over Luna. I'm sure she'd agree."

Twilight knew that the younger princess would, but still she hesitated, biting her lip. Still, how was one to argue with a goddess, especially one who took such pains as Celestia did for her? Twilight reluctantly followed at Celestia's heels, and Spike followed at hers.

Twilight hadn't even really looked at her room before now. It was nearly a mirror image of Luna's, only with a smaller bed and lighter curtains. Spike had already done his best setting up, which mostly entailed organizing every book Twilight had. Stacks no greater than six, four for certain marked tomes, so as not to cause undue stress. The stacks about the floor and desk would naturally be in dewey decimal order. Aside from the occasional fit of mad studying or unexpected arrival of Rainbow Dash through her window/balcony/wall, Twilight took her library ownership seriously and always treated books with care. Of course, most of these books weren't hers to take, but Twilight thought of it as checking them out. She fully intended to pay herself any late fees she incurred.

"Don't worry, my little pony. Get some rest." Celestia told her. Twilight nodded, feeling her lids get heavier. After Celestia left, Twilight sat down right there on the floor and let out a yawn.

"Great, and what am I supposed to do?" Spike complained. "I don't even have any chores." he turned to Twilight. Twilight's gaze was blank for a moment.

"Twilight? Twi!" Spike snapped his fingers in front of Twilight's face. She found herself shaking her head, trying to clear her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and finally focused.

"I can't go to sleep. Not now." she said. "There's got to be something I can do to help. I don't even know if anything I've learned about diseases and medicine applies! No one's studied alicorns that much."

"Studied who now?" Spike asked. Twilight sighed, sounding impatient.

"Alicorns. Like the princesses? You can't just cross a pegasus pony and a unicorn, after all. Princess Celestia never spoke much about it, but apparently there used to be other alicorns. It's all just legends and fairy tales though. Maybe if I could just get my hooves on some records, if there were any historical mention of alicorn society or history, or even physiology!" Twilight hung her head. "I doubt I'll find so much as a footnote in the entire library."

"Well, what if it's not in the library?" Spike asked.

"Huh?" Twilight's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"These books would be old, right? Like old old. Like old old old-"

"Spike."

"Sorry. Anyway, remember that time you had me track down that book on pre-Canterlot Equestrian folklore? The original copy? And I had to go down into the basement to find the archives?"

"The archives!" Twilight perked up. "Oh how could I have been so stupid! Of course, there, if there was anything at all...." she paused, and suddenly her entire expression dropped. "Oh, wait. We had to get Princess Celestia's permission and a special key just to look at the copy, and they wouldn't even let me turn the pages myself..."

"And they made me sit outside in case I 'accidentally set the books aflame'" Spike said with a roll of his eyes. "Like I'd make that mistake more than four times."

"Uh huh." Twilight was barely listening. She was torn in two directions internally. Princess Celestia had told her to stay here, even had lunch on the way for her. She'd be so disappointed if Twilight exhausted herself before they got another chance to talk. Then there was also the fact that they'd probably have to find some way to get to the archives without the sun princess's permission. But she had seen how pained Luna was to fulfill her role, to try to make up for what she felt she had to. If she wasn't able to raise the moon - not by virtue of imprisonment or anything but simply unable to - Twilight could only imagine how heartbroken she would be. Twilight knew Celestia cared. But so did Luna.

"Spike, I'm going to need you to stay here." Twilight said with resolve. Spike just gave her a questioning glance.

"Someone's going to need to take my food when it comes or they'll know I'm out." she explained.

"But Twilight, aren't you hungry?" he asked. "When was the last time you ate?"

"That's not important right now Spike." Twilight told him, already heading for the door. "If anyone asks, I'm sound asleep."

"Wow, good thing you're not the element of honesty." Spike retorted.

"Honesty is more than just words." Twilight retorted. "It's about intent. And I intend to help Princess Luna."

"Even despite what Princess Celestia said to you?" Spike asked. Twilight, half out the door, paused. She felt pained by the question, by what Spike was getting at. Was she really going to go through with this? Still, Celestia hadn't been there, to see Luna work. And Luna would never tell Celestia how troubled she was, Twilight knew. It was up to her. So she forced herself through the doorway, and with a nod, shut the door behind her. Spike sighed.

"Hope she doesn't expect me to save her any of that lunch." Spike said to himself. Maybe he could busy himself constructing a Twilight replica in pillows for when somepony came by.

While the main floors of the castle were all built with the open world and sunlight in mind, as one descended into the basement carved out of the mountainside it soon became an entirely different world. The walls were gray stone and the ceilings were very low; the lack of windows meant that small, magically lit lanterns were the only source of light. Down here there was no night and day, only an even mix of pale shadows and dim light. It was not a part of the castle meant for dignitaries or guests or the public, so little value was placed on aesthetics. Twilight only knew the way thanks to her studies of the architecture and layout of the castle. She passed by several maintenance rooms, one with its door open just a crack.

"...asleep now.." came a voice from inside the room. Twilight was a little startled, but immediately admonished herself for thinking she'd be alone down here, what with all it took to keep the castle running. She brought her steps to a tiptoe so as not to disturb whoever was conversing inside.

"...would she.....finally....real ruler." Twilight only half caught the mumbles, but her ear picked up at what she heard. What was that? She was just behind the door now, and her curiosity forced her to stop and listen.

"It's taking too long, she's putting herself at risk."

"I think she knows what she's doing."

"Why now?"

"Had to be sooner rather than later, nopony would suspect."

"She could just-"

"Oh shut up. Look what happened last time. No, this time will go much smoother."

"I suppose you're right"

"Now shut up before somepony comes, right?"

Twilight heard movement, and in a panic, started the only spell for the situation. She winked out moments before the door opened. More a credit to her luck than her skill, she appeared around the corner of where she had been heading. Her heart was in her throat, particularly unpleasant given its pounding. Twilight tried to make sense of what she heard.

"It couldn't be." she told herself. There was a misunderstanding here, there'd have to be. It'd turn out she had overheard two guards moonlighting as actors and practicing their lines. Or perhaps some elaborate game. It couldn't actually be....that somepony was plotting something.

'Look what happened last time' the words played themselves over and over in Twilight's head. They were only eventually drowned out by the ringing that had developed in her ears. The last time there had been a plot against the throne of Equestria....the only time there had been a plot against the throne....

It couldn't be! It simply couldn't. Somepony was up to something. Perhaps they were stealing from the castle, or forging documents, or something. Twilight had a bitter taste in her mouth realizing these were her ideal scenarios. But nothing there suggested the princesses were in danger. Except Luna was mysteriously ill, and now Celestia's attention and magics were even more taxed than usual. Twilight swallowed. She needed to find those archives!

Twilight really wished she had put some thought into a camouflage spell. She was jumpy now and didn't want to be seen. First there was the fact that while technically not anywhere she wasn't allowed to be (yet), the sun princess's' personal student was gather notice down here. Twilight didn't want word getting back to Celestia. Then there was the fact that if - and that was if, she shouldn't jump to conclusions - there was in fact some movement against Equestria's royalty, once again Twilight did not want to be noticed down here, where whatever plot (maybe) was happening.

Twilight reached the room she knew to be the archives. It wasn't guarded, and for a few reasons. It was low priority, deep within the castle, and then there was the little fact that the door was sealed magically and was otherwise all but impenetrable. Twilight knew this was the turning point. Go back now, and she had taken a jaunt around the castle, most definitely with enough time to spare for a nap before Princess Celestia returned. Go through with this, and not only was she breaking the princess' trust, but maybe one or two laws while she was at it. Twilight thought back to Spike's words, and wondered what Applejack would say.

"Shame on ya." Imaginary Applejack said to Twilight. "Fer even thinkin' y' could just hit the hay while y've got friends needin' ya." Okay, perhaps imaginary Applejack had an even thicker accent than her real world counterpart. She still had a point. Twilight nodded. Doors really didn't make a difference when one could just pop in.

Twilight cast the spell with something approaching practiced ease. She tried to open her eyes, expecting to see the room. Only something went wrong. Something felt weird. It didn't seem like she had eyes. Or any sort of body really. Twilight stifled the rising panic. She could feel something. She had never wondered how exactly her teleportation spell worked, but apparently it moved her somewhere, through something. And now, she guessed, she was stuck in that somewhere in between points in reality. Twilight could feel a barrier, a pressure of some sort, holding her back. The door wasn't just warded, she realized, but so was the entire room. If she lost focus, it would fling her back out where she had started from – only her continued casting of the spell kept forcing her against the barrier. Twilight mustered her resolve. She had come this far, she would not be denied now. Thinking back to how she had traced Luna's spell last night, Twilight began to mentally probe the ward. An old, solid spell like a stone wall. Yet Twilight could feel a spiderweb of fractures. Images began to form in her mind as she tried to make sense of the spell. A wall, yes, and the fractures were not random. They were symbols, writing, the language of the spell written into its raw magical energy, giving that energy form and purpose. Twilight imagined she still had a horn, and began to scratch off one of the symbols.

The spell shuddered and died as Twilight broke its ancient circuits. She found herself flung forward into reality, tumbling against the floor. Laying on her side she gasped for air, glad she even had lungs to do so with. Whatever her teleportation spell was, it was far greater than she had imagined. Here she had apparently been entering another plane of existence - often so she could do things like get a leg up on her friends or save herself a trip into town.

Twilight shook these thoughts from her head. There was no time for that now. The spell

had been broken, and Twilight didn't know what that meant or if it was noticeable, but she quickly decided not to stick around too long and find out. She picked herself up off the floor and looked around. The archives were one long room with a low ceiling, pillars of bookshelves as regularly spaced as a library's. Apart from that there were several papers mounted on plaques and books in display cases, along with tightly sealed chests along the walls. Twilight glanced to the nearest shelf. The books appeared to be only loosely organized by genre and alphabet, judging from what she saw. Twilight took a deep breath - and immediately sneezed. The air here was more dust than air, so old and stale her mouth was already dry. A wry thought passed through Twilight's mind that it had been a good decision on the archivist's part not to let Spike in.

There was nothing to it but to begin searching, and Twilight was in her element. She sized up entire shelves in just a glance, scanning past the titles on each faded spine without a second glance. It was still slow going given the volume of books to go through, and the fact that Twilight wasn't even sure what would or wouldn't be helpful. Her tired eyes caught a yellowed scroll set aside on a pedestal. It was still clearly legible.

"And thus when the terrible battle was over, the moon made way for the sun, forced down by the mighty and terrible magic of Harmony. And to her sister did the elder Goddess turn, and saw that her efforts had been in vain. With the magic fading around her, Princess Celestia did imprison Princess Luna and banish her to the moon..." Twilight stopped reading. A story she had read a hundred times or more. Well, the wording was off. It hit Twilight that this may have well been a first hand account, or at least that of someone who lived during that era. It was certainly off from what Twilight had learned - from the sound of it, the elements of harmony had been used to actually lower the moon, whereas Twilight had always heard it that Celestia had lowered the moon of her own after banishing Nightmare Moon. Something else niggled at Twilight's mind about that scroll, but she pushed it aside. Her want for factual accuracy would have to wait for another time.

After what seemed like forever, Twilight began to come across just what she had hoped for. 'On the Magic of Alicorns', a surprisingly slender tome with a red leather binding, floated behind her. She'd collect a few promising leads to go over at once, in case any were a bust. Unfortunately, after that she hit a bit of a dry spell. Most of the books down here were still collections of fairy tales and myths about alicorns. There was one 'biography of the ascending goddesses.' that caught her eye, but if she wanted to learn more about the Princess' past she knew all she had to do was ask them. She was almost ready to give up when she caught sight of a tome on the bottom shelf titled 'The four ponies of Equestria'. Picking it up and turning to the first page, the subtitle

explained it was 'An objective comparison of the roles, magics and strengths of the four types of ponies in the land of Equestria'. Twilight had never heard anyone speak as if all four types had magic - that was only unicorns, clearly. Still, it was the best she could do, and it looked like it would at least cover more than just an alicorn's spells. She kept it next to the first book. She glanced back to see if any other similar tome was nearby, and was surprised to find that the portion of the back wall of the shelf she had revealed was no back wall at all. Leaning down to look closer, Twilight realized there was a small book that had been jammed behind the others, including the tome she had just removed. She had to remove a couple other books to get it free. Floating it up to inspect it, Twilight couldn't make sense of the book. It had no title, no mark. It was barely big enough to hold a shopping list, looking all of a page thick. Most curious, it looked like it was bound in a black cloth, the material holding its shape yet soft, folding to the touch. Twilight was too intrigued to ignore it, and tucked it in with the others.

Before she could continue with search, something hit Twilight. Not literally, but internally, a coldness seemed to grip her innards. She looked toward the door, now in the distance. Something was aware the spell had been broken. Something had been triggered, and now some angry presence bore down on her. Twilight hadn't felt like this since she had stared a full grown dragon face to face. She needed to be gone, now. The spell was already on her horn before she thought to cast it. And she vanished.

Twilight didn't know when she had time to formulate the thought, but it came to her to try to pause before the spell was finished. She stopped herself, mid-teleport, and found herself back in that strange not-space as before. Only this time she was here voluntarily. She mentally probed for the books. They were here...only not. They felt ghostly, unreal, like she was dreaming their existence. In other words, to Twilight, they felt like magic did in the real world. But they were here, wherever here was. And Twilight felt she could find them again. She had no reason to believe she had been caught, no reason to suspect they knew it was her, but she wasn't going to run that risk after all she had been through to get these. She could still feel her levitation magic on them, and that marked them in her mind. She could maintain the spell - she hoped. So she continued on without the books.

To her surprise, she didn't land in her room. She didn't know if it was from her detour (which now seemed unreal to her, as dreamlike as the real world had been a second ago) or from her panic in casting the spell, but she was in Luna's room. That surprised her. What really startled her, however, was Princess Celestia was in the room as well, checking Luna's temperature as she slept fitfully.

"Ah, there you are Twilight." Celestia said calmly, turning to her. Twilight shivered, from

what she could tell it was just nerves. "And your assistant was so adamant you be left to sleep." there was no telling from her tone of voice whether she knew anything or not. Twilight was going to assume the worst, however.

"I'm sorry Princess. I wish I had responded sooner."

"I appreciate such dedication." Princess Celestia told. If she knew anything, it looked like she wasn't going to say anything. "But I don't think sister is in any state to raise the moon. I know she'll never admit it, however."

"She...feels she has a lot to work for, Princess." Twilight responded. If she could only get to studying, maybe before tonight she would be able to....Twilight didn't know what she thought she could do. But it had to be something!

"I have a task for you, my little pony." Celestia said, her eyes on her sister. "I must be away to tend to another meeting, but I hope you can convince my sister to come see me when she awakes. We will need to discuss plans for her wellness - I fear the castle may not be the best for her right now."

Did Celestia know? That would explain the guards. Things began to click into place for Twilight. She had to know, or at least suspect. Not enough to stop it (whatever it was) but enough to act. Twilight needed to tell her about the conversation, about when - she bit her tongue. About when she had been skulking about? Near where someone had clearly already found out about a magically sealed room had been broken into? Celestia didn't need to know, she clearly already had a plan in mind.

"Try to convince her to take the night off, my little pony. Please?" Celestia turned back to Twilight, and the young pony was moved by the sun princess's expression. She wore her concern openly, accentuated by a long-holding weariness. Twilight nodded. She would make her deeds up to her mentor. Even if she didn't know there was anything wrong.

"Thank you. And don't forget to rest yourself." Celestia bent down and briefly nuzzled her pupil. Twilight closed her eyes - such closeness to Celestia always left her feeling tranquil, regardless of the circumstances. The goddess turned around and sighed.

"And now I am off to discuss security with the bookkeepers and librarians." she said. Twilight perked up.

"Security?"

"Yes." Celestia looked over her shoulder, her face serene and unreadable.
"Something's got the archivist quite upset."

Chapter 4

After the Princess left, Twilight was determined to get to studying. She wasn't too clear on how she was going to go about retrieving her books - maybe another teleport was in order. Twilight was just getting ready when a knock on the door interrupted her concentration. She groaned, knowing she had to answer it before Luna was disturbed.

"Wha- Oh, Spike!" Twilight was surprised to find her assistant crossly tapping his foot outside the door. He came in without her invitation.

"Where were you, Twi?" he asked, clearly indignant. "You were gone for hours! Do you know how hard it is to keep a straight face when you're lying to the Princess of Equestria?"

"One of." Twilight corrected. "And sadly, yes. I'm sorry Spike." gears turned in her head. She couldn't have spent more than an hour and a half searching for books, probably less. Yet Spike was right - it was already well into the afternoon, several hours having passed from when she began her venture. Twilight wondered just what happened in that in between space she had discovered.

"I'll worry about that later." Twilight said with a shake of her head. Spike gave her a strange look.

"I've got studying to do..."

"Twi?"

"I only found a few books." she was already at Luna's desk.

"Twilight!"

"I think I should start with-"

"Twi! Light!" Spike shouted, hopping onto her desk. Twilight blinked. Spike gave her a flat look and held up a hand mirror.

"Spike this is hardly time for- oh." Twilight saw herself in the mirror. The bags under her

eyes were darker than Luna's coat. Her hair was ragged and her eyes bloodshot. Her stomach took this moment to remind her of last she had eaten. Twilight groaned.

"I don't have time to be tired!" she complained. The realization had been enough, however, and her body already felt like it was shutting down. She forced her eyes to stay open but could feel the strain.

"Twilight, you can't help anyone like this. How much magic have you cast today?"

"Just..." Twilight groaned. Her eyelids were winning the battle.

"Come on, Twi, go to bed."

"Can't...just....need to...." Twilight fell where she stood, her legs giving out. She had just enough thought left in her head to tuck in her legs comfortably. Then she was sound asleep. Spike facepalmed.

"I'll get you a pillow." he said to his comatose employer.

"She's so peaceful." came into the edge of Twilight's awareness.

"Trust me, this is the only time you get that." a more sarcastic voice tickled Twilight's mind. Who?

"Has she been out long?"

"A few hours. She'll be up and running in no time."

"What? That doesn't seem healthy."

"Trust me, when Twilight dedicates herself to something, she does not stop. You should have seen her trying to stop the whole Nightmare Moon thing."

"...what drives her now, then?"

"To be honest, Princess." the voice dropped lower. "As far as I can figure it - you."

Twilight drifted back asleep. When she woke up, really woke up this time, it was dark.

She lifted herself off the floor with a small groan. She found a pillow for where her head had been, but the floor had still been quite a stiff mattress. Twilight closed her eyes, squeezed them shut until any afterimage faded from her sight. She could feel another's magic.

"Princess Luna?" she opened her eyes. She could see nothing yet in the darkness, but she felt she knew where to look.

"Ah? Twilight, you're awake." Luna was beside her at the desk.

"Oh no! It's late! I'm already late-"

"Twilight, Twilight, please." Luna calmed her. Her horn gave off a blue glow, and the curtains drew back. The orange of sunset spilled into the room, casting long shadows but illuminating the two ponies. Orange didn't look good against her, a voice in Twilight's head said. She looked much better under the night. Twilight was much too distracted to notice this voice, however.

"Princess, I'm so sorry..."

Luna shook her head. "I've told you, an empty title." she smiled weakly. "Here, you should eat." with another glow of her horn, she lifted something off of the desk. It was a bowl of soup, which she placed before Twilight's hooves.

Twilight paused, but her stomach told her to take it or suffer the consequences. She obeyed.

"I ate what I could. Your assistant is quite the darling - when I awoke this afternoon I couldn't find five minutes when he wasn't making sure I was as best I could be."

Twilight secretly swore to herself that when all this was over, she would spend every bit in her stipend to buy Spike the biggest pile of rubies she could find. She glanced around for him and found him curled up on Luna's bed. She gave a sigh of relief and turned her attention back to Luna.

Something was wrong - that thought immediately imprinted itself on Twilight's mind. Well of course something was wrong, Luna was sick. But no, as Twilight looked at her, something just didn't seem right about the princess. Words she had thought silenced bounced around her head.

'Look what happened last time...'

"Twilight?" Luna asked, tilting her head. "Please don't say you're sick."

Twilight shook her head. "I'm sorry, P- oh, uh...what should I call you?"

Luna laughed, getting even closer to Twilight and sitting opposite her. "Luna, of course. If anyone has the right..."

Twilight bit her lip, not sure she could go through with such a request. But looking up at Luna, Twilight could see her waiting expectantly, eagerly. She wanted Twilight to call her by her name. She needed this. Twilight's concerns crumbled away.

"Thank you, Luna." she said, bowing her head. She didn't catch the brief lighting up of Luna's face before the moon princess caught herself. When Twilight raised her head, she was met by a cautious smile.

"Spike has told me of how hard you've been working." she told Twilight. Now why did that sound familiar? Twilight pushed the odd thought aside and continued to listen. "So I simply cannot detain you like I did so selfishly last night. I shall go to raise the moon, and then we'll discuss getting you back on a normal sleeping schedule."

"Please, I wouldn't have- the moon!" Twilight's mind snapped into full gear. "Pr- Luna, please, Princess Celestia wanted me to speak with you about..." she saw Luna close her eyes. She was almost ready to cry, it was clear.

"Sister doesn't think I can do it, does she?" she asked. Twilight's words died on her tongue, leaving her mouth full of bitter ash. She hung her head.

"Twilight, please, understand me. The night is all I have. I am no Princess, title or no. I do not run our trade, or direct our policies, or guide our people as Celly does so well. I do not even serve the function of so many noble clerks and pages, tending to and cultivating this nation. I must do this. For Equestria and for myself. I am such a selfish foal..." Luna had indeed begun crying, not sobbing or heaving but letting her tears roll down her cheeks.

"I..." Twilight couldn't find the words. Did she betray Celestia's trust once more? Prove herself incapable of aiding the Princess, who had mentored her from her time as a filly, on a matter so close to her heart? Or did she betray Luna, who despite all the reasons she had to the contrary, suddenly seem to matter so much more?

Still, she could not find words for this situation. She was at a complete lost. Or, well, most of her was. One little voice inside her made it quite clear what she should do. Her sense of propriety and respect tried to stifle it, aided by her insecurities and fears, but her compassion, quiet as it was, would not be silenced.

"Everyone needs to be shown some kindness." Fluttershy told her. And that didn't just mean smiles and being near. When she really needed it, Twilight had to be here for her. In truth, she wanted to. So, for once in her life, Twilight Sparkle paid attention to her heart over her head. She stood up and got on her back hooves, freeing her front legs to wrap Luna in a hug. Twilight brought her head over Luna's shoulder and with eyes closed tight held on to the young goddess.

For a while Luna just cried on her shoulder, her breath ragged, almost pained. Twilight felt her shift, and just as she took this as a sign to let go she found Luna's own arms around her. She felt herself tighten her hug, not by much but making sure Luna was against her. The two ponies held onto each other. For comfort, for support, for a myriad of reasons both apparent to them and not.

"Thank you Twilight Sparkle." Luna's voice was so close to her ear, so surprisingly welcome. Awkwardly, they began to work their way out the hug. Both ponies kept stopping and waiting on the other to loosen or move, wanting to make absolute sure they couldn't hold on a moment longer. Yet both also knew they couldn't simply stay there.

"Luna, I, I'm afraid what will happen if you try and raise the moon." Twilight said. Her words were honest, Celestia's request not even entering her mind. Luna nodded in defeat.

"I understand. Perhaps, then...a compromise?"

"Huh?" Twilight couldn't imagine how one could compromise such a thing as lifting the moon. An unexpected new moon, perhaps?

"I want you to help me raise the moon." Luna said, looking bashful.

"O-oh.....oh!" It hit Twilight what Luna was saying, why even now the Princess looked away from Twilight, glancing back from the corner of her eye. She refused to go to her own sister with this, but was willing to trust Twilight to help. Her one pride...and she wanted her, Twilight, as part of it. Twilight blushed. It was similar to that time she had helped Applejack out after the silly pony had tried to do a team's worth of harvesting in a

week - only this was more as if Applejack had allowed her and only her to help, and if she had always successfully done the work on her own before. Luna may not have had Applejack's stubborn pride, but it still could not be easy. Another point of difference was that Applejack hadn't asked her to do the work of gods....

"I, what could I do?" Twilight asked. Luna smiled.

"I felt your presence last night. You could follow my spell, couldn't you? Without a word of instruction you were able to follow along with what I was doing, and even reach the leylines of the sky. There is great power in you, Twilight, alongside great wisdom."

Her praise made Twilight really turn red this time. "I, I'm not that great. I've never...I wouldn't even know....what if I screwed up?"

"You won't. Trust me. I do not need much from you, but between the two of us we can do this. I was surprised, for only the rarest of ponies can even attempt celestial magic. But I knew that you were a rare pony." The smile on Luna's face was strangely happy for her weary state. She stood up and began to walk towards the door.

"What else am I to do?" she asked, opening the door. She looked over her shoulder at Twilight. "Please say yes."

Twilight took a breath, gave a moment's thought, and nodded with a sharp exhale. She got up and gave Luna a quick grin. Luna's eyes lit up, and she exited the door. She waited for Twilight to draw abreast of her.

"Thank you, you don't know how glad you have made me."

"It is my honor, Luna." Twilight said. And so as not to sound so formal, she added, "and I mean that."

"You are too kind. Come, the twilight is fading." Luna giggled. "Ah, and the Twilight comes to help usher in the night. I wonder sometimes if there isn't as much in a name as there is in a cutie mark? It certainly seems that way at times, does it not?"

Twilight found herself smiling, suddenly happier. "I guess it does. And I guess in a way I even have the cutie mark to match the situation. I wonder, I've always figured my talent is magic, but..." she looked to the mark on her flank with content. Luna nodded.

"What night is complete without stars? Ah, my cutie mark..." she looked back as well

briefly, but then a worried frown closed up her face. "...I guess it was a long time ago."

"Luna?"

"I...can't remember." Luna shook her head. "So much from back then is foggy. I know I had a life back then, but it is all just a dream. They tell me I am over a thousand years old, yet of those thousand years only a handful were my own. To be honest, while Celly has aged with grace, I feel your elder by a mere hoofful of years, and most certainly your junior by wisdom."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." Twilight said in earnest. "And thank you, but you do yourself a disservice. I've already learned a lot from you, Luna."

"You have?"

"Oh yes. Equestria will definitely benefit from your insight - Princess Celestia does a great job of course, but she's only one pony."

"Hmm." Luna looked up, and Twilight realized they were closing in on the same balcony as yesterday. Twilight swallowed hard. Was she seriously going to try this? Did she have the gall, the hubris? Imagine what her friends would say. Even they would think her boastful if she mentioned helping raise the moon. She remembered the incident with 'The Great and Powerful' Trixie. Her friends had taught her she could take pride in her abilities, but over-assuming one's greatness only led to a terrible fall. Not just Trixie had taught her that, she thought, but the ponies who had taken her on - Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and notable for her particularly pompous manner and hard fall - Rarity.

"It's not about that." Imaginary Rarity told Twilight, a hint of disgust in her voice. "You have a gift, my dear! Vision! And you need to share this gift! Come now, art requires sacrifice, and so does friendship." and with a clever wink, Imaginary Rarity was gone. Twilight nodded, steeling herself. Luna walked out onto the balcony and sat down. Still unsure what she was getting herself in to, Twilight followed and sat down beside her. Luna fidgeted like a nervous filly.

"There isn't the time to instruct you." she said. "I'm sorry..."

"Then, what can I do?" Twilight asked, perplexed. Luna looked surprised.

"Celly said it was uncommon these days, but...do you know the direct way to share magic?"

"Direct way?" Twilight's question was enough of an answer. Luna took a couple of breaths, trying to calm herself. She shifted around to Twilight, prompting the young unicorn to do likewise. Luna wouldn't look her in the eye.

"Do you trust me, Twilight Sparkle?" she asked. Twilight wasn't expecting the question. Did she? The words from the day before were still fresh in her mind. And something seemed off about the princess, even now. Something magically was wrong with her. What if Nightmare Moon was a literal poison to her? And what if that poison was taking hold? For the second time today and in her life, Twilight acted on impulse.

"Luna? Look at me." it was neither command nor request. Bashful, Luna's eyes darted upwards briefly, her gaze refusing to stay for long. Then, with a hard swallow of her own, she brought her eyes up to meet Twilight's. Twilight had her answer.

"Fully." she said, staring into Luna's eyes. Mournful, tears lingering, and so full of hope - Luna's eyes told her soul sincerely. Twilight didn't know how she knew, or if she really knew, but there was no argument inside of her when she looked into Luna's eyes.

"Lean forward." Luna whispered. Twilight did so, unsure but willing to follow. Luna leaned forward as well, head tilted. Twilight tilted her head more in return, and their horns met. A hot shiver ran down Twilight's spine at the unexpected sensation of the Princess' horn against her own.

"All it takes...is a spark." Luna murmured, eyes closed. Twilight felt something happen on her horn. Her eyes closed as the world began to swim. She could feel magic, magic that wasn't hers yet didn't feel not-hers either. Her world began to fade. The sensation was somewhat familiar to the limbo she had discovered when teleporting, only a smaller world, with landmarks and some sort of space. Twilight began to feel her world out, casting her mind around. She came across black chains of sorrow that warded some deep inner sanctum. Worry and loathing began to surround her like a miasma. In the distance, a feeble flicker of light gave her direction. It was the smallest bundle of hope, so fragile and ethereal. Cautious, unaware of what she was doing, Twilight instinctively reached out to it...

"Ahhh-ha!" In the real world, Luna's cheeks burned hot red as her heart surged with hope and elation. Twilight's mere touch caused the fire to surge forth. It was not wild, but neither was it weak any more. Twilight wasn't aware what she was doing, but she began to feel good as the miasma burned out like a fog at midday. Out of nowhere, she realized another presence. The presence dragged her away from the fire she had

cultivated, which stayed strong now without her care. Twilight could make out things about the presence, which seemed to also be the same thing as the place she was in now, if that made any sense. It was like the world she was in had taken an avatar. Slowly Twilight came to her senses, realizing Luna's consciousness spoke to her on a level more pure than thought. She followed it away from the chains and hope, into something that Twilight visually likened to be a scarred plain, empty and cracked. Yet a warm sky was the roof to this plain, and the entire thing imparted on Twilight a sense of acceptance. It was here that Luna's self began to teach Twilight. She learned of the leylines that crossed the earth, sky, and heavens. Of the magic all around them and inside every creature, every pony and besides. Of the magics of moon and star, and their surprising links not just to heavens but to the sky and earth. Of magical flow and current, the push and pull of energy. Entire concepts were imparted on her at once, and were suddenly as natural as had they been her own. Her own mind was hard at work processing all this, and filling in the gaps. She could feel Luna's surprise as Twilight realized the connection between the elements of harmony and the leylines, along with such things as how to draw magical energy from a source without damaging it. Twilight felt like she spent days under Luna's tutelage, examining in full the intricacy of the night sky and its centerpiece, along with its relationship to Equestria's brightest and most special star. She could tell when it came to an end, and Luna believed her to be ready. Twilight expected the link to end, but instead she felt Luna direct her attention elsewhere. Luna was herself part of the night sky, or it was a part of her. Twilight could touch the darkness and mold it, she could feel the distant heat of the stars. The magical ocean of the sky made itself clear to her, along with its underlying currents. She knew what to do. They would need to bolster this leyline here while drawing from three others, urge the stars to move and stifle the near-caustic energy of light that hovered at the edge of the sea of night.

The moon began to rise, though Twilight was not fully aware of it. The sky she had always seen was just two dimensions, and a limited two dimensions at that, of the sky that was. She didn't know where the moon's progress was, she only knew she was causing things to stir and shift. Not everything had to be so precise, she knew, and Luna encouraged her to dip her hoof in the waters, as it were. Twilight took a moment to swirl one dead patch of night, and then convinced some stars to part with a bit of their light, adding stardust to the mixture. She checked back to the moon and kept its path straight, damming smaller outlets of the stream of magic it rode. She could feel Luna as well, working both moon and star, and the two seemed to work perfectly around each other. Luna had to tell her when it was time. They were done. The magic was strong; the moon would ride it until daybreak with ease, when they would have to quiet the stars and let in the light. Twilight knew the spell would end soon. She reached out to Luna, wanting to give her thanks and support. She touched Luna at her core being. Suddenly

she was flooded with thought and emotion. Fear, depression, mental exhaustion. Hope, pride, a timid joy. Faded memories of a time that didn't exist, and a cautious look to what the future may bring. And one pure, passionate emotion dominated all else.

"Ahh!" Luna wrenched her head away, breaking the spell with force. Twilight gasped and found her front legs buckling, bringing her down onto the ground. Her world swam and her head seemed too full of thoughts for her to get a word in edgewise. She found herself gasping and sweating more than any other time in her life. She forced herself back into a sitting position, woozy but beginning to come back to reality. She found her eyes blurry when she opened them and had to rub both before she was able to find Luna in front of her. Luna was also panting, her head down, a furiously red blush across her face. Twilight's heart dropped like a rock. She was aware of what she had done. She crouched back down, prostrating herself.

"I'm, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"I...I know..." Luna replied, still panting. "T-Twilight. Th-that's not why...I, I could feel yours too you know."

"What?"

"Your soul. Th-that's what you did. I linked our minds, b-but you linked our souls. You were as laid bare for me as I was for you."

Twilight turned as red as the princess when she heard this. She couldn't say anything. She felt empty, numb of even emotion. After several moments of silence, the princess stopped panting and spoke again.

"You're wrong." she whispered. Twilight glanced up, finding Luna shaking her head.

"How can you...?" Luna's mouth worked for the words to come, but they refused. "You're wrong to feel that way. Not about me. You're wrong about me. How can you think so much about me?"

Twilight's mind was still numb. She heard the princess's words, but was afraid to listen to them. Afraid of what they meant, both to Luna and to her. Afraid that any emotion she felt would be too strong to ignore. So she didn't feel any emotion of hers. Instead, she remembered the feeling the princess had had. The one stronger than all else.

"You don't believe that." Twilight responded, her voice a croak. "You can't."

"I'm not worth it. After all I did."

"You didn't do it." Twilight argued. Against her will, she began to feel a rush of emotions, all at once. The dams broke, and she was swamped with confusion, anger (mostly at herself), worry, compassion and just plain passion.

"I felt that darkness. It was...frightening. But you've managed it, and you still have hope. You're stronger than you think." she didn't expect the aggression in her voice. It was born of desire, a desire to see Luna realize how precious she was. Luna refused, shaking her head.

"Don't. I'm sorry. I never should have...I was in the wrong. Forgive me."

"Luna.."

"Don't."

"Luna."

"Please."

"I've fallen in love with you."

Sobbing, Luna threw herself at Twilight, wrapping her arms around Twilight's neck and clinging to her. Twilight held onto her and got Luna's head positioned underneath her chin.

"Don't say you're not worth it, because you are." Twilight told her. "Don't say you've failed, because you've done so much. You're not weak. I learned not so long ago that in order to be strong, you have to stand together. I will be by your side, I promise."

Luna stayed still, but tears no longer flowed from her eyes. She shuddered and rubbed her cheek against Twilight's neck.

"I think...I'm in love with you, Twilight Sparkle."

"I know." Twilight said softly. "And I love you too, Luna."

"How?" Luna asked. "We barely know one another."

"I think we know each other better now." Twilight pointed out. "And to be honest, I don't care. You're smart and serious, but you're better at being playful than me. You're so strong and knowledgeable, but so kind. And..." Twilight's voice faltered a little at this point, "I've, I've never felt this about another mare, but, well, you're so beautiful to me."

Luna got off of Twilight, rubbing her tear-stained cheeks. She gave a small smile. "Another mare? I've never felt this for any pony at all. It was the least of the surprises after all this."

"Really?"

"Well, no, that does come as a bit of a shock." Luna admitted, making Twilight giggle. Luna was surprised, but quickly looked pleased with herself. Her gaze drifted towards the balcony, and she shifted to better look out at the sky. Twilight followed her gaze, and saw the full moon hanging low in the sky.

"We did it." Twilight realized aloud. She had a shift, and suddenly felt a pressure against her side. She realized Luna was leaning against her. They were both overly warm and sweaty, absolutely exhausted - and there was no better feeling in the world.

"You did so much. It was amazing" Luna said, reverence in her voice. Rather than blushing at the compliment, Twilight just smiled.

"I had a great teacher, after all." she responded. Luna giggled. That noise made Twilight's heart quiver. She knew then that she would carry the moon on a harness the whole length of the night sky just to hear that noise. She tilted her head, finding it fit perfectly on the taller pony's shoulder. Luna rested her head over Twilight's. Twilight thought to their horns. They would have to do that again, sometime. She had so much to share with Luna.

"Whatever you say," Luna began "you've been so strong for me. I promise, it is my turn to be strong for you. I shall not let this illness keep me. We will find a way to overcome it."

Those words struck mortal blows to Twilight's contentment. She could still feel something wrong with her new love, but she had literally seen the moon goddess' heart and mind laid bare. The darkness in her heart was often bleak instead of comforting, but it held no malice. It was the dark heart of a troubled pony, not an evil one, to be settled, not struck down. No poison crippled her, at least not of her own doing. Which left only

Twilight's worst fears of today possible. Someone was trying to do in Princess Luna. And that someone was succeeding.

"It's silly, isn't it?" Luna asked, bringing Twilight's attention out of such bleak thoughts. "My own work, yet like everyone else I can't help but to find it romantic."

"I have always loved the moon and stars." Twilight told her, trying to put aside her fears. "I saw them often while studying, and whenever there was a meteor shower I never missed it. I guess it's not that surprising, this."

"What?" Luna asked with a laugh. "You fell in love with me because of the moon?"

"Maybe I did." Twilight admitted. "I fell in love with the artist after admiring her work for so long. Maybe it wasn't your hoof in the night sky, but Princess Celestia was only preserving what you had done."

"I spy someone else's hoof in my night sky." Luna said, pointing up to the right of the moon. Twilight looked up and found a glimmering whirl of sparkling stars in the night sky. Milky stardust really gave it the appearance of a swirl of water in a river. Twilight couldn't believe it. She had put that there.

"You have a true gift." Luna told her. "Though I shouldn't be so surprised. You should have seen my first attempts with the stars."

"I'm sure they were just beautiful."

"Oh, so ponies say. They're being nice."

"You mean, they're still up there? But the night sky changes every night."

"For the most part. The constellations, Twilight." Luna pointed across the sky. "My baby art. Look at that, ursa minor - what was I thinking! I was so proud of them as a filly I kept them up every night. By the time I grew tired of them, ponykind was so used to them that I felt obligated to keep them up. And then she didn't touch them for a thousand years - I've seen entire legends built around them. Ahh, I'll always have to live with that embarrassing display."

Twilight laughed. "I can only imagine you as a filly. I think it's adorable."

Luna was silent, and when she still hadn't said anything after a couple minutes Twilight

shifted enough to look at her. She found Luna's eyes closed, fresh tears on her cheeks.

"Luna?"

"I, I can't handle it." she smiled. "I can't remember ever feeling this way. It's enough to make me forget how weary I am. I'm sorry."

Twilight nuzzled against Luna's neck, moved by her. "I understand. And you are still weary. Maybe we should get inside before it gets too cold."

Luna nodded and opened a wing, wrapping it around Twilight's back. Her down was softer than the clouds Twilight had walked on in Cloudsdale. She hadn't forgotten Luna's state. She would get to studying intensely the night, and promised herself not to leave Luna's side until the moon was back below the horizon. For now however, if she wanted to help Luna, she needed to be here. To be frank, there wasn't anywhere she'd rather be. Her mind wandered. What exactly would this mean? She loved Luna - that is, Princess Luna, goddess of the moon, co-ruler of Equestria. Even if Luna eschewed the title, she wouldn't do so to her duties, and was working to get more involved in ruling at that. Was it proper for a Princess to even have such a relationship? She had never heard of anyone by Princess's Celestia side. And especially someone like her, Twilight! Another mare, and one barely old enough not to be called a filly. Let alone things like her lack of noble birth. Would they even be able to see each other, all that somehow solved? Twilight couldn't imagine abandoning her friends, but neither could she leave Luna.

"Twilight? Are you ready?" Luna asked. Twilight squeezed her eyes shut, wanting to focus and capture this moment. In case.

"Yeah. Let's go," she replied, getting up as Luna took her wing away. It was time to get to work.

Chapter 5

Luna was holding up well on the walk to the library, though Twilight could read the strain on her face. She didn't really know how to behave. What was expected of her? What should she do? Should she treat Luna like a fillyfriend? That didn't even answer any questions, given that Twilight had the dating experience of a particularly socially inept rock.

"Twilight? What's going through your mind?" Luna asked. Twilight realized she had been staring.

"Ah, uh...I'm sorry. I'm just nervous. I don't know what to do, I mean, about...us?" the term seemed so foreign, so odd to apply. Luna both blushed and smiled, equal parts embarrassed and elated. At least Twilight knew she wasn't alone.

"You needn't worry. All you've done, and still you want to do more." she leaned over as they walked and nuzzled the side of Twilight's neck, playing with her mane. Twilight nickered, ticklish.

"There is generosity, but there is sacrifice. For my sake, please, do not go too far."

"Alright."

"Promise me."

"I...promise." Twilight said with a nod. Luna was satisfied with that. They reached the library, and once again they both stopped to soak in the comfort of the place. This time they ended by turning to each other with a shared laugh. Luna headed over to her table - there was a lot of tax law to go through. Twilight decided to clear a little corner to pull out one of her books. She glanced over, finding Luna already engrossed in her studies. Twilight gathered herself. Even with the aid of Luna's bonds with the night, Twilight had done no meager amount of magic. Yet she found her limits growing by leaps and bounds. She knew the magic that came from the bonds of friendship (from what Luna had helped her learn, it was one of the most natural sources of magical energy), and wondered if with new bonds came new power. Either way, despite the spells she had already cast, she had no trouble winking out. The spell seemed to actually come more naturally - perhaps she was gaining familiarity with the magics involved. She found

herself in the plane again. Everything felt more real now. She could almost claim to have a form - she could at the least better mark the boundary where her self ended and the rest of the plane began, though it still felt like these were blurry concepts for the world. Casting out her mind, she found the books, just as she had hoped. It only now occurred to her that she couldn't make out the books enough to distinguish one from the other. She grabbed one at random and winked back.

"What did you do?" Luna greeted her. Twilight blinked. Luna was staring straight at her, wide-eyed.

"You disappeared, but I could still sense you. Only barely...if your magics weren't so similar to mine, I might not have at all."

"Was I gone long?"

Luna shook her head. "Ten minutes perhaps."

Twilight sighed. "To me it was just a few seconds. I, I have this spell, I don't know how I found it, where I essentially teleport. Only it looks like actually move through this...other space."

"Other space?"

"Magic seems solid, and what's solid more like magic. I found it out accidentally, but I can go there, even store things." she floated up the book. It turned out she had grabbed the small black book. Probably it wouldn't be helpful, but she could at least figure that out quickly.

"That's..I've done that with night before. But what space could you have found? I've never come across such a thing with another pony."

Twilight could only shrug her shoulders. "I've never tried bringing another pony there, not exactly. For now, it's convenient." she placed the book down. Luna nodded, though she gave a worried glance at Twilight before returning to her books. Twilight opened the book to its one and only page. Immediately she frowned.

"Luna? Do you recognize this book?" she asked, holding it up again to Luna. Luna looked up, blinked, and shook her head.

"No, should I?"

"It's...got your name in it. It only has your name in it." she opened it up, and sure enough, the one word on the page, in flowery letters, very simply read 'Luna'. Luna stared at it much longer than it took to read.

"I...no. I've never seen..." she shook her head and rubbed her temples. "Maybe it something I forgot? I can't...let me try something." she gestured for the book. Twilight floated it over, and Luna took it between her hooves, pressing it closed firmly. She took a breath and focused on the book. Her horn sparkled with magic. There was a brief flash of darkness (an odd experience, though Twilight admitted to herself it was preferable to a flash of light) and Luna let go of the book. It spilled open - and kept going. Page after page came out of nowhere, falling to one side or the other of the book, forcing it to grow apart on the table. It grew thicker and thicker, not stopping until it had easily three hundred pages or more, opened about halfway in. Twilight's jaw dropped and she rushed to Luna.

"It is mine. That...I used that trick to hide things from Celly as fillies. I think. But...I can't actually remember when I used it on a book."

"What is it?" Twilight asked. She glanced to the page but caught herself. "Ah, sorry.."

Luna shook her head. "Go ahead, I'm as curious as you."

'Celly was so mean today!' the book told them in flowing letters. 'I worked so hard on my golem. "Where's its wings?" she asked. "Where's its horn? What makes it special?". I tried to explain how its magic was inside. How it would be stronger, sturdier, and more reliable than her golems. "That's just like you, Luna." she laughed at me! "Hiding things away. It was a cute try, little sis." Little sis! I'm not a filly anymore. But I'll show her. She'll come around. Celly's just being Celly."

"It's a diary." Luna and Twilight realized together. Luna's brow furrowed.

"These are my words....why don't I remember any of this? I knew my memories were hazy, but this....why can't I remember this?"

"What happens when you try to think back to before Nightmare moon?"

"I...hnn..." Luna closed her eyes and put both hooves on her head. She shuddered and bit her lip.

"N-no. No I won't cry anymore."

"Luna?"

"The nightmares." Luna said, unwrapping her hooves and putting them on the table. "I try not to think...I just see the nightmares."

"The nightmares?"

Every day, every minute, every second as Nightmare Moon, I was living a nightmare. Trapped in the moon, I don't know. I think I shut down, let Nightmare Moon just have me. If I fought back, that was when the nightmares happened. I wouldn't have survived otherwise."

"I, I never knew! Did you tell Celestia?"

Luna shook her head slowly. "And burden her? Make her feel guilty for what she had to do? No." she shuddered. "T-Twilight, could you please..."

She need not say more- Twilight wrapped her arms around Luna tightly. She didn't let go until Luna stopped shivering. In the meantime, however, her mind turned. This mere passage brought up a half dozen questions to mind. It was hard to imagine that once upon a time, Celestia and Luna hadn't gotten along. Or at least so it seemed. She could never imagine Princess Celestia laughing at her sister. Then again, perhaps a thousand years rule wizened one a little. Twilight kept her tongue until she felt Luna calm. She felt selfish for how good it felt to be there for her.

"I'm sorry." Luna sounded like a scolded filly.

"You're getting stronger." Twilight told her. She saw Luna smile, uplifted by the remark. They turned back to the book.

"What's a golem, do you remember?"

Luna furrowed her brow. "It sounds so familiar. Golems are...were... they're important. Somehow."

"Hold on, I'm going to check something." Twilight told her. She winked away. Luna could only stand and wait for a couple minutes, keeping an anxious gaze on Twilight's spot. The young magician popped back in only five minutes later.

"Long?"

"No, quicker than last time." Luna told her. She could see the gears turn in Twilight's head.

"Hmm. I'm getting used to it." Twilight said, more to herself than to Luna. She had two books with her. Glancing at their titles, Twilight brought over 'On the magic of Alicorns'.

"Where did you get that?" Luna asked, impressed by the book's apparent age. Twilight cringed.

"Funny story about that. I...I may have....well, teleportation kinda makes every door look open."

Luna extended her wing to embrace Twilight. "I understand. I would hardly expect anything so mundane to stop you when you have a goal in mind."

"Right. Mundane." Twilight replied. Luna just laughed at her. Gathering herself, Twilight pushed aside books to make a gap for the tome of magic. She turned to the index, Luna reading right along.

"Golems....Golems...here we are. Only one page, huh." Twilight flipped to the noted page. It was in a chapter concerning the original elements - Earth, Sky, and Heaven. There was just one paragraph near the bottom of the page. Twilight read it aloud.

"A golem is a construct of the elements, usually based in earth, ordered by Alicorn binding magic (see page 264) and animation magic (page 83). Golems were used by the Alicorns Celestia and Luna to help in their construction of Equestria, and were never seen after the spread of ponykind, unnecessary past the construction of the land."

Finished, she turned around to Luna. The princess was deep in thought, and looked absolutely upset with the book.

"No."

"What?"

"No, that's not right." Luna shook her head. "We didn't 'make' Equestria. I still remember them."

"Them?"

"The first alicorns. Earth, Sky and Heaven."

"There were other alicorns?" Twilight asked, hopeful but still surprised. Princess Celestia had never mentioned anything about other alicorns, though Twilight was sure there had to be something. Yes, the sun princess had never spoken much about her past at all, but Equestria was rife with creation stories (Celestia didn't like 'spoiling' things, she once claimed) but not a one mentioned three alicorns.

"They made Equestria. You can guess by their names. They made it..." she squinted, "...and they left us."

"Left you?"

"I don't know. I remember them, but whenever I think of Celestia and I as a filly, I only see...us."

"That must have gotten lonely." Twilight said. Luna's head snapped erect, her eyes wide and pupils small.

"Lonely." she murmured, staring into nothingness.

"Luna? Luna, are you okay?" Getting no reaction, Twilight waved her hoof in front of Luna's face. Still getting nothing, she began to check Luna's temperature. That was when Luna grabbed her by the shoulders, face almost frightening in glee.

"I remember!" she practically yelled.

"That's...great!" Twilight said, mixing excitement with a bit of fear at Luna's expression. Fortunately the princess let her go.

"We were so lonely. We didn't know why we had been left. So we made the golems."

"Yes?" Twilight egged her on. Luna scratched her head, but continued.

"Celly made...it was like a unicorn. She had me gather stardust and mix it with mud and wind. We were so excited when we told it to move a rock and it moved it."

"The golems were like ponies?"

"Y-yes." Luna replied, sounding none too sure. "Yes. I made one like an earth pony, that's what that entry was about. We did use them for things, that was right. They were like dolls. The book was right - you told a golem what to do and they did it. I wish I could remember more."

"This is still great, Luna. Maybe more of your diary would help you remember." she began to levitate the book towards Luna, but Luna blocked it with a hoof.

"Read it with me." she said. "I may need your help understanding."

"Are you sure?"

Luna giggled and nuzzled Twilight for a few seconds. "You've seen deep inside me. If you haven't mocked me yet, I doubt my ravings as an unwise filly will change that."

"I don't know." Twilight teased. "You sound pretty silly."

"Twilight!" Luna's face dropped. She sniffled. "I, I thought...."

"Ahh, Luna, no, I meant-" Twilight stopped as Luna dropped the act and began giggling madly. Twilight smiled, but Luna continued giggling. It was infectious, and before Twilight knew it her lips were quivering. The two ponies leaned on one another for support as they laughed for several minutes straight. As they calmed down, Twilight stuck her head under Luna's chin, finding another giggle in her as Luna's mane tickled her nose. She nuzzled once and removed herself from Luna.

"Alright. Alright. We should get to work."

"Twilight?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

It caught Twilight off guard. They had said it before in the heat of the moment, with their emotions laid bare. But now here they were in a library at who knew what hour. And the feeling was none the less for it.

"I love you too. Now let's get to work."

Chapter 6

Twilight skimmed through the diary. Luna had fallen asleep; willing oneself strong only went so far, especially when sick, and she needed to be ready to guide the moon down. She lay at Twilight's feet, a book as a pillow. A voice in Twilight's head had been telling her to just lay down beside her, keep her warm....Twilight had never been smitten before, and surprised herself constantly with the thoughts that ran through her head. But she turned it all into fuel for her study. To figure out what was making Luna sick. Something told her to keep going through the diary. At some point, she had decided, she was going to have to introduce Luna and Rarity to each other for real, given the Princess's professed love of gems (how would the night sky look in rubies, not diamonds, she asked her diary at one point) and pretty things in general. It was also uncanny at times reading about Luna trying to study or practice magic (studying being much more hands on when you were inventing literally everything) while life kept interrupting. A thousand years and more besides stretched between Luna and Twilight, yet more kindred spirits than they could not be found.

Most immediately important was the talk of the golems. Both sisters loved their creations, and gave them ever more complex tasks, along with making them more refined to carry out these tasks. But the diary was beginning to take an odd turn.

'I don't understand why Celestia won't leave the elements of harmony alone. Earth, Sky and Heaven gave them to us, and I guess she still misses them. But I don't like them. Celestia was always more energetic, and while it's good to see her studying, I think she's missing something. The elements feel...wrong. Incomplete? Something, dear diary. I don't know what she wants to do with them'

A few pages later, Twilight found this entry. 'Celestia's done something to some of the golems. She's messing with the elements all the time. I don't like it, but when I said something about it, she wouldn't listen. "Imagine Luna. Imagine what they could do. We need to stop playing with little foal's toys." what is she after? I went back to my studies. I like my golems. They're quiet, and they help out. But...I guess I'm still lonely. Maybe I could teach them to talk?'

Ambition. Celestia had had ambition, like Twilight had never seen. It was only the two of them and all the golems they could make. Celestia wanted them to be more, and she thought the elements of harmony (minus the element of magic) could help. But Luna

had known there was another. Twilight remembered Luna's words that first day. Could they really have been dangerous? Twilight was beginning to see what happened to the golems.

"Uhhh....Twilight?" Luna's voice was so unsteady. Twilight looked down. Luna was barely awake, her eyes refusing to focus. She looked horrid.

"Could you...get me something to eat?"

"Luna! Are you alright?" the question was worthless, but Twilight couldn't help but ask. Luna gave a smile.

"I'm going to be strong. But...I just need to get my energy up." she tried to lift her head, but couldn't manage and dropped it back down. Twilight felt worse than that time a cockatrice had turned her body to stone. Now it was like she had been turned to ice. Luna was getting worse, much worse. Twilight had to do something. But she hadn't learned anything. Well, that wasn't true. The effect was magical. But no spell was at work, not that either of them could see. It didn't come from within Luna. Maybe if they would disrupt the magic, yet....

"Luna...do you trust me?"

Luna looked up in confusion, but when she saw Twilight's face, she smiled. They both knew the answer, but Twilight still wanted to hear her say it.

"Fully."

With a nod of her head, Twilight began the spell. Her horn glowed much brighter than usual. The two of them began to glow, and with a flash, both disappeared.

Twilight cast out her mind. Every visit made things easier. Position didn't make sense, but energy did, and there was a way to navigate the plane through that. Honestly she had blundered so much her first couple times it was more luck than skill that the books had remained intact. She found Luna. Like a filly trying to learn to swim, Luna was flailing mentally in this strange medium. And like the practiced mother, Twilight reached out and steadied her. They traded thoughts not quite words, but the sentiment of their 'conversation' was easy to understand.

"Where? What?" Luna's confusion reigned over all else.

"Don't worry." Twilight soothed her. "This is what I'm talking about. If you focus, you can feel things with your mind. You have something like a form. It's similar to when our horns met."

The mention of that brought a little bit of embarrassment to the surface of Luna's consciousness. Still, her fear calmed and she took her first strokes into the water.

"Yes, I can see. But with even less structure. How are you doing that, Twilight?"

"Doing what?"

"You, you feel like part of this world. I can barely see where you end."

"Lines are blurry, but trust me, I feel distinct."

"Hmm. I wonder...you remember me talking about how I can move through the darkness, and sister the light?"

"Yes?"

"Well...perhaps this realm is natural to you. Perhaps this is tied to your magics."

"Perhaps. How do you feel?"

"I feel..." Luna paused. Twilight could feel her turn inwards.

"I feel better already. But...not myself."

"Let me check something." Twilight said. She began to test Luna's form. The lunar pony was more distinct, being a mix of magic and flesh, and magic unlike any around the realm. Body and mind were not so clearly separated, and Twilight wasn't sure what she was looking at. That didn't stop her from finding what she was after.

"A spell - oh no!" Twilight probed the filigree web she found around Luna, somewhere around her lower consciousness. It crumbled apart at her touch, disintegrating into the background. Twilight scrambled to catch a piece. She could almost make out the magic. It was something she had seen before, but...it was gone before she had a chance.

"What was that? I felt something briefly." Luna asked.

"..." Twilight didn't know how to say it. However, she still was no expert at this realm and left her emotions bubbling on the surface of her mind.

"Oh...Oh by the Earth and Sky." Luna said. Well, at least Twilight knew what a goddess swore by. She didn't know if the remorse she felt was hers, Luna's, or both.

"Someone's trying to kill you. And they nearly succeeded. Whatever that was, I think it was drawing your energy off."

"No...no..." Luna was terribly shaken. Twilight brought forth what she always held inside her, regardless of the situation. It wasn't hers, so much as something her friends had given her. Really it had been the greatest lesson Pinkie Pie had taught her. She brought up the laughter inside her. Not a chortle or a giggle, of course. It was the joy inside her, a joy that would survive any darkness or trouble because she knew that it was that very joy that would see her through. She shared this inner laughter with Luna. Like a balm over a wound, it began to soothe the troubled Princess. It didn't eliminate the fear and distress, but it allowed Luna to think straight.

"Thank you, Twilight. I needn't fear so with you nearby, I must remember that. Yet, what are we to do? I, I was just beginning to believe I had a chance to help serve this nation again. Who would hate me so?"

"I don't know. I really...I don't know." Twilight told her, sadly. "For now, you're safe. The spell fell apart. Whoever it was will probably try again, but we can tell Princess Celestia."

"Yes, of course. Celly will know what to do. We just need to get through the night."

"I'm learning more about how this place works. I think I'm getting better at time, but I can look out for when it's time to lower the moon."

"Thank you Twilight. I feel you could manage it on your own, if the need arises."

"I...I don't want to take that from you."

"You're not. But thank you, my love. I feel better here."

"It should replenish your magic. It takes effort to work spells here, yet it otherwise feels so pleasant..."

"I do wonder, Twilight, if you are not somehow linked to this domain."

"Perhaps? I don't know." Twilight said.

"So, what shall we do? I can guess time will pass easier here, but there are still hours."

Twilight paused. A voice inside her that she had been ignoring for the past couple hours was creating quite a clamor.

"...Twilight?" Luna asked, no doubt sensing Twilight's mix of feelings.

"I have some ideas." Twilight told her. She used their mental link to open herself, her true emotions. She could feel shock initially from Luna - and then all her emotions were returned in full force.

Time immeasurable passed for the two ponies. Twilight allowed Luna to see inside her to her core. Fear and insecurity swarmed about, she admitted this. And Luna showed her her own fear. They were in the same position, both afraid above all else to do wrong to the other. This soothed Twilight, and the fear gave way to warm acceptance heated by a passion below. Luna had inspired her and her heart. She let this soft heat wash over Luna, and felt the other pony's delight. Yet she wanted more than that. There was still something between them. When Twilight brought this up, she felt Luna recoil – then stop. She turned back to Twilight. She gave cautious approval, a wish only for kindness and gentleness. Twilight agreed, and reached into Luna. The inner sanctum of her soul was still sealed. Twilight wrapped herself in her love for Luna – it was fresh and untested, still soft and gentle. The chains of sorrow inside Luna's heart gave way to Twilight. She touched Luna at her core, feeling the dark smoothness of isolation. Luna gave a mental gasp. Twilight was not deterred by this wall, but went no further. She extended the invitation, and Luna accepted it. The darkness trembled, and the final locks were undone on her heart. Twilight found herself as in a sauna, the wet heat of passion soaking into her. She felt Luna's elation, and returned it in kind, until the two mixed and were inseparable, indistinguishable in origin. She was in true union with the goddess.

It was hard to tell for how long they were simply giddy with emotion, but they were both ponies not well suited to simply revel in mindless joy for long. They finally began to calm, and the psychic pillow talk ensued. Twilight showed memories of her friends to Luna, retelling the stories with all their detail. Luna had no stories to tell, but would share knowledge she often couldn't remember learning. As she did so, things came back to her. She talked about the origin of the stars and how she occasionally relit them, and it came to her the first time Heaven brought her to see the stars up close. At

Twilight's egging, Luna showed her a memory of herself as a filly, viewed through a still-water pond. When Twilight was done giggling, Luna prodded her until she returned the favor.

Twilight's mind drifted to thoughts of reality. She had not truly forgotten the situation, and knew that all the time they had spent here could well have translated into a night's worth outside. Reluctantly, she expressed this sentiment to Luna.

"Luna...I think I should go check."

"Already? It can't be time."

Twilight laughed a little at her. "Even here it's been a while. How long have we spent...doing, I don't know what to even call it."

"Neither do I, but whatever it was it was, to be honest, magical."

"Haha." Twilight gave the mental equivalent of a nuzzle to Luna. "Still, let me check. I think if I tweak my spell I can find my way out onto the balcony."

"Alright. Please don't be long."

"I promise." Twilight told her. She moved through the energy field tentatively. Her spell felt different here - like she was ordering the world around her. She was creating a pathway for herself, almost a tunnel. She slid back into the real world.

"Ah-ha!" she said with pride. She was right where she wanted to be. She looked around. The moon was low in the sky. Twilight took focus, her horn shimmering purple - not its usual bright glow, but something but more like Luna's. The leylines of the night sky became apparent to her. The moon was beginning to stutter, its path weakening, order unraveling. They were a little late for a perfectly smooth transition, but Twilight was sure she they could manage it together. She looked herself over as well, wanting to make sure that an extended stay in wherever that was was actually healthy for a pony. Her coat was ruffled and her mane a mess, her pink stripe spread out to give her hair a more evenly fading color. She flexed her legs, finding them stiff but not painful. She nodded at what she saw, everything was fine. She winked back into the plane.

"Luna?" she prodded the other pony.

"How is everything?"

"Good, but we should hurry."

"Alright. Lead the way." she clung to Twilight. Twilight prepared the spell again and guided Luna through.

"Whew." Luna sighed when they reached the balcony. She stretched each leg out and looked around. She grinned at Twilight.

"What?" Twilight asked, wondering if Luna had forgotten how dangerous their situation was.

"You look so scruffy! My goodness, pardon me. I suppose I'm still giddy after all that."

"Trust me, you're no better off." Twilight pointed. Luna glanced around and discovered most of her vision was blocked by her mane. The unruly blue hair had gone everywhere, curling into her eyes, down the side of her face, and up into the air. Her tail looked like one big cotton ball at that.

"Hah, I suppose we both look like we've taken quite a romp!" Luna said. Twilight blushed, which confused Luna. She tilted her head, her expression asking for an explanation.

"That, uh, it's..." Twilight had to remember that technically, Luna's language was just a bit outdated.

"I'll explain later. We should get to work. Oh, I mean...do you still need me to...?"

"It would make me feel safer." Luna said. "I'm not at my best yet."

"Alright." Twilight nodded. They both sat down to face the moon. They lowered their horns in tandem. Luna's gave off it's bluish-night glow, and Twilight's a lighter purple. Both spells grew in power, the magic around their horns becoming more real, more solid. Twilight could feel Luna's magic adjacent to her own. Luna was reaching out, and Twilight allowed it to intertwine with her own. Together they reached the night sky. There was magic to unravel this time, and more to bolster. The stars had to be sent to sleep - still there, but hidden to allow the day sky to shine evenly. Luna got started on the moon itself while Twilight began to prepare for the coming sun. It wasn't as intensive, but they had to be thorough lest they leave the night lingering in the sky. When the work was over, both ponies were tired, but not as much so as after raising the

moon. Twilight sighed as she came back into her head.

"Okay?" she asked Luna. Luna nodded and yawned.

"Don't worry, I am tired but I will hardly pass out once more. How are you?"

"Me? I'm fine." Twilight asked, confused at the question. Luna gave her a worried glance.

"Twilight, you have still been up the whole night and more. You're bending space itself. How do you do it?"

"I..." Twilight looked down at her hooves. She could feel exhaustion, now that she looked. But there was a distance to her tiredness, she was holding it at bay. She couldn't help but smile.

"I guess it's just, when there's something I need to do, I don't like to stop until I'm done."

"Something I've certainly learned these past few days. Let us both get some rest then."

Twilight nodded in agreement. Held at bay or not, her tiredness was real and she didn't want to pass out again either. They turned away from the balcony. A thought struck her.

"Hold on one second." with that, she vanished. It was actually a teleport this time, and she popped right back to Luna. She had Luna's diary floating besides her. Luna nodded.

"Good idea. Did you get far?"

"I think you were right about the elements of harmony. I don't know though. While we walk back, why don't we?"

"Yes, lets." Luna replied. Twilight flipped open deeper in the book. She read aloud as they trotted back.

"I tried to talk Celestia out of it, but she doesn't listen to me anymore." Twilight and Luna traded a worried glance. "She spends all her time with the elements. I wanted to tell her that they weren't necessary. That golems were more than just dolls, and we didn't need the elements. I don't think she cares. I think she's forgotten why she was studying to begin with."

Twilight swallowed, frightened by what she read. She flipped ahead a couple pages.

" 'You've named your toys. How cute' she said. I didn't tell her that Star Shine named herself. I want her to think they're just toys, then maybe she'll ignore them. I found, a, I can barely write it! I found a broken golem near where she makes her home. Not broken - dead. I was afraid to move it, but Helios urged me. It was an earth golem, so we returned it to the earth. I wonder if it felt anything. I don't know what she's after. But I fear my nightmares will be worse than usual tonight."

Luna shivered. Twilight could barely make sense of the words on the page. What had happened?

"Twilight!" Twilight looked up as she was called. Spike was running towards her, arms waving wildly.

"Spike, what's the matter?" Twilight asked, putting the book aside for the moment. Spike panted heavily and stopped right in front of them to catch his breath, hands on his knees.

"The guards are going crazy! What did you do?"

"What?"

"They only let me go after they were sure I couldn't tell them where you were. What did you do? They're really angry."

Twilight and Luna shared a glance. Luna bit her lip briefly.

"It couldn't be..." she said.

"I don't know, but for now...Spike, stay close."

"Huh?" was all Spike had time to ask. They flashed out of existence. When he next looked, they were surrounded by musty books.

"The library's back room?" he asked. Twilight looked around.

"I panicked. Luna, we need to hide you."

"And do what? You don't really think, it couldn't be...?"

"What's going on?" Spike asked. Both ponies ignored him.

"I think we need to read that diary." Twilight said. Luna nodded, so Twilight opened it further in. She decided to look near the back, finding the last entry. The writing was shaking.

"I found the spell. Curse the elements! I don't know what's happened. My Celly is gone. She's completely gone. She goes about now with her hooves gilded in gold, magic radiating from her mane. And she was responsible for my nightmares! I nearly didn't find the spell, but Star Shine spoke to one of Celestia's golems and found out. I can still feel it inside me though. She wanted control. Now she's controlling me. I can feel it inside me, laughing at me. It's winning. I know it is. It's been too long, it's too deep inside me. There's only one thing I can do. I'm going to let it win. But I'm not going to let Celly win. She never figured it out. Why my golems aren't golems anymore. Why they can think for themselves, feel for themselves. I'm going to free her golems, before she uses them to destroy this land. All it takes is a spark..."

Twilight looked up from the book. She could feel Celestia's presence. They had been found out. It was no surprise really. Spike was just wide eyes, stunned at what he had heard.

"Spike! Hide!" Twilight hissed.

"W-what?"

"In the bookshelf. Hide, and don't come out. Now!" Spike jumped at her words and ran deeper into the room. Twilight turned to Luna.

"What are we going to do. I...I can't believe it, yet...it's so familiar."

"Stay here." Twilight told her. "I-I'll think of something." she turned towards the door.

"Twilight!" Luna cried. Twilight paused, but didn't turn around. She walked out the door. Below the balcony, in the middle of the room, Celestia stood. She was already looking up, waiting for Twilight. She gave the same serene smile as always.

"Hello, my faithful student."

Chapter 7

"Twilight, you look so worried." Celestia said, eyes on Twilight. The young magician swallowed, trying to keep a straight face. Celestia's eyes narrowed.

"Tell me what troubles you, my little pony."

The words lurched from Twilight's mouth. "We found Luna's diary!" her eyes widened.

"Sister." Celestia called. "Come out now. It's time to let in the light." Twilight looked over her shoulder. She noticed a flash of green light under the door. It creaked open.

"Luna, no!" Twilight told her.

"I must, Twilight. We shall stand strong together." Luna stepped out of the door.

Meanwhile, in the Ponyville Library, a piece of paper came from nowhere and floated gingerly down onto the face of a pegasus sleeping on the library floor. The pegasus, still asleep, tried to blow the paper off of her.

Shall you now?" Celestia asked. She turned to Twilight. "It's time to sleep, my little pony."

Twilight stumbled. "Twilight!" Luna called her name, but it sounded so distant. Her eyelids grew heavy. No. No, she couldn't rest yet. The world blurred.

"Sleep, my little pony. Sleep. And never wake up." Celestia's voice echoed in her head. No. She had to keep awake. She couldn't see anything. She was only vaguely aware she was on the floor. There was only the blackness.

"Come on, Twi!" Rainbow Dash told her. What? "I thought you were a better friend than that! Psh, and I gave up the Shadowbolts for you." she stamped her hoof. "What, you're tired? That's what you get for sticking your head in books all the time. C'mon, up. We

got work to do."

"Now what in tarnation is going on here?" Applejack asked. "Rainbow, help me get this 'un up"

"Up up up!" Pinkie Pie bounced around her head. "You gotta get up!"

She's right, darling." Rarity helped her up. "You simply can't leave a marvel like that on her own. Don't you know how true love is supposed to work?"

"Twilight?" Fluttershy asked. "Um, if it's alright...it's time to get up now." she saw all her friends, together. They stood together, strong - with her.

In the library, the pegasus groaned awake. She couldn't get the paper off her face, and got up as she brushed it up. The writing on the paper caught her eye.

The flare of magic made the guards approaching Luna rear back. Twilight got her hooves underneath her, and with a groan, began to right herself. She was surrounded by an ethereal purple fire, her horn as bright as the north star.

"No!" Celestia yelled, eyes narrow. "Not again." when she next spoke, it was not any word Twilight could understand. She didn't even hear it. She just felt it inside her. She cried out and threw her head back. The pain was nothing she had ever felt before, so intense she nearly felt her mind shut off. She couldn't see as her body shivered and shimmered. For a brief moment, her body was replaced by an outline of the void of space, stars visible through her. Nothing but night sky and stardust. But she held on, and her form snapped back together. The magic around her flared brighter. Celestia's eyes widened.

"No! You may have broke the control spells but you are still a golem! I can undo your spell as easily as I made you."

The words did not surprise Twilight unduly. She had realized it the moment her mouth had betrayed her to Celestia. She shivered but stood strong.

"You never learned, did you?" she asked Celestia. "What made a golem a real pony."

"Real pony." Celestia sneered. "There are only two real ponies in Equestria, and soon I will have the power of both. You, you are stardust, sunlight and magic. I can promise that next time, I'll make you much better." she turned to the library's window. "I can't undo you now, but we will see once you under my domain. Guards." she galloped out the door. Twilight moved to follow her, only to realize half a dozen guards moved towards her. Six more approached Luna from the other side. The two ponies backed up until they were pressed flank to flank, surrounded.

"They're golems." Luna realized. Twilight nodded.

The pegasus raced through town. A hut near the Everfree forest was next, acres of apple trees racing below her. Meanwhile, a strong young farmer readied her cart for an unusual payload.

A dozen guards were stuck to the library roof, wings and legs flapping uselessly. Twilight hadn't want to be mean - it wasn't their fault, after all. She and Luna raced through the castle. She didn't know what they were going to do, but she needed to stop Celestia.

Imprisoned then banished! The tale that paper told became clear to Twilight. Nightmare Moon was the prison, a poison administered by her own sister, taking over her body. She had probably meant for it to ally with her, and when it hadn't, sent it to the moon while she dealt with Luna's freeing of the golems. She established herself as ruler, spread propaganda and myth to make sure her sister was unwelcome, unliked, forgotten as a hero. When she knew Nightmare Moon would return, she built a golem. A golem with just the right powers to defeat Nightmare Moon - maybe even take over for her, Twilight could only guess. And when it had gone wrong, Luna had managed to survive the thousand years of torture Nightmare Moon had offered and come back as the prison had shattered, a new plan was implemented. And now that had gone wrong too. Celestia's hoof was forced now that they knew. She didn't have the elements this time.

A white unicorn briefly considered finding a hat, but remembered a friend's wise words.

There was a time and place for details, and this wasn't it. She left the shop for her younger sister to care for and got ready to leave.

They found Celestia above, on a high platform overlooking the city. The sun was already rising, her horn alight. Twilight's own horn began to glow. Stardust and sunlight. She had both magics inside her. She knew what to do.

The day sky was not what she had expected. Chaotic, energetic. The blue color of the sky, she realized, was akin to a magical glow. And the sun was a massive star, filled with celestial magic. It was not guided like the moon so much as corralled, pushed and pulled, kept going like a ball going down a hill, gathering momentum. Twilight could feel Celestia controlling the sun, yet at the same time gathering energy from it. She would weaken its light if it meant more power for her. And that's just what she was doing. It was a part of her just like the night sky was for Luna. Her magic was gathering strength.

Twilight became aware she was falling. Her eyes opened, her mind split in two places. She had kept running and collided with Celestia, knocking her off her pedestal. They now hurtled towards a great stone plaza surrounded by the castle's inner gardens.

"You foal!" Celestia raged at her. They battled on the celestial plane as Twilight began to imprint her spells on the day sky, twisting it and blocking Celestia's progress. She could hear the stars, faintly. She cried out to them in help.

"No!" Celestia's horn was as bright as the center of the sun. Twilight strained and cried out as Celestia bombarded her mentally, burning every bond she placed and forcing the weight of the sun upon her. For Luna, she would not falter. She refused.

'Luna...' the voice echoed in Twilight's head. It was a mare's voice, soft and sad. She felt the stars turn their attention on the two battling ponies. Some of them were twinkling lights, but some of them...remembered. Four of them still remembered. Names came to her. Star Shine the unicorn. North Star the pegasus. Helios and Selene, the earth ponies.

"The stars themselves...." Twilight felt herself flooded with ancient magic. Their strength had waned over the centuries, but for Luna, they too refused to falter. Their love had not lessened after all these years.

Twilight halted the sun. She bound it in celestial magic that had come from before

Celestia herself. Celestia fought back, desperate and angry, thrashing like a beast in a trap. Twilight heard a cracking noise and looked up.

About ninety minutes. That's how long it took to get from Ponyville to Canterlot by balloon. Celestia's chariot made it under an hour, regularly. So the pegasus and farmer pony pulling the cart with three more inside probably set a few land-speed records as they raced across the land. Muscles stained, coats glistened with sweat, and five sets of eyes were focused on the city looming up from the mountains.

Celestia's horn shattered. Not entirely, but the top third of it fell to pieces. Celestia cried out, losing her connection to her sun. And so it hung in place. The sun hadn't gone unaffected by the fight. It was as fiery and angry as its master, setting the sky around aflame in orange. It hung at mid-dawn, not risen but not hidden. Twilight only had seconds to note this as the two ponies crashed into the stone below.

"Twilight!" Luna flew down from above, almost twenty more guards on her tail. She gritted her teeth and whipped her tail. A trail of black night spread behind her, like a midair oil slick. It stuck to the guards, binding their wings and blinding their eyes. Many fell away from her. She looked down at the ground.

To her surprise, both ponies stood. They were battered, but they stood.

"A failure. An absolute failure. You had your hooves on the elements and you still failed to defeat her."

"I've been wondering." Twilight responded. "Why the only other pony who looked like you was Nightmare Moon."

The sun was an angry eye staring them down as they approached the city. The pegasus was panting hard. She had worked her wings this hard, but never her legs. She looked over to the farm pony. Stubborn as always, she had her head down, refusing to show the wear of the long run. The pegasus had an idea. She spread her wings.

Twilight's shield came up just in time. It shimmered around her as rays of solid light shattered against it. Luna was trying to keep the guards at bay. She didn't know what to do, however. She was no fighter, and she felt so weak. The sun wasn't all the way up, but her night was distant, and she was far from in the best shape.

"Twilight, what do we do?" she looked over. Twilight's head was cocked to the side. She was looking past Celestia. Luna glanced to the sky. Her jar dropped.

"Yeeee-haw!" Applejack called out, waving her hat around as she hung in midair.

"Watch it!" Rainbow Dash told her as the hat blocked her vision. She held onto Applejack with her legs while she dragged the cart behind her in midair. Rarity and Fluttershy were gripping the sides for dear life while Pinkie Pie giddily leaned over to let the wind whip her hair back. Dash's wings pumped furiously as she brought the cart in for a landing, letting go of Applejack. Landing was a bit of a strong word - the cart bounced harshly against the floor while Applejack and Rainbow Dash skittered along the ground, trying to keep their hooves beneath them. The cart skidded sideways, teetered on one wheel, and came to a halt to the side, not quite at Twilight but beyond Celestia.

"Twilight, are you-" Rainbow Dash looked around, unharnessing herself as the rest of the ponies got off. "Wait are you fighting...Princess Celestia?"

Celestia blinked, but then immediately capitalized on the situation. "Quick, my little ponies! I fear Nightmare Moon has poisoned her mind! We must put a stop to this!" she pointed to Princess Luna, who was once again backing towards Twilight as she tried to avoid the guards. Rainbow Dash looked to Celestia, to Twilight, and then hopped into the air. She flew over to Twilight and stood by her side, facing Celestia. She braced herself as if for a hit.

"Really shouldn't try that on the Element of Loyalty." she mocked. The others rushed to her side. Twilight felt invigorated. Her friends were here, and for her they stood against the Goddess of the Sun. To her surprise, Celestia began to laugh.

"The elements of harmony? Yes, I've heard of them. Look at you ponies, you think you're so virtuous, aren't you? Look at you. Element of Honesty, lying to herself, as if her life and livelihood wasn't falling apart like that sagging barn." Applejack faltered, looking down at her hooves.

"Loyalty, who dismisses those that hold her back or simply annoy her!" Rainbow Dash bit her lip.

"Generosity, embarrassed for others, only wanting them to be as half as privileged as she feels!" Rarity began to argue, but stopped herself, hanging her head.

"Laughter, only to hide her depression, a mask worn by such a shallow actor." Pinkie Pie's constant smile faded. Twilight looked around at her friends, horrified by what she saw. The guards were closing in.

"And kindness, a crutch for weakness, who uses it to hide her nature." Celestia sneered at Fluttershy, who's legs quivered.

"The elements are flukes." Celestia told them. "And you ponies unworthy of their titles. Your power means nothing." she spread her wings. "And it is time for them to return to their rightful owner." The sun behind her suddenly felt close, amongst them. Fire spilled over Celestia's wings, racing towards the ponies. They cringed, but no one moved. Twilight braced herself.

The fire surrounded them, swallowing most of the plaza. Even some of the guards got caught in the flames, rearing away. Celestia laughed wildly, stomping her hooves. She continued laughing until the flames died down. Showing seven unharmed ponies. None were more surprised than the ponies themselves. Except for Twilight.

"By what magic?!" Celestia asked. The tiara on Twilight's head glowed brilliantly. Her friends and Luna were unscathed, surrounded in a light purple glow.

"You're wrong, Celestia." Twilight told her. Her eyes get sparkling with light, her magic nearly spilling over. "You've forgotten the final element."

"Magic?" Celestia laughed. "Parlor tricks, what an element!"

"Friendship." Twilight told her with a smile.

"Applejack's honesty is in her pure intent. She has worked hard for the sake of her farm. And with her friends, she had the best harvest in years, followed by the best planting season ever. Rainbow Dash has learned how her friends can support and motivate her. Rarity knows what it means to truly give a gift, and how to respect other ponies. Pinkie Pie knows she can trust us, and we can help her laugh on the inside. And Fluttershy

has been strong - for us. Her kindness is empathy towards others, and she will never let another come to harm."

"On their own, they mean nothing." Twilight said, stamping her hoof. "But with friendship, they are all complete." she saw the glimmers around her friends necks. They all raised their gazes, eyes determined, standing strong together. Celestia stepped back. Her poisonous words had been meant to disable the elements from acting - she truly feared their power.

"Enough of this." she spread her wings, taking into the air. The guards, held at bay briefly by the fire, now closed in again.

"What do we do, Twi?" Applejack asked.

"Protect Luna. I'm going after Celestia." Twilight said. She bent down, and her horn glimmered purple. Her form flickered, briefly replaced by a window into the night sky again. When she flickered back, two great wings spread from her sides. The limb looked almost natural, the same purple as her coat, but the feathers faded from purple to the black of night. Twilight took into the air after Celestia.

"When could she - nevermind." Rainbow Dash looked around. "Ready girls?"

Twilight flew after Celestia, who seemed to be trying to get back to her platform. She saw Twilight come after her.

"You don't know when you've lost, do you?" she asked, turning around in midair.

"We can help, Celestia." Twilight said. "The elements of harmony freed Luna. They can free you too."

"Foal." Feathers darted from her wings, flying like daggers at Twilight. Twilight slid into her other plane and out, dodging them all. Celestia responded by curving rays of light towards her, trying to bind her. Twilight could feel them - they existed on both planes. This time she wrapped her wings around her as they darkened to all black. She was soon surrounded in a sphere of void. The light lashed at her, only to sink into nothingness. She unfurled her wings. Celestia was already preparing her next attack. Her horn was cracked, but Twilight imagined that was the only reason why there was any pause between the attacks. She gritted her teeth, trying to figure out what to do.

"I am not a war pony!" Rarity cried, running into the castle to escape the guards. She looked around in a panic. What could she do, what could she do? Ooh, what a nice tapestry. Too bad it was frayed around the - Rarity smiled.

"Rainbow Dash, go help Rarity!" Applejack called, finishing the knots roping up another guard. Rainbow Dash looped circles around two more flying guards until their heads spun and they crashed into the ground. She nodded.

"Pinkie Pie, you holding up?" Applejack looked over.

"Pinkie keen!" Pinkie told her. Applejack called out as three guards dog-piled her.

"You guys are silly!" Pinkie Pie said, standing besides them. They got up to find a fourth guard passed out from the dog pile. Pinkie Pie giggled and bounced away as they tried to catch her. Applejack rolled her eyes.

"Rarity, you okay?" Rainbow Dash looked around the grand hall. She didn't hear anything.

"Just fine dear." Rarity said, trotting up from around the corner. "I'm afraid those guards were quite unruly. I ask, what has become of chivalry?"

"Huh? What happened to them?"

"Nevermind dear. Shall we rejoin our friends?" Rarity trotted happily back outside. Rainbow Dash followed, scratching her head. Around the corner, several cloth lumps struggled to free themselves. The carpet-like material was without a single seam, expertly woven, and too tight for them to stretch or get purchase on the fabric.

"Dash, you seen Fluttershy?" Applejack asked, bucking a guard running up to her. Rainbow Dash shook her head. She touched hoof to her hat in worry.

"Don't worry. She'll be back."

Off from the battle, a single hoof stamped at the grass. A cool breeze blew through the gardens. The animals of the garden looked up. Something...something was calling to them. Not just them, but every animal in every garden. In the forests below, they felt it. Miles away, a certain rabbit dropped his carrot. He had never felt this before. And beyond, far beyond. A familiar dragon woke from his nap. Something was calling. And it

was angry.

Luna looked around at the ponies fighting for her. Images flashed in her mind, long forgotten and suppressed. The ponies that had fought for her. While she prepared the last spell she could before the darkness swallowed her. She remembered seeing them ward off the unthinking golems yet under Celestia's rule. Her friends, refusing to fall until the tyranny was over. And then, even after falling, still fighting for her, remembering her even when she herself had forgotten.

"This time." she said. "It ends differently." her horn began to glow.

One of the guards caught Applejack's rope. She let go of it, not having time to wrestle it free. She glanced around. Now how many more could she buck before she gave in?

Rainbow Dash panted. These guys would not give up! Dizzy with loops for the first time since flight camp, she could only hope that this round would shake them. Meanwhile, inside, A hoof punctured the carpet surrounding it. Rarity, nearby, heard the loud rip. Pinkie Pie frowned. These guys were no fun. She was beginning to think that they seriously wanted to hurt her!

"Come on gals, we gotta help the Princess!" Applejack rallied, falling back to near Luna. Rainbow Dash landed, her legs unsteady. There was still so many of them.

"AJ, it'd be a lot easier if being the elements, you know, did something."

"I reckon." Applejack agreed. Then an ear perked up. "...Y'all hear that?"

All the ponies except Luna turned to the noise. Around the corner they came. The rabbits and foxes first, squirrels at the sides. Birds swarmed the air, and the hiss of snakes pierced their ears. Then came the boars, the wild wolves from the forests. Then came the bears. And riding the biggest grizzly bear any of them had seen, Fluttershy cackled madly. The four friends' jaws dropped slack. AJ shook her head.

"Rainbow?" she asked as she recovered.

"Y-yeah?"

"mind me never to anger Fluttershy."

"Yeah."

It was then they noticed the dragon flying towards them.

Chapter 8

The tables were beginning to turn. Twilight was finding more time between Celestia's attacks. Celestia still underestimated her, after all this. Twilight understood now. She had access to the plane of magic - and more than that, she was home there. Part of her mind stayed on that plane, sensing what it could. Celestia's attacks were easier to spot from there. Occasionally the alicorn moved through the sunlight, meager as it was, but Twilight could trace her. In fact, when she did that, Twilight began to figure things out. She could feel the magical shroud around Celestia. The shell she wore. It came from the elements of harmony, and Twilight was beginning to see how the elements could be used to break it, just as they had with Nightmare Moon. There was one piece missing, however. Twilight needed to find the Celestia, the real Celestia, inside the prison. The real Luna had still be inside, strong enough to endure, but she worried that if she destroyed Celestia, she would truly kill her.

Twilight swept around the sky to dodge a piercing lance of fire. That was when she saw it. The moon! Despite the day sky, the full moon was quite clear, and rising fast. Unfortunately, Twilight wasn't alone in noticing it. Celestia raged, rearing in midair.

"You may have cut me off from my sun, but I can still halt the moon." she raced off, slipping past Twilight in the sun. Twilight turned around and flew after her.

"Luna!" she called out. She looked below, eyes widening at what she saw. A dragon lay on the the plaza, looking positively bored. He propped his head up in one claw while the other one kept down a score of struggling guards. Dozens more lay helpless under his tail. Her friends were watching it, Rainbow Dash trying to help a heavily panting Fluttershy. Applejack spotted Twilight.

"Don't worry, pardner! We got her." she said, rearing up.

"Watch out!" Twilight called. Celestia flickered back into the world in front of her, closing in on the group. An aura of fire surrounded her like a shooting star as she headed straight for Luna.

"No way no how." Applejack said with a glare. "Gals, we got a live one." the ponies lined up, tired, scared, worried. Unflinching.

Around their necks, the pendants finally appeared, summoned by the need to help a dear friend. Twilight felt her tiara glow.

Celestia hit the bubble of magic. It glimmered like a rainbow, drawing strength from each pony. Celestia didn't bounce away, instead trying to force her way through the barrier. The heat of the fires made the ponies cringe, but they held strong. Twilight closed in, trying to stop Celestia before she got through. Then she saw Luna, inside the bubble, open her eyes. She smiled at Twilight. Then Celestia cried out, flinging away from the sphere. She nearly took out Twilight. Twilight turned around to follow her, and that's when she it. The moon covering the sun. The sky darkened around them, only a halo of light peaking through. Day and night married, Celestia's power blocked. She could only imagine though; Luna had extended a piece of herself to block the source of Celestia's formidable power.

"Enough!" Celestia boomed. The air around her began to sizzle. The white glow of her horn spreading around her body. Twilight was nearly blinded on both planes. The magic was intense, chaotic, no order or structure put into it. She was burning pure energy. It would destroy her.

"I am your ruler! I am your goddess! They left me to rule, and I alone am worthy!"

"Celestia, stop!" Twilight called out. She needed to stop her, now!

"Girls?" she turned around to her friends. She found all five watching her. Applejack nodded.

"We're here for you, sugar. Do it." she said. Twilight could feel the power they offered. They were all strained, yet still they stood for her. She wouldn't need to draw from them though. Not yet. Their part was later. She only needed to cast one more spell. And all it would take would be a spark.

Twilight turned back around and raced toward Celestia, now surrounded in a shimmering ball of white fire, barely visible. Celestia brought up a hoof and lances of sunlight raced at Twilight. She ignored the ones that seared her wings, gathering speed. A flap of Celestia's wings brought a rain of daggered feathers. Twilight dodged what she could, but she couldn't risk slipping into the plane of magic this time. The heat of the fireball seared the rest of her feathers, but she kept going.

"They left us! She betrayed me! I alone can stand this world! I alone can rule it! I-" Celestia was so mad that she didn't even see Twilight pierce the flame surrounding her.

Headfirst, Twilight dove into Celestia, her horn meeting Celestia's broken horn. A spark passed between them.

The world inside Celestia was nearly as bright as the world outside. Twilight found it razed with the fires of fury. They had grown out of control, eating into everything. She could make out nothing else. She continued on. She could feel a consciousness notice her. It felt different from Luna's. Hollow. It wasn't a real mind, she realized. Twisted magic, some emotional imbalance mixed with magical energy, given what passed for life. Twilight raced ahead to avoid it. The landscape was nothing but fire, or so it seemed. Something just visible through the flames stood out. Twilight turned to it; an orb, to her the size of a house. It was surrounded in fire yet untouched by it. And as Twilight reached it she felt cold. So cold, so desperately, painfully...alone. It was a shell of isolation. She didn't know how, but she knew what was inside. Who was inside. She railed against the dome. The consciousness immediately reacted. This was it - this was the prison. Twilight brought out all her strength, all her power. She pounded the dome with all her might. Nothing. The consciousness closed in on her. Twilight wouldn't let it end like this. Celestia, the real Celestia, was still in there. The one Luna had loved.

The consciousness reached Twilight, grabbed at her. Twilight tried to fight it off, refusing to let go of the dome. She couldn't shake it. She had to get in. She needed to get to Celestia. She was still in there. She had felt it, time and again. It hadn't all been faked. She had felt Celestia's love, her approval. It didn't all make sense as some nightmarish creature's plan. It had let the real Celestia slip out. And it was that Celestia that Twilight loved.

The dome cracked. The consciousness raged, tearing and clawing at Twilight's mind. She wouldn't let go. For Luna, for herself, for Celestia. She couldn't let it end now. She still had work to do. The crack widened in the dome, and Twilight could see inside. She smiled.

The other ponies felt their elements warm. It had been minutes since Twilight had disappeared into that ball of flame. Like they had seen once before, each one shone bright with power. They felt the call for them to act. And they accepted. Each pony felt themselves raised up by the magic that was not them, yet part of them. They lent their power to the sixth element.

The fireball shimmered, grew, shrunk, almost petered out, and then exploded. The ponies flinched, only to find nothing reach them as the dragon held out one great wing to shield them. When he lowered it, the fireball - and both ponies - were nowhere to be seen.

"Twilight!" Luna was the first to act. The others ran to catch up as she headed over to where the fireball had been. There, in a shallow crater in the ground, she found them.

"Sister! Twilight!" The pony laying on her back in the dirt was so familiar, yet so strange. Pure white coat, except where it had burned off. No gold gilded her hooves. A tattered green mane with a pink streak fell about her face. One wing lay out, the other half shielding Twilight. It was bent sharply halfway down, badly broken. She was only slightly taller than Luna. On her stomach, wrapped in her arms, a certain purple unicorn lay with her eyes closed, her entire body covered in cuts and burns.

"Sister..." Luna slid into the crater, only to back away cautiously. "Is that you?"

"Luna..." Celestia's voice was strained, as was her smile. "It's been so long."

"Twilight!" Rainbow Dash ran down into the crater, everypony else on her heels. Her wings flared when she noticed Celestia.

"Get away from her!" she yelled at Celestia. The alicorn flinched, tears running down her cheeks. Luna turned to get between Celestia and the rest, wings flaring to shield her sister.

"Blame her no more than you would blame me for Nightmare Moon!" she cried. "The same magics possessed her."

"This mean it t'weren't really Princess Celestia before?" Applejack asked. Luna nodded her head.

"W-what about Twilight?" Fluttershy asked. They all turned to her. Celestia lowered her head. Twilight hadn't moved.

"Twilight? Twilight!" Luna rushed to Celestia's side. She pressed her head to Twilight's. The young magician didn't respond.

"No, no." Luna began to cry. "No. Twilight! You can't!" she nuzzled Twilight desperately. There was no response. Applejack took off her hat. One by one they lowered their heads. Luna sobbed, lowering her head against Twilight's body. Celestia coughed.

"Luna. My horn."

"W-what?"

"The pieces of my horn." it was stubbier than before, but still broken as it had been.

"They fell in the plaza. Quickly!"

"B-but, what?"

"I got them!" Pinkie Pie shook her head. Several pieces of alabaster white fell from her mane. Everyone looked at her. She just blinked.

"They got stuck in my hair during the dogpile."

"Y' mean the dogpile you weren't caught in?" Applejack asked. Pinkie Pie nodded. Meanwhile, a weak glow came from Celestia's horn. The pieces bobbed up in front of Twilight.

"Sister, I need you." Celestia said. "You were already better at it than I."

"But...without...you mean?" Luna's eyes widened.

"There is life still in her." Celestia replied. "I remember when I, or...whatever I was, I remember making her. She yet has ties to my magic, and I can sense just a spark of life."

"A spark?" Rarity asked. "Will it be enough?"

"All it takes is..." Celestia cut herself off and gave a weak chuckle. "I'm sure you've heard. Please, my sister."

"It won't grow back, you know. Without these pieces." Luna told her. Celestia nodded.

"I have much of the elements to learn. Let us begin with generosity."

Luna nodded and closed her eyes. She took the pieces from Celestia, the white glow around them replaced with deep blue. She held the pieces against Twilight's chest. Her horn began to shine with darkness. The pieces quivered. Luna bent down, face contorting with strain. Twilight's body began to shimmer. The glow started at the shards of horn and spread outwards, surrounding her. Luna gasped, an overglow surging forth around her horn. The pieces became indistinct. Luna's entire body strained with effort, shuddering. The magic around her horn flared, somehow painfully dark to look at. It

crackled in the air, making everypony's mane stand on end. The pieces slid straight into Twilight's chest.

Luna cried out as the magic came to an apex, her head rearing back as her body twitched and shuddered. Twilight's body shone brightly for several seconds, indistinct. With a rough gasp, Luna collapsed into a sitting position. The spell faded, and so did Twilight's form. She wasn't bruised or cut or burnt anymore. Several seconds of silence passed, all eyes on her.

"Uhhhhggg..." Twilight groaned, letting out a small cough. Luna's face lit up, and she forced herself to stand. She rushed to Twilight, nuzzling against her.

"Lu..na?" Twilight let one eye crack open.

"It's okay, my love." Luna told her, not caring for the world around her. A few sets of eyes widened. "You can rest now."

"How does anypony survive all that?" Rarity asked, shaking her head. Celestia began to cough. Blood dripped from the corner of her mouth. It was the smile that let the others know she wasn't coughing, but laughing.

"I'm sure you've all met Twilight." she said. "She's not exactly the kind to give up until her work is done."

Twilight awoke in a bed. It was so comfortable, but for some reason, she was eager to move. Or, she was for all of two seconds. It was then the stiffness and soreness hit, and she decided whatever drove her could wait a few moments. She did, however, open her eyes.

"I don't usually say this." said the pony who had been watching her. "But good morning."

"Luna?"

"I saw you stir. How do you feel?"

Twilight looked around. She was in her room, in bed and propped up by pillows. She spied Spike fast asleep where he sat on a footstool. Luna saw Twilight's gaze.

"Refused to leave your side as soon as we brought you in. Not even to talk to that other dragon. I think we have him to thank for everything, given what your friends have told me. Such a noble hero."

"I'm buying him the biggest ruby I can find. I promise." Twilight said in all seriousness. Luna giggled.

"I'm sure there's something in the treasury that will be a suitable reward." she turned back to Twilight. "Are you alright?"

Twilight nodded. "A little stiff, but I'll survive." she rubbed her head, flexed this and that. She stifled her surprise. "What happened?"

"How much do you remember?" Luna asked.

"There was all that fighting...my friends helped so much. We summoned the elements again...oh my gosh there was a dragon! How was there a dragon?"

"You have an interesting group of friends." Luna replied. She moved closer to Twilight, standing beside the bed. "You don't remember how you freed Celestia?"

"N-no." Twilight said. "I remembered a bright light....and then undoing a spell of some sort. Now I'm here."

"You threw yourself into the heart of Celestia's flame, and found her. The spell you're talking about were the magics of the elements of harmony, imbalanced and wild, given motivation. Celestia talks about how you managed to reach out to her, through her prison, and wake her up after all this time."

"And...then what?"

"Then..." Luna closed her eyes. "I still can't believe you weren't dead. You felt dead even as I cast the healing spell. Yet somehow, you still remained." she opened her eyes, her gaze low. "You know the healing properties of a unicorn's horn, yes? Only an alicorn's horn can heal wounds of the spirit. You were depleted of all magical energy. It took a significant amount to rekindle your spirit. My sister claims, in time, she will regain most of her abilities. But the horn will never grow back."

"I..." Twilight looked down at the bedsheets. "I'm sorry."

Luna shook her head. "She regrets nothing, and I don't think she should. But she is going through everything I did, and even more. She will need you. Can...can you forgive her? Truly?"

Twilight knew her answer immediately. It came so strongly she took a moment only to examine her feelings. Luna waited anxiously for her answer.

"Yes." Twilight told her. "Absolutely."

Luna sighed in relief. "I knew you would, but she wouldn't believe it."

Twilight nodded. "I always knew the real her was in there. The nightmare wanted me loyal, without the command spell. So she had to let me love Celestia. She had to let Celestia out, since that was the only way to return my love. So I saw the real Celestia. And I loved her."

"She won't believe you." Luna said with a smile. "So, please, keep telling her until she does. It was her loneliness that caused all this. She never got over when the first alicorns left. We had each other but it wasn't enough. Maybe if I had been a better sister...." Luna shook her head. "No, she tells me I can't think that way. That she never meant to spurn me. But as she studied the incomplete elements, the imbalance inside her grew. She believed herself to be alone, distant even from me. And she became obsessed with the golems. She wanted to make them more, make them real. If only I had discovered the secret earlier. By the time I learned how to do just that, she didn't care. The Nightmare had twisted her. and now wanted the power of the elements. Wanted to prove herself to the first alicorns. And that meant she had to get more powerful."

"So why'd she attack you?" Twilight asked.

"I was the only other pony she considered real. She was experimenting on me, the nightmares the result of magic invading my mind. I had discovered the way to bring golems to life, and I think she knew."

"Just a spark?" Twilight asked wryly. Luna smiled and nodded.

"Just a spark. The spark of friendship. It may seem silly, but understand, by then the golems were more like you. It gave them something fundamentally meaningful, something to live for. And the rest...you've figured out."

Twilight nodded. "What now?"

"Now? You still need rest. I healed you of your wounds, mortal and magical, but some things just need to be slept on. There will be time to talk to Celestia - and the others - later."

Twilight wanted to argue, but stopped. She nodded. "Alright. But on one condition."

"Hmm?"

"You look exhausted Luna. How long have you been by my side?"

"It's only been a day since the battle."

"A day. You've been awake the whole day - after being exhausted from before the battle began."

"I can't sleep yet." Luna argued. Twilight smiled. If she had a bit for every time she had said that...a voice piped up inside her. She could barely believe it. After all this, and all they had been through, all they had done together....the voice was making a compelling case.

"Luna. I really think you, you....you should come to bed." Twilight said.

"I can't go yet, I-"

"No, Luna." Twilight interrupted. Luna gave her a curious glance, and her confusion only deepened as Twilight blushed and looked away. Then she saw Twilight's hoof pushing down the covers. Creating room for some pony to sidle in besides her. Luna turned red, and then began to get up on the bed.

When Twilight next awoke, it was by the sound of giggling. She kept her eyes shut, hoping dearly she was mistaken.

"Aren't they precious together?" a voice asked. Nope, there went that slim chance.

"Sweet as two cherries on th' same sundae!" came a reply.

"I, um, never knew that Twilight..."

"Heh, Ah don't blame you none. Here I always pegged Dash..."

"Hey! It was one time in flight camp!"

"They, uh, saw each other for three weeks."

"Fluttershy!"

"Why are they still sleeping? We need a party! We have so much to party for! They've got to be the guests of honor!"

"Would you ponies please actually let me sleep?" Twilight groaned, acknowledging defeat. As she heard various yelps and peeps she raised her head, blinking her eyes into focus. Her bed was surrounded with her friends. They all just grinned at her in their various styles.

"Well howdy there sugarcube. Feelin' better?"

"Yes, I imagine you're much more relaxed now?" Rarity asked. The others were beginning to giggle.

"Yeah, uh." Rainbow Dash faltered. "You, uh...heeheeheehee." she failed to come up with anything before the giggling overtook her. Twilight frowned.

"What is wrong with all you ponies. I-" she tried to get up, only to find a leg pinned. She looked over, and only then realized Luna was against her, still asleep. She had wound up snuggling up against the moon goddess, and now she had a limb trapped underneath. She turned back to her friends, cheeks so hot it threatened to singe her coat.

"We didn't - we only slept toge- I mean..." she just gave them all a flat stare.

"I'm going back to sleep." she told them, laying her head back down. Luna's mane was so, so soft.

"Aww, now don't be like that Twi." Applejack told her. Twilight opened an eye.

"Don't you think we've all been worried? I'm gonna get it from Granny Smith for up an'

leavin' the farm like that."

"We simply couldn't leave you until we knew you'd be alright." Rarity explained. "Is it...what it looks like, dear?"

Twilight sighed. She wiggled free of Luna, trying dearly not to wake her. She got up.

"Yes. It is." she said simply, not sure how else to put it. Rarity gave her a reassuring smile.

"And good for you. Though I must say, Twilight, I'm a little upset. Here I sought a royal companion, and here you go and upstage me!"

"Sorry Rarity." Twilight said with a grin. "I'm okay you guys. I suppose I should explain everything."

"Naw." Applejack shook her head. "The princess' been doing a right job tellin' us everything bewteen 'em. Well, fer the most part. Now what's this all about about you bein' some kind of magic?"

Twilight sighed. "I should explain. I am - well, was, it's complicated, but I'm kinda a golem."

"A what now?" Applejack asked. All five friends gave her blank stares.

"I was...never born. I wonder if my, uh, parents knew about me, or...that's something for later. The nightmare that controlled Princess Celestia created me. I'm mostly magic and stardust. Oh, and sunlight."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash stared at her with tilted heads, Fluttershy's eyes filled her head, and Rarity's jaw dropped.

"That sounds pretty!" Pinkie Pie told her with a quick clap. Twilight smiled sheepishly.

"Actually, all ponies were made that way, originally. Or, well, kinda. I think there were other things usually involved. The first ponies were golems made by the princesses. And I'm not exactly one any more. I'm real you guys. I think it must have happened when we defeated Nightmare Moon. It's the magic of friendship that brings a golem alive."

"So, yur just a normal pony now?" Applejack asked.

"Well...not quite." Twilight responded as she got off the bed. She turned to the side, showing herself to her friends. Everyone blinked, making Twilight roll her eyes. So she spread her wings.

"Twilight! They're beautiful." Fluttershy cooed. They looked more normal than before, just strong pegasus wings. On a unicorn. Twilight had noticed them when she had awoken, but hadn't known what to do about it. "You're a...?"

"I guess?" Twilight responded, none too sure herself. "I think the healing made them permanent. But it's still me, guys."

"Shucks, course it is!" Applejack responded. "Right gals?"

She got a chorus of approval, everypony nodding their head. It warmed her heart.

"Thanks girls. I owe you all." she walked around the bed. Fluttershy was nearest, and the pegasus squeaked as Twilight hugged her briefly. Pinkie Pie was next, and giggled, returning the hug.

"Aww, now sugar you don't have to-" too late, Twilight had her next. Applejack smiled and patted her friend on the back. Twilight saw Rarity pause, but returned Twilight's hug. Finally, Rainbow Dash.

"Oh, come on. I..." she saw everypony else just look at her. "Oh, fine." she gave Twilight a hug.

"Thanks girls. We can talk more back in Ponyville. I'm sorry I dragged you all away."

"Hey, just let us know earlier next time you want to save the world." Rainbow Dash told her, flapping her wings once. Twilight grinned. Rarity was looking to Luna, still asleep on the bed.

"You...are coming back to Ponyville, right dear?" she asked. The question caught Twilight off guard, and she stared at her hooves. After a moment of thought, she nodded.

"Don't worry. I'm coming back."

"Well, then we should see you there. Applejack, Rainbow Dash, let's see if you two can leave the cart intact for the return trip, hmm?"

"If we're not in a rush, why don't we make her pull?" Rainbow Dash muttered. Pinkie Pie was at the door. It opened before her.

"Oh...hello." the pony on the other side stepped back, looking away. She held herself so timidly. Twilight's eyes went wide. It was the first she had seen of Princess Celestia after the battle.

"P-princess?"

"I don't mean to intrude." Celestia replied. She was so much like her sister, Twilight realized. Especially just after the Nightmare Moon incident.

"We were just leavin', come on in." Applejack replied, seeming to have the best grasp of the situation. Celestia smiled, but let them out before entering the room. It was just her and Twilight, Luna being effectively not present. At first, neither seemed to know what to say. Twilight smiled at Celestia - Celestia smiled back, but looked away. The silence dragged on.

"The wings are quite fitting." Celestia eventually said. It caught Twilight off guard.

"Ahh, uh, thank you. Is, is there a difference between an alicorn and an unicorn-with-wings?"

"Oh, yes." Celestia replied. "However, since your soul was rekindled almost from scratch with alicorn magic, and your body restored using the energy in my horn, you...are an alicorn. The wings would have appeared regardless of the other magics in you."

"Oh..." Twilight glanced at her wings. They felt strange - she suddenly had all these new muscles that moved in such unexpected ways. Without a lot of magic bolstering her, she realized, there would have been no way she would have known how to even keep herself aloft. Then she gave a second thought to Celestia's words. She glanced up at the Princess' horn. It had been rounded off, but it was clear that it had lost its tip. Not enough of it had been lost to call it stumpy, but it was a good bit shorter than it should have been.

"I don't regret it." Celestia told her, bowing her head. "I'm glad any good could have

come from our fight." she laid herself down at Twilight's feet. "But it's not enough. I am sorry, Twilight Sparkle. For everything."

Twilight smiled, bent down, and pressed against Celestia's cheek with her own. Only briefly, as an act of affection, not intimacy.

"Please, Princess, I understand. The nightmare is over. You were only in the same prison as your sister."

Celestia raised herself into a sitting position and shook her head sadly. "No. It was a prison of my own construction. I had every chance to listen to my sister, to see the love she held for me, and I ignored it. I wanted more."

"You got carried away. When Applejack or Rarity get carried away, some ponies get upset or maybe a little sick. When a goddess gets carried away..."

"I appreciate what you're trying to say, but you're too kind m-my...my hero. It was my own hoof in this, even if I lost control."

"You're too hard on yourself, sister." both ponies turned to find Luna just getting up, stretching her neck. she opened her eyes towards Celestia.

"Trust me, I understand. And trust me that you will not hear the end of it from Twilight until you believe it." she smiled at the newly-minted alicorn. Twilight remembered her conversation with Luna earlier.

"Princess-" she saw Celestia flinch. She was expecting the words that came next, more or less.

"Please. A title earned by betrayal and falsehood."

"Fine." Twilight wasn't going to argue that point for now. "Celestia. You know me. You really know me. And I know you. You were always in there. That's why I could get through to you at all. Why you're here now. Because it wasn't you before. And you, the real you - I love you. I always felt closer, and I guess it makes sense now, I always loved you like a mother. The real you."

Celestia's face was quiet, almost serene like before, but tears rolled down her cheeks. "And you mean it. I know you do. Sister has already spoken with me at length. I appreciate your words, but I cannot simply pretend I am free of guilt. There is history to

be rewritten, lies to be set right. I cannot expect your acceptance from every pony in Equestria. Nor do I deserve it. I deserve some punishment for my misdeeds, whether it be banishment, imprisonment, or more..."

Twilight looked at Celestia, deep in thought. She said nothing for a moment.

"Sister..." Luna tried.

"You're right." Twilight said with a stamp on her hoof. Both goddesses turned to her.

"She is?"

"I am?"

"You have a lot to make up for. And I know just how you can do it."

"You do?" Both sisters asked in tandem. Twilight nodded.

"Tell me, please, Twilight Sparkle." Celestia asked. "Be my judge. And I shall repent."

"Celestia." Twilight looked her in the eye. "I charge you with a thousand years - of community service. You are to aid Princess Luna in her duties, to serve the nation of Equestria and its ponies to the best of your abilities, and at Princess Luna's discretion" she smiled. Celestia smiled back, tears in her eyes.

"I accept my sentence, Twilight Sparkle." she said with a bow. "Thank you."

It had been a couple weeks, and ponies still tended to drop by the library just to see the town's resident suddenly-alicorn. Everypony that did, however, somehow or another found them getting a lecture on the nature of nightmare magic, and the sacrifice of noble Princess Celestia. A few ponies had been stupid enough to argue back - the Princess was none too popular, and many didn't believe her fit to rule. Many others were agreeing to hear her out, especially as she explained everything in first person with Luna by her side, accepting all the criticism that came her way, acknowledging most of it. But anypony that argued with Ponyville librarian left with their ears stinging and head swimming.

Of course, they only got all this if they came after noon. Before hand, a baby dragon

and oddly diurnal owl tended to the library, which oddly enough now stayed open until nearly midnight. Twilight Sparkle balanced the day and night, her afternoons free to spend with her friends most of the time. Her evenings, however, were another story.

Luna stepped out of the night sky on a hill just away from the Ponyville library. She glanced to it, to see all lights but one had gone dark - it had closed up, but not everyone in it asleep. Luna took a moment to glance up at her night sky. She was happy with her work for the night. She knew a few were confused by the lack of a few landmarks (sailors were more than a bit vocal), and Luna had had to promise new ones were coming. Already she could promise one. She looked to the swirl of stars to the right of the moon, the whirlpool of silver light. That was going nowhere any time soon.

"We finally did it, my friends." she told four more stars she could promise would forever remain alight in the sky. Twilight had told her their names. The nightmares were finally beginning to fade, and she was remembering more and more.

"She was a lot like you, Star Shine." she said to the star. "I wonder if it wasn't your dust that Celestia pulled from? You always somehow found a way to help me, even when I didn't know I needed it. Even after I pushed you away." she blinked back the tears, promising not to cry any more. She knew her friends had moved on, yet were still with her. Some bonds transcended all things.

She trotted down the hill, focusing on things nearer to her than the stars in the sky. She knew the door would be unlocked. She kept silent, not wanting to wake the other inhabitants of the tree. She moved smoothly through the darkness, slipping into the bedroom.

Twilight was partially silhouetted by the candle she held to the window as she looked up at the night sky. Luna smiled to herself.

"Will you tell me about them, one day?" Twilight asked quietly.

"I promise. You would have liked them."

Twilight turned to her and smiled. "Sorry. Probably not very romantic, am I?"

Luna giggled. "It's fine. You care, and I appreciate that." she reached Twilight's bed. "But for now, let us not speak of the moon or stars. Let us not speak at all."

"Hmm?"

Luna climbed onto the bed beside Twilight and blew out the candle. "Oh no, we shall be much to busy for that." as she heard Twilight giggle, still bashful, she turned to her. The darkness was no deterrent for either pony now, and they could easily make out one another's face. Their eyes met - then so did their lips.

The End

To Be An Alicorn

Sweet Apple Acres was a busy place in the spring. Two young stallions walked the fields with plows in tow, while a mailpony dragged in shipments of seeds and tools, and a couple more ponies were visible amongst the apple trees. Adding to the general bustle was a visitor to the farm who gingerly stepped out of the sky, looked around, and opened the gate into the main homestead area. A filly, not quite yet a mare, with a light green coat and straw-colored hair and baskets strapped to her saddle had been trotting through the area, and noticed the visitor first. She stopped dead in her tracks, eyes as big as the moon.

"P-princess?!"

"Oh, hello." the visitor said. "I'm here to see Applejack. Is she around?"

"G-great-granny Applejack?" the filly asked. The visitor paused, and nodded. The young pony kept her eyes on the visitor and pointed towards the barn. There, in a rocking chair, an ancient mare sat with a worn brown steltson covering her eyes. Her coat was gray but with a healthy sheen, and her hair was so blonde it was nearly white. The visitor ignored the looks she got from the farm ponies and approached the old mare.

"Took ya long enough." Applejack replied, her voice raspier than the visitor remembered it, but still strong.

"I came as soon as I got your letter."

"You always were th' letter-writin' type, Twilight. Ah figured that'd get yur attention." The old mare moved her hat aside and looked at the pony before her. Twilight had grown slender, if not that tall. Her purple coat shone as healthy as it had ever been, her eyes sparkled yet with youth, and her deep blue mane had grown long and flowing. She couldn't be far past a young adult, from her looks. Yet the old pony before her was a lifelong friend, and a testament to her true age.

Applejack heaved herself off the rocking chair. Twilight moved to help as she heard numerous pops and cracks from her friend, but Applejack shrugged her off.

"Ahh, not you too." she complained. "Ah'm fine, Ah tells ya." she gave herself a shake, a few more sickening pops coming from it. Twilight just smiled at her stubborn friend.

"I see you're a great-grandmother now." she stated conversationally, almost chiding her friend. Applejack was stretching her back now. How many joints did this mare have to crack?

"Great-great-grandmother. Well, aunt, but it don't have th' same ring to it, do it?" Applejack replied. She nodded over Twilight's shoulder, making the alicorn turn. Off from the barn they were at was the Apple family homestead, where the filly that had greeted Twilight had apparently entered and was now exiting. "That 'un's the youngest of the youngest."

"Of the youngest?" Twilight asked with a laugh. Applejack sucked air through her teeth. One was missing, creating a sharp whistle.

"Of th' secon' youngest if'n Ah remember right." she replied. A few more pops came from her and she seemed to finally be done. The filly had apparently gotten her mother, a mare with a bright red coat and brown mane. Images of Big Mac from long ago flashed through Twilight's mind.

"Princess Twilight!" Twilight cringed as she was greeted by the mare. "It's an honor, it is. W-would you care to stay for lunch? We have any delicacy you could ask for - uh, any apple-based one that is." she smiled nervously. Applejack snorted.

"Sure, ge' out the fine silk pillows we keep too, an' why not the gold silverware while yur at it?"

The mare gave a worried glance to Appljack before turning back to Twilight, bowing slightly. Twilight hated the bowing. "P-please excuse Granny Applejack, she's-"

"A close personal friend of mine." Twilight said, trying to sound soothing. "That I'm just going to spend some time with today. If that's alright?"

"Ahh, y-yes, of course." The mare leaned over and forced her filly's head down, making her bow too. Twilight sighed.

"Ahh, get on wit' yurself, Candy Apple." Applejack told her. "And let Appletini to her chores, would ya?" she began to walk away with a shake of her head. Twilight gave the

two earth ponies a small smile before following, glancing over her shoulder one last time at the mare and daughter.

"You Apple family ever going to run out of names?" she asked.

"Eventually." Applejack replied. Her gait was as solid as all those years ago, Twilight noticed with surprise.

"Ah tell you, Ah thought Ah'd be glad to see the Apple family back up to full strength." she said, referring to her family's legacy all around her. "But it's just more ponies to tell me when t' go to bed, or which foods Ah'm not s'posed to eat cause of mah kidneys, or..." she ended with a huff. "And Ah can still applebuck better than all y'all, and y'all know it!" she yelled to no one. Twilight smiled at her friend.

"It's good to talk to you again, Applejack." she replied. "It's been too long. But...your letter made it sound urgent."

"It is urgent." Applejack replied. "It's urgent tha' you spend the day out of that frilly castle and back here in Ponyville. Or did ya finally forget about all us li'l ponies?"

Twilight cringed and hung her head. "I....I..." she was surprised by a punch on the shoulder. Something about the exact spot made her yelp, her wings flying out of their own volition. Applejack laughed as Twilight folded them.

"Hah! That trick always worked on Rainbow." Applejack responded, grinning at her. "Ah wondered if it was a pegasus thing or what."

"That was mean."

"Tell y' what. You can buy me lunch an' we'll call it even." Applejack responded, head held high. Twilight rolled her eyes at her friend's logic and followed her down the road. The weather was beautiful today, and she soaked in the quiet of outer Ponyville. Applejack seemed to keep watch of her, and eventually spoke.

"So how's things with that cute li'l mare y' were seein, oh what's her name...?"

"You mean Luna?" Twilight asked. Applejack faked surprise, slapping her forehead with a hoof (and nearly sending her hat flying).

"Oh that was it." she replied. Twilight laughed.

"The element of honesty is a horrible liar." she teased. "And great, thanks. I don't think even I could find such joy in the mechanics of government, but she seems excited by every little by-law that comes up to her, and is constantly looking to improve the system....not that the bureaucrats like that much, of course."

"Ah meant more 'bout how the two of you are doin'?"

"Oh." Twilight gave an apologetic look. "Great. You remember the wedding."

"Ah remember you blushin' so hard we thought yur coat had turned red." Applejack smiled and looked to the sky. "Y'know y'helped a lot of folk out by doin' that."

"By...getting married?" Twilight asked. Applejack nodded.

"Yup. Hard t' argue against it when we got a pair of fillyfoolers on the throne."

"Applejack!" Twilight hissed, cringing at the term.

"Sorry. Old dog, new tricks. An' how about Celestia? She don' mind her sister runnin' most of things nowadays?"

"Not at all." Twilight told her, swelling with joy and pride. "It was always hard for her to balance her work as the ruler of Equestria and as Headmistress of her school. That's what she really loves. She spends so much more time with her students now - I'm almost jealous!"

Applejack guffawed. "Ah think you may have one up on them there, sugarcube."

Twilight smiled and lowered her head a little, her pride deflating. "Yeah, I said almost."

"Ah'm surprised you didn' go into the school with her. It seems right up your tree."

Twilight shook her head. "Maybe it'd be fun to teach some classes one day. Imagine me with my own 'faithful student'." she grinned at the little joke. "But for now, there's still so much out there to explore, so much more to learn than what's in the books."

"Right, you do that arch...arki...archistudy." Applejack taxed her mind.

"Archeology." Twilight corrected gently. "And yes. Ponykind spread rapidly after the end

of the golems, and there are ruins of places settled by ponies who knew Luna and Celestia firsthand, or only a few generations later. It's amazing that the Nightmare was thorough enough to convince ponykind to bite into her story, but that doesn't mean all traces of the old tales are lost."

"But where's the fun if y' can juss teleport around? That ain't explorin'."

"I can't go where places I haven't seen, or at least been given a very good description of. And a lot of ruins have strange magics about them that need to be preserved. My legs get more of a workout than my magic." By now they had made it to Ponyville proper, and Twilight stopped to look around. She smiled at first, spotting several landmarks, from town hall to Sugarcube corner. But slowly her smile faded, replaced by confusion, then sadness.

"I don't recognize anypony." she said quietly. Applejack turned to face her and gave her a gentle nudge.

"Tha' kinda happens when y've been gone for four decades." she replied. Twilight gave a slight nod. Her eyes didn't seem to be sparkling anymore. Applejack nudged her again, this time as she began walking.

"C'm on. We gotta lot a places to see." she told Twilight. The alicorn gave a reluctant nod and followed her old friend through the streets. She garnered numerous looks, of both awe and trepidation - why was a princess here? What was going on? Too much time had passed, she realized. No one remembered the nerdy unicorn who had barely kept the town library running and herself intact with the antics she seemed to get herself into. Twilight turned her gaze ahead, trying to ignore the growing self-loathing inside of her. That was when her eyes caught something.

"That's...new." she said to the building in front of her. A barber's shop. But....Twilight saw it in her mind. The trees had been smaller (Earth and Sky, even the trees had changed!) and there had been more bushes, but the path was the same. This was where the Carasol Boutique was supposed to be. This was an entirely different building. And it wasn't supposed to be.

"This...this isn't right. Where is it?" she asked, looking around. She had to be wrong, maybe it was next door. What had they done to it? Applejack sighed.

"Sugarcube-" she stopped as Twilight rushed past her. Without thinking, the purple alicorn ran into the shop, practically bursting through the door.

Her entrance was met with stunned stares and dropped jaws. Patrons sat covered in aprons, most staring at mirrors until she had burst in. A few unicorns stood behind them, scissors and brushes hanging in midair. The tools clattered to the ground, the spell keeping them aloft broken as the unicorns startled. Twilight winced as the clattering blades luckily hit only the floor. She looked around. Tinny music played through speakers in the ceiling. The walls were tan, there were shelves beside her with shampoos, conditioners and lotions. The entire place was rectangular, with only a few square windows. It was a completely different building. Twilight finally noticed the eyes on her.

"Wrong building." she said, feeling more out of place than her first day in Ponyville. "My mistake." she backed out, trying to smile at the stunned ponies. She only turned around once outside, and found Applejack staring at her. Her friend has so many lines on her face, under her eyes. How had she not noticed that before?

"Yur an idiot." Applejack told her. Twilight hung her head.

"I know."

"Find what you were lookin' for?"

"No." Twilight told her with a shake of her head. She glanced back at the building. "Where'd it go?"

"Rarity paid rent on the darned place every month, every year." Applejack replied. "She always meant to move back, I reckon. Some day. Next year, it t'was always goin' t'be next year. Well, one year, next year didn' come, you know that. She never had any foals, and Sweetie Belle, bless her heart, had her own problems to worry about. So, township got the place, no one wanted it, an'..."

Twilight nodded, wiping her eyes. "I just thought...I don't know what I thought."

"C'm on." Applejack told her with a flick of her head. "There's more." with that, Twilight began to understand why her friend had brought her here. She followed Applejack down the road.

"Now, if'n we're lucky, we can head down to Sugarcube Corner an-" she was cut off as she passed by an alleyway and was promptly tackled by a pink and blue blur. Twilight jumped back in fright, and when the dust cleared she saw what happened, what -

rather, who - had brought her friend down flat. Two sets of big young eyes looked up at her.

"Ahh, it's a princess!" a blue pegasus colt shouted. He looked beneath him, at the pony he was laying on. "Ahhh! It's Granny Applejack!" he leaped off, fluttering a few feet in the air. With a sigh, Applejack lifted herself off the ground. Twilight's gaze was transfixed on the pink pony still on Applejack's back.

"Hello." the filly said, staring at her with a smile, on her face and in her eyes. Twilight found she couldn't work her mouth.

"Pinkella Daphne Pie!" Applejack shouted, looking over her shoulder. "What are you and Rush up to? An' get off mah back!"

The pink filly with curly pinker hair slid off Applejack's back with a giggle that was, somehow, pink. "Nothin." she said in that tone that children everywhere used. Twilight was still stunned. She even sounded the same. No, but besides being younger, this filly already had her cutie mark - an open present with streamers flying out of the top. It wasn't her....but...

"Nothin' mah hoof!" Applejack looked up at the colt. "Rush, an' what do you have to say for yurself?"

"Uhh..." the colt looked around, scratching his head. His mane, oddly, was snow white. "I can only get in trouble if I'm caught? Bye!" with that, he was off, leaving a gust of wind in his wake. That pegasus could move.

"Rush! Wait up!" Pinkella Daphne Pie began after her friend, hopping along in a way all too familiar to Twilight. Applejack turned to her, shaking her head at the vanishing little ponies.

"Welp." she said, stopping to cough. "Y've just met heir to the Pinkie Pie fortune. Along with the worst rascal this town has seen since, since..." Applejack just stamped her hoof. Twilight's brow furrowed.

"But-"

"Ah know what yur thinkin'." Applejack replied. "Scootaloo's kin. Well, down the road a li'l but Ah doubt y'd know...anyway. No relation to.." she shook her head.

Twilight nodded. "And...Pinkella. I..."

"Ah know, Ah know. Hey, every generation needs its Pinkie Pie. Some things are juss uni-vers-al truths." she nodded her head decisively. "And Ah would know."

"...You said Pinkie Pie fortune?"

"Yup. You go diggin' all around Equestria an' you still need to get out more." Applejack scolded her. "Sugarcube Corner. They got spots all over from here to Fillydelphia. They even got one in Cloudsdale!"

"Wow. I knew Pinkie Pie was doing well back in the day, but..."

"It grew more in her daughter's hooves." Applejack explained. "But she followed Pinkie Pie's dream for it. Wanted to make it so there was a place for anypony to throw any kind of party, anytime. Now, we don' need to stop by Sugarcube Corner anymore thanks t' that, but you're still buyin' me lunch."

"You mean you just wanted to show me..."

"Lunch!"

Twilight smiled weakly and nodded, so Applejack brought her over to the Daffodil Delicatessan. It was moderately busy, a respectable establishment specializing in good sandwiches and great service. As soon as the two of them entered the restaurant a waiter noticed them and just dropped his plate on a table, not even looking to whoever he dumping on. He was at the podium before they were, nodding deeply since he couldn't bow.

"Madam, and Princess Twilight! We are honored, truly honored! What brings you to our hhhumble establishment today?" Twilight had to admit, she had never heard anyone roll an 'h' before.

"Lunch." she replied simply. The waiter gave a nervous smile.

"Of course, of course! Where would you like to sit today? How may we serve you?"

"Where do you have that's available?"

"Why, every seat is available, my dear Princess!" the waiter seemed to still be trying to

figure out how to bow without hitting his head on the podium. Twilight stifled a sigh.

"I don't know...somewhere outside would be nice. Also some place that doesn't have anypony sitting at it already." she felt she had to add that last part. The waiter's head was bobbing so hard it might come off. He led them straight out the side to a patio. Twilight saw the waiter signal to another staff member. She also heard Applejack snicker.

"Well ain't you all high an' mighty." her friend quipped in a not-so-quiet whisper.

"This is why I don't get out much." Twilight whispered back. By the time they got to their table, Twilight found a purple cushion at her place. She swore it was like everypony kept one on hoof just in case. She didn't want to, but knew it would cause only more headache if she didn't take it. They'd think they'd offended or something. Another waiter came up with two menus as the first departed. Twilight held hers in place magically, and could see that the waiter was still waiting on them.

"Could you please give us a few minutes?" she asked, making him jump.

"W-why, yes, of course. We are at your service." he backed away tentatively. Once they were gone Twilight just plunked her head onto the table.

"You okay sugarcube?" Applejack asked casually from over her menu, as if nothing was wrong.

"I hate the whole Princess thing. How did Celestia ever put up with me? I get it now."

"Well, that kinda happens when y' marry into royalty, y'know." Applejack replied. "'sides, they're just being polite."

"They're afraid, Applejack. I'm feared. Me." she sighed. "Celestia and Luna have it worse, because of the whole Nightmare thing. But I don't get why they fear me. I've never done anything!"

"Naw." Applejack said tiredly, actually rolling her eyes. "S'not like you've got any power. Like you could shut down this here place if you so much as felt like it. Or just tear it up and throw it from here to Canterlot."

"But I don't do things like that!"

"But y' could."

Twilight groaned and looked around. Ponyville was still Ponyville, even if the faces had changed. For the first time in years, Twilight felt desperately homesick for a place that had never really been hers. It began to all unwind for her.

"I miss...everything. I miss the boutique, I miss Pinkie Pie's parties, I miss the everfree forest, I miss Zecora, I miss when Trixie came to town or when I helped you with Applebuck season or..."

"Slow down sugar." Applejack said, her voice low and sweet. Grandmotherly. "Ah miss them too. And Ah've missed you. So let's enjoy ourselves, okay?"

Twilight nodded and straightened herself. She saw the waiter approach again (he had probably timed two minutes to the second) and glanced quickly at her menu.

"The toasted carrot sandwich with whole-oat bread sounds wonderful." she told the waiter. "I'm not very hungry." the waiter nodded, still looking worried.

"Ah juss want the hay fries." Applejack said. Twilight wondered if the waiter had even noticed her until she spoke. He was off in a flash, yet another one came up right away only to pour them both tall glasses of crystal clear water. Well, at least they got both of them something to drink.

"Ah can't stomach much these days." Applejack told her. "Candy Apple tries to keep the cinnamon apple pies and the turnovers away from me, an' I know she means well by it. But Ah'm a bit sick of it."

Twilight nodded. "I never really got to know your family, I'm sorry."

"Well..." Applejack sighed. "O'course, they're Big Mac's kids first, but because he didn' stick around Ah just wound up being 'Granny Applejack'. If Granny Smith could see me now..." she shook her head, her smile deepening the lines on her face. "Candy Apple's sweet as y' can guess, but she's going to worry herself dead before Ah hit the ground."

"Don't talk like that, please." Twilight responded. Applejack gave her a look, but before she could say more their food came. That was fast, Twilight thought to herself. She bit into her sandwich, which honestly was pretty good, while Applejack picked at her fries. Every time Twilight took a sip of water she found it topped off. She had to try not to roll her eyes. Applejack kept silent during lunch, and Twilight found herself at a loss for

conversation. Had they really grown that apart?

"Eh, Ah'm finished with these, how about you Twi?" Applejack asked as the alicorn finished her meal. Twilight was briefly heartened to hear her old moniker again, but her mood fell when she saw Applejack had barely eaten.

"Ah know that look. Yur like Candy Apple y' are. Don' worry. It ain't gonna make a difference." her words were unusually cryptic for the salt-of-the-earth pony, but Twilight just nodded. She turned to one of the nearly ever-present waiters.

"Check please."

"Compliments of the establishment, m'lady."

Twilight frowned. "I'd really rather-"

"Twi?" Applejack interrupted. She looked over. Her friend was so, so tired. She looked like she barely had the energy to shake her head. "Let it go."

Twilight turned back to the waiter. "It is a lovely gift, thank you. And your establishment is more than praiseworthy."

"You honor us, Princess." Twilight cringed at the words, and the bow that followed. Always the bowing. She briefly wondered about talking Luna into making bowing illegal. No, no. Down that path lay the mind of a tyrant, even a well-meaning one who just wanted to enjoy her lunch with her friend.

"You comin', Twilight?" Applejack had gotten ahead of her, walking off the patio and into the road. Twilight nodded and caught up. Her friend's gait was slower than this morning

"Y'know what today is, don't ya?" Applejack asked. Twilight was puzzled - aside from the letter, nothing had marked this day as important to her. She just gave Applejack a confused glance. The old earth pony sighed.

"Really has been too long, ain't it? It's mah birthday, y' darned foal." she sounded disappointed.

The news hit Twilight like a stone. That was it. That was too much. She found tears on her cheeks and didn't bother to wipe them away.

"Hush, now, don' be like that." Applejack was at her side, pressed close as she could against the alicorn, brushing her folded wing. "Ah know y' didn't mean it. Ah almost stopped countin' myself."

"You're..."

"Eighty years old." Applejack said quietly, her voice unsteady. "An I know ponies that ain't lived half that. We all held on there, but Ah've been wantin' to ask you, Twi. Why me? Th' others stuck aroun', but...this ain't right."

Twilight didn't even realize that Applejack was leading her out of town. She shook her head. "It was natural, kind of. It's no spell if that's what you're asking. You're as solid as an apple tree, AJ. Mix that with with a strong will, and a good life, you'd be surprised. Plus...I may give off a slightly magical aura. That some ponies may be slightly receptive to."

"Slightly?"

"Slightly. It's mostly the will thing."

Applejack nodded. "Makes sense. That's why it took Fluttershy a while, t'weren't it? Good life an' all."

"Yes. Normally pegasus ponies don't live that long, but..." Twilight nodded. "She had such a gentle soul. The years didn't wear on her as much as other ponies."

"But she weren't strong enough either, was she?" Applejack asked. "Only pony to truly die of heartbreak. When her little grandfilly..." She wiped her eye.

"I should have been there." Twilight was so angry at herself. "I shouldn't have ever left Ponyville! I shouldn't have left any of you!" She stamped the ground, only wishing she could kick herself. Applejack sighed and hushed her again.

"Now enough of that." She told Twilight, once again coming off as so much older than her friend. "The princess's needed you, and it wouldn't've been right of us t' keep you. Besides, there was nothing y'could've done for her, 'les you think you can make a rockslide climb back up a mount'n. ...Shoot, you probably can, but y'know what Ah mean."

Twilight hung her head. "See? I could have done something."

"Y' can't go thinkin' like that. Yur putting the weight of the world on your shoulders. Besides, it all works out in the end, one way or th' other." She looked up. Twilight realized where she had been brought. Fluttershy's hut was gone, and in its place,

"Dragonfly Memorial Hospital and Veterinary Clinic." She read the red words emblazoned on the monolithic white building ahead of them. It wasn't pretty, but it was very stately, more windows than building, letting in all the sunlight it could. And it was surrounded by the most beautiful gardens Twilight had ever seen outside of Canterlot, with at least as much care put into them. Twilight could see every type of songbird that could possibly live here fluttering through the trees, a rabbit den just off the path leading to the hospital, and the entire thing was surrounded in flowers made brilliant by the spring. This time, as the tears rolled down her cheeks, she at least lifted a hoof to wipe them away.

"I remember this. Celestia went to the grand opening. I...couldn't come. I couldn't bring myself to come."

"It was all y'all that made it possible. Fluttershy never was one to have a sum of money in the bank. Or under her mattress, or anywhere really." Applejack shook her head. "But the family does well know, y'know. Her grandson, Fluttershy the Third, is a good doctor."

"Oh, well, that's - wait, her grandson Fluttershy?!"

"Yeah, well, 'parently his parents wanted to keep the tradition. He's a fine stallion."

"You, um...know him well?"

Applejack sighed. "We've met a few times recently. C'mon. We're almost done." she turned off the road, into the trees. Twilight was confused.

"Applejack, where are we going?"

"It's a shortcut." Applejack told her.

"Are you sure you should be-"

"How come Spike couldn't make it?" Applejack interrupted, shifting the conversation. Twilight frowned at the back of her friend's head but allowed the new topic.

"I'm sorry. He took a nap last year."

"Still going?"

"Dragons can sleep for up to a hundred years, you know." Twilight told Applejack. The earth pony nodded.

"Twilight?" She asked, her voice suddenly strained.

"Yeah?"

"You're going to be there when he wakes up, ain't cha?"

"...y-yes."

"How long do dragons-"

"About two thousand years. There's a lot of variation, and records are...spotty." Twilight briefly closed her eyes, but had to watch where they were going. Applejack was forcing herself up a hill, heaving her body every step of the way.

"I'll be there whenever that is." she told Applejack, anticipating her friend's question.

"Eventually even he will...and that will be the last person besides the princesses who ever actually knew me."

"Y'talk like it's already happened." Applejack said with a huff. "An' yur forgetin' yourself, y'idiot."

"What?"

"How old are ya? Li'l younger than me, right? An' you know the princesses, I reckon. Y'know at least one of them inside and out, don't cha?" she briefly turned to grin at Twilight, who after all these years still blushed a little.

"An' there'll be others. Y'know there will. Sooner or later, some bright eyed filly's gonna come up to you, all full of ideas an' prob'bly magic, and you'll get to know her. She won't give you the choice." With a heavy breath, Applejack crested the hill. Twilight did so as well a moment later, and paused. This hill rose higher than all the land around it. She

could see Sweet Apple Acres, the hospital, even into Ponyville. Applejack stood in front of a single gravestone.

"You remember the funeral, don't cha?" Applejack asked, tears collecting in the lines on her face. "Las' time we could say we were all together."

"I...yes. I could never forget. It rained that day. I don't think it was scheduled to, but it did."

"Ah remember Fluttershy the most. She was already goin' a bit daft by then, wasn't she? Asked for Angel the whole day..." Applejack wiped a hoof across her cheek. "Didn't say a word as they brought in the casket."

"I remember the colt who made that bad joke to Pinkie Pie after the service." Twilight said, sitting down besides Applejack. "About one occasion that even she couldn't party for. After the stare she gave him, I wouldn't be surprised if he swallowed his own tongue."

"Ah think he almost did." Applejack said, sitting down. She was smiling, but still crying.

"Rarity ruined her dress in the rain. Just wouldn't leave." Twilight said. "I remember the stallion she was with...he seemed nice. Guess it never worked out."

"Naw. Spinster to the end." Applejack was shaking. "Thirty-five years. That's how long it's been since then, Twi, you realize that. We've been kept apart for that long. I can still see her face too, bright as ever. Ah didn' want to tell you, but...it's hard. Nowadays, thinkin way back when. But ah can't forget her smile." Twilight leaned in to try to support her sobbing friend, and also to draw support from her.

"Come on. It was nice to visit, but we should get you home."

"...." Applejack closed her eyes and shook her head. "Ah ain't goin' home, Twilight."

"W-what do you mean?" Twilight felt her throat begin to close up in panic.

"You know what I mean." Applejack said. She opened her eyes to look up at the gravestone.

"N-no...you can't be sure."

"Ah am. S'old ticker. They say with some pills and and a lot of bedrest, Ah got a couple years left, but..."

"Th-that doesn't sound that bad." Twilight tried.

"They mean a lot of bedrest. As in all th' time. That ain't life, Twi. Not for me." Applejack was shaking. "Ah've raised colts and fillies from babes, and watched 'em grow old and die. Ah haven't seen any mah friends in least fifteen years."

"S-stop it!" Twilight sobbed "You're, you're not...."

Applejack smiled at her. "Hush now, none of that." she managed to reach up and wipe a tear from Twilight's face. "What did you say? It was friendship that gave those golems somethin' to live for, weren't it? Sure Ah got my kin, but Ah'm a burden to them. Ah'm past mah time. And Ah'm so tired." she looked Twilight in the eyes. "Go. They'll know to find me here, and Ah don' want you to see me like this."

"N-no!" Twilight let the tears stream down her face as sobs wracked her body. "I've missed everything else. Everyone of them! I haven't forgotten, I promise I haven't! I'm going to be here for you. I...have to be. Please."

"Fine then." Applejack said. "Ah ain't got it in me t' argue no more."

The two of them stayed there, leaning on each other. Slowly, Applejack got down, laying on the grass. Twilight kept aside her, and Applejack snuggled against her just like Twilight used to against Celestia as a filly. When the sun was setting, they were still there. Applejack let out a sigh. Her eyes hadn't opened for an hour.

"Twi....where is she? Will I get to see her? Will I get to see all of 'em?"

"It's hard to tell you where, but yes. It's like the heavens, but better. There's earth and sky, trees and creatures."

"An apples?"

"All the apples you can buck. And I know she's waiting for you. They're all waiting for you." Twilight told her.

"Mhmm. Twi?"

"Yes?"

"We'll wait for you too. But if you don't come with plenty of stories, if you don't come with a long life behin' ya....Ah'll whup ya."

"I will, Applejack." Twilight told her. "I promise."

"Mhmm." Applejack sighed. She grew still. Twilight waited, but nothing stirred in the old mare. Twilight was weeping again, she realized, but she couldn't feel it. She only felt cold.

Long after the moon had risen, and the last breath had passed from her friend's body, Twilight stayed there as if to keep it warm. She stayed there and just looked at the tombstone, the night sky, and the world around her she had left behind. It was the inscription on the tombstone that kept drawing her eye.

*Here lies Rainbow Dash,
Legend of the Wonderbolts,
Founder of the Royal Equestrian Aeronautics League,
and in her own words, most importantly,
The most loyal friend she could be.*