

# The First Light of Dawn

By Cold in Gardez



Karol Pawlinski

# Table of Contents:

|                  |                                   |            |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Chapter 1</b> | <b>The Pastel Desert</b>          | <b>3</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 2</b> | <b>The Celestial City</b>         | <b>16</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 3</b> | <b>The Treasures of the Night</b> | <b>30</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 4</b> | <b>The Harsh Light of Morning</b> | <b>44</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 5</b> | <b>The Root of the World</b>      | <b>70</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 6</b> | <b>Appleloosa Blues</b>           | <b>88</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 7</b> | <b>Flight</b>                     | <b>108</b> |
| <b>Chapter 8</b> | <b>Revelations</b>                | <b>126</b> |

# Chapter 1

## The Pastel Desert

The longest day of the year passed over the scrub and sage of the Pastel Desert in much the same way every other day that year had: quietly.

Millions of years before, when the desert was actually an inland sea, an unusual variety of zooplankton had thrived in its shallow waters, absorbing the light of a younger sun and the rich mineral salts leached from nearby mountains by rain. The high alkali concentration stunted or killed most life, but the tiny plankton adapted and exploded, untroubled by predators or competition. In time the exotic mineral soup changed the simple creatures, painting them in a riot of colors: iron red, cobalt blue, sulfur yellow, copper green and calcium white, to name just a few.

As they died the plankton sank to the bottom of the shallow sea. Those that fed on the heavier metals sank further, while those that tasted only of the lightest elements died on top. Countless trillions of plankton lived and died beneath the waters, until the slow tectonic shift of continental plates thrust the land under the sea upwards thousands of feet. Spurned by the rain and loved overmuch by the sun, the sea eventually evaporated, leaving only the stratified skeletons of the plankton to remind anypony that water had ever existed there at all.

The first pony explorers to stumble across the ghost of the sea knew they had discovered something special. Instead of the bland beige and white sand to the south and west, or the grim granite peaks of the mountains to the north, the Pastel Desert, as they named it, was a poet's dream. Time had blended and faded the sharp colors and sharper rocks, leaving a gently rolling landscape of lavender and peach, umber and rose, charcoal and ivory. Short, hardy bushes dotted the rocks, the only visible sign of life for dozens of miles in any direction.

Hundreds of years later the only change to the timeless landscape was a thin ribbon of train tracks laid by industrious earth ponies building networks between their towns as they moved west. Neither the sage

bushes nor the desert seemed to mind the railroad, though the rattle of passing trains sometimes sent lizards and rodents scurrying for cover.

Which is exactly what they did when the train came roaring down the tracks. It was fast – the rails had barely started to shake when the iron monster was upon them, and just as quickly it was gone.

The train was short, consisting only of an engine and a single passenger car, all pulled at breakneck speed by a team of conductor ponies. They galloped down the tracks lathered in sweat and panting for breath. They ran as though the dawning night behind them was in pursuit.

The roof of the passenger car had been converted to a makeshift balcony and was in use by a pair of ponies. One, an orange filly with a yellow mane and a cowboy hat that somehow stayed attached despite the whipping winds, was leaning on a rickety looking railing at the front of the car, her forelegs draped over the rail as she watched the landscape ahead. The other, a lavender unicorn filly, stood next to a telescope and tripod that had been crudely nailed to the car's roof, to keep it from bouncing off the train. Her head was buried in a large book floating in the air without any visible means of support, aside from a faint purple glow just now becoming visible as sun began to fall beneath the mountains to the west.

"We're comin' round a corner, Sugar!" the orange pony called over her shoulder. "We should be able to see her again in a sec!" Ahead of them the tracks bent around a massive hill that had once been a true mountain, until time and wind reduced it to its current state.

The unicorn pony turned a page, then another, and then flipped through the rest of the book before slamming it shut with a growl. The strain of the day's events was clear on her face – circled, tired eyes and a frazzled mane above tightly drawn lips. She levitated the book over to a trapdoor in the roof and let it drop into the car below.

The train took the turn without slowing down. The car rocked and began leaning dangerously, but before it could roll off the tracks they rounded the curve and were back on a straightaway. Ahead of them the sun had almost set – only a tiny piece of the orb remained above the mountains. The world around them darkened as twilight took hold.

But then the train passed all the way around the hill, and sunlight found them again.

To the south, miles away and high above the desert floor, something like a shooting star traced its way across the sky, paralleling the tracks as it headed west. It was nearly as bright as the setting sun, its flickering light illuminating the landscape below like noon. Even from the train it was impossible to look at directly for more than an instant. Twilight Sparkle dared a glance, then quickly turned away, blinking her watering eyes to clear the dazzling afterimage.

"Now that's powerful bright," Applejack said. She tipped her hat down to shade her eyes like a sensible filly. "Find anything in them thar' books?"

"No," Twilight said glumly. "I don't even know where to start. I have half my library in this car but it would take a week to read through it all, and even then we could miss something important because we didn't know it was important!"

The lavender pony rested her forehead on the railing. Over the roar of the train she could barely make out a faint rumble, like an unending thunder, coming from the south.

Applejack sighed. "The conductors are gonna need to stop soon," she said. "You look like you could use a rest yerself."

Twilight's head came up with a jerk. "But we just caught up to her! If we stop now she'll get away!"

"I know, Sug, but we can't--" she stopped suddenly, her eyes on the sky to the south. Twilight followed her gaze and gasped.

The shooting star was flickering badly. It nearly vanished several times before popping back to full brightness, but just as quickly it began to falter again. The constant rumble of thunder became a series of staccato booms felt in their chests.

"What's happening?" Applejack asked quietly, her words barely audible above the din.

Twilight stared at the shooting star. "Of course... it's the sunset," she said. "The sunset!"

To the west the last sliver of the sun dipped below the mountains, and the shooting star went out.

\*\*\*

"Stop the train!"

"What?" Applejack stared at her in confusion.

"Tell them to stop! I can't use the scope if we're bouncing around like this!" Twilight fumbled with the telescope and tripod, trying to orient it to the south. The shooting star was a barely visible spark descending from the evening sky.

The train lurched as Applejack's message reached the conductor ponies. When it finally settled she peered through the spyglass's eyepiece, trying to find the glimmering dot against the emerging night.

"I think she's landing," Applejack said. The orange pony stood by Twilight's side, squinting as she tried to find their target. "Try looking lower."

"Got her," Twilight said. Through the scope she found a thin black line that slowly resolved into a smoke trail, like the ones left by the Wonderbolts during their performances. As she followed the trail to its head the smoke slowly turned red, then orange, and finally a brilliant yellow surrounding a tiny, incandescent white nucleus streaking toward the earth. With a quick spin of one of the telescope rings the white spot jumped in magnification, filling the entire eyepiece.

It was like staring at the sun again. As her eye slowly adjusted to the brightness she could barely make out a pair of huge, feathered wings, their tips a dull cherry red that seemed nearly black when they passed in front of the alicorn's body. The air around it was literally on fire, a halo of flames that gave birth to the trail of smoke.

"Oh no... no no no no no," she mumbled. Applejack turned to her in concern.

“What? What’s wrong, Twi?”

“She’s not landing,” she said in shock. “She’s falling.”

The alicorn tumbled through the air, wings useless, completely out of control. Twilight pulled her eye away from the telescope in time to see the falling star meet the horizon.

“Princess...” she whispered.

The falling alicorn streaked past a low mountain and slammed into a rock outcropping nearly the size of Canterlot Keep. From the train it looked like the world’s largest firework; a shower of brilliant sparks rose into the air like a blossoming flower, soaring high above the mountain itself, followed by a fountain of yellow lava that sprayed upward and out like a severed artery. The outcropping collapsed a moment later, sending boulders the size of houses rolling for miles down the mountainside. The explosion grew in silence for several seconds before a titanic \*CLAP\* shook the train and raised clouds of dust from the desert floor around them.

Twilight fell back onto her haunches, her ears ringing from the blast. She watched numbly as a rockslide large enough to devour Ponyville slid down the mountain, accompanied by a river of lava that formed a small, burning lake at its foot.

Applejack managed to stay on her hooves, but couldn’t keep from shaking so hard her teeth chattered. From overhead came the whistle of rocks zooming by, followed by faint thuds as they landed. Some of the falling stones were nearly the size of a wagon, Twilight noted absently.

Neither of them moved. As the sun sank further below the horizon the world grew darker, illuminated only by the flickering orange of the burning mountain. Even as night took hold they could still see clearly by the flames.

Finally Twilight stood. Without a word she hopped down the trap door into the car, and then jumped out the back door onto the tracks. Before Applejack could find her voice, the purple unicorn was already trotting toward the mountain.

“Hey... Hey! Wait for me, Sug!” she yelled. “Gosh darned filly,” she added under her breath, then hopped clean over the railing to the desert floor and took off after her friend.

\*\*\*

“Slow down, girl! You’re gonna git yerself hurt!”

“I’m fine!” Twilight yelled. She really wasn’t, though; galloping across the desert at night wasn’t the safest or smartest thing to do, and she’d already nearly snapped an ankle on an unseen crevasse. The purple light of her horn wasn’t much help, only lighting the ground a few feet in front of her.

“Just take it easy, it doesn’t matter how fast we git there,” Applejack tried to reassure her.

“She needs our help!”

“You won’t be much help with a broken leg. If she survived that fall she’ll survive the extra minute it takes us to reach ‘er safely.”

The unicorn stumbled and almost fell as Applejack’s words sank in. She spun around to face the other pony, pointing her horn like a weapon.

“How can you say that?!” Tears left wet trails in the dust on her face. “Don’t you care about her?”

Applejack stopped a few feet away. “Of course I do,” she said quietly. “You know I do. I’m just bein’ honest.”

Calm, practical Applejack. Twilight lowered her horn, choking back a sob.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Applejack said. She placed a hoof on Twilight’s shoulder. “Now come on, let’s do this together.”

Twilight sniffled, and then bobbed her head. Together they turned to the mountain and walked the rest of the way.

\*\*\*



The fallen alicorn was waiting in a pool of glowing rock perhaps twenty feet across. By approaching from the higher ground on the side of the mountain they could get within a pony length of reaching her before their hooves began to smoke. Applejack retreated with a startled yelp, and grabbed Twilight's tail in her mouth to pull her back when she didn't follow.

"I think we're gonna have to wait, Sug," she said. Beside her Twilight ground her teeth in frustration.

"But she needs us now!" Twilight hissed. "Look at her!"

Applejack sighed. "Twi, if she can survive in that, she can survive anythin'. And nothin' we can do will help her."

The rock around the alicorn simmered as they watched. Occasionally a large bubble would burst with enough force to spray flecks of lava over her wings and head, the only parts of her body not submerged in the liquid stone. The drops ran like water down her feathers and hide, leaving no mark to signify their passage.

Twilight stomped her hoof in frustration. "Princess!" she called, "It's your faithful student! Can you hear us?"

The alicorn had no response.

"Princess!"

Near the edge of the lava a boulder cracked with a deafening report, half of it slipping into the pool while the rest tumbled down the hillside, starting small brush fires as it rolled.

"Sug, it's not—"

"Princess! CELESTIA!"

Applejack rested a hoof on the unicorn's shoulder. "Twilight, enough. She's either asleep or—"

Twilight batted the hoof away, interrupting the filly. "Or what?!" she demanded.

"Or unconscious," Applejack finished calmly. "Either way, yellin' at her ain't gonna help."

The unicorn glowered at her for a moment, then seemed to wilt. She sat back on her haunches, head so low it nearly touched the hot earth, and started to sob.

"I'm s-sorry, AJ," she said quietly. "I don't know what to do. Nothing like this has ever happened before."

Applejack drew her into a tight hug. "It's okay, we'll figure somethin' out."

Twilight continued to sniffle for a while, until the tears finally ran out. She gave her head an angry shake and stood, stomping the ground again.

"Applejack," she said. Her voice was as clear and calm as if she were in her library.

"Yeah Sug?"

"How far is Appleloosa?"

The orange filly stood and looked around at the nearest mountains, comparing them to memories of visits to her cousin's town.

"Hm, maybe 10 miles? Lookin' for a place to stay?"

She snorted. "No, we need more help. Can you head there with the train and tell them what happened?"

"Sure can. What do ya need us to bring?"

Twilight thought for a moment, then sighed. "I don't know. Everything I guess."

"Alright, everything it is. You stayin' here?"

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the alicorn. She kicked a loose stone into the lava where it sank without a sound.

“Well, alright then. I’ll be back just as soon as I can.”

Applejack started to turn back to the train when she felt a warm nose nuzzle her shoulder. She smiled, and stopped long enough to give the unicorn a tight hug.

“Thanks AJ,” Twilight said. “Sorry about all that.”

“Aw, it’s nothin’ Sug. It’s been a long day.”

After Applejack left it was a long and lonely night, as well.

\*\*\*

*Three months earlier...*

Trixie was an unhappy pony.

She never would have admitted that, least of all to herself, but her powers of self-delusion were starting to wear a bit thin after being chased from yet another town. Apparently this “Winter Wrap-Up” celebration was not a good time to advertise her magnificent magical skills by offering to use her power to melt the snow.

Or teleport the animals out of their burrows.

Or blast the clouds from the sky.

In retrospect, she hadn’t really “offered” to do those things, in the technical sense of the word. She just did them. It was better to ask for forgiveness than permission, right? That’s how powerful magicians worked.

And was she thanked for her efforts? Did they shower the Great and Powerful Trixie with praise (and bits) for her dazzling display of magical prowess?

No! The ungrateful earth ponies actually booed her! They accused her of ruining the celebration!

Granted, she probably shouldn't have called them "dirt" ponies, not out loud at least. But that's what they were – earth, dirt, mud: all the same. They spent their days grubbing in the soil, trying to eke out a living. It was actually very generous of certain talented unicorns – like herself – to stop and try to make their pitiful lives a little more bearable.

They were lucky! Even if they didn't realize it now, someday they would tell their foals of the time the Great and Powerful Trixie visited their town and blessed them with her magic. They would weep as they recalled how poorly they treated her. "Someday," they would say to their young, "another magician may deign to visit our pitiful little hovel. Treat her with kindness! Do not repeat our mistakes! Woe! Repent!"

Mud ponies. Dirt ponies.

Anyway, on the open road again. This really was the best life for a pony like her: travelling the world, helping the less fortunate. If it happened to cement her reputation as the greatest magician in all of Equestria, well, she could hardly be held responsible for the hysterical adoration she caused in everypony who met her.

The Great and Powerful Trixie was happy, she decided. There was nothing she wanted to do more right now than walk down this very road, to whatever fortunate town awaited her arrival.

She was a little hungry, maybe, on account of not eating for a few days. But she was happy.

Her legs were a bit sore, from galloping to escape the angry herd in that town whose name she hadn't bothered to learn. But she was happy.

She was a tad cold, what with all the snow, and her lack of winter clothing.

And her wagon. Mustn't forget the wagon, lost those many months ago.

Or her books, lost with the wagon, that she had spent so many nights pouring over.

Or her beloved hat and cape, purchased with the first bits she earned from performing on street corners in Canterlot, now gone as well.

She stopped and stomped her hoof. These were not happy thoughts. They were not helping.

She was happy. Happy. The Great and Powerful Trixie had never been happier than she was on that snowy road, stung by a knifing winter wind, in the deepening gloom of twilight.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie,” she announced to no one in particular, “is *delighted* to be here. Delighted!”

She didn’t need a stage to perform – the world was her stage! She reared up on her back legs, hooves spread wide, imagining the next cheering crowd before her.

“Come one, come all!” she called. “Come and witness the amazing magic of the Great and Powerful Trixie!” A wave of her hoof filled the sky with blue and silver fireworks, their thunderous claps shaking the snow from the branches around her and sending animals fleeing in terror for miles around.

“Watch in awe as the Great and Powerful Trixie performs the most spectacular feats of magic ever witnessed by pony eyes!” She pranced in a circle and the ground beneath her lurched into the air, lifting her up on an earthen pedestal as high as the treetops. A magical spotlight popped into existence, lighting her like a star.

“Behold, as she commands the powers of the arcane!”

She thrust a hoof toward a dark, snow-covered field, her horn glowing with a brilliant silver light. The snow roiled and shook, moving about as though being shaped by an invisible sculptor. It piled higher and higher, quickly taking the form of a massive, white dragon that shambled toward her, puffs of snow and frost falling from its joints with each creaking step.

Icy claws grasped her pedestal as it towered over her, its wings blotting out the sky.

And then it bent low, and laid its head at her feet.

She twirled to face a stand of trees. "Gasp, as nature itself worships her!" Beads of sweat collected on her hide despite the freezing cold, and began to trickle in streams down her body. Clenching her teeth, she stared at the trees, her horn flaring like a torch.

Silver sparks appeared around the trees and they began to lean, as though being pressed down by a great weight. Slowly at first, then with greater speed, they bent until their bare crowns touched the ground, bowing to her.

"Quake before her majesty!" she shouted, her showpony's voice quavering with strain. Wide, shaking eyes stared at the road as her magic filled it with illusions. Dozens, hundreds of ponies cheered for her, stomping their hooves, calling out her name. Flights of spectral pegasi soared in formation overhead, paying tribute to her greatness. Waves of fireworks lit the sky like day.

"Love her! LOVE TRIXIE!" she screamed at the illusions, flecks of froth flying from her lips. The trees began to crack under the strain of her magic, their trunks snapping like twigs. The snow dragon lifted its head and rocked back as she fell to her knees. It flailed at the air, as though fighting an unseen enemy, then slowly disintegrated, forming piles of snow and ice that would take weeks to melt.

The earthen pedestal began to lean slightly, then suddenly slumped, giving up the fight against gravity. It sank into an irregular mound, depositing the shivering, crying pony on the icy road. Around her the illusions flickered and went out.

"Love me..." she whispered, and wondered, not for the first time, where it had all gone wrong.

\*\*\*

Eventually the cold and wind forced her to her feet. Unable to go back, she went forward.

Hours later the road came to an intersection. Some helpful pony had put up a sign to guide travelers, which she glumly surveyed. Most of the names she didn't recognize. One, she did.

Canterlot. How long had it been since she started there? Years, at least. She could barely remember the rough streets, the early, clumsy performances.

Going back there would be like admitting defeat. Admitting that the wide, open world was too much for her.

On the other hand, all artists occasionally needed a break. She had done well enough at Canterlot as a filly; imagine what she could accomplish as a powerful magician!

She could make a new name for herself there; she could recover from the past few months. New allies would bankroll her performances. She could be the newest star in Equestria's greatest city.

Yes, Canterlot. She practiced saying the word, and found she liked it.

Head higher, a bounce in her step, she started down the road to Celestia's city.

She felt happier already.

# Chapter 2

## The Celestial City

*The purple foal had never been more excited in her young life. She bounced in place, trying to see over the heads of the taller ponies in the crowd around her, until finally her father picked her up and placed her on his back.*

*Ahead of them, at the front of the Solarium, Canterlot's largest plaza, hundreds of craftsp ponies had spent the night constructing a special stage, behind which the first light of dawn was beginning to rise in the East. Now there were thousands of ponies crowded into every open space as far as she could see, filling the air with the sound of hooves on marble, the faint hum of conversation, and the rustle of pegasus wings overhead.*

*The babble of the crowd suddenly grew louder, and faint cheers broke out near the front. Trumpets sounded as a giant white pegasus with a unicorn horn walked onto the stage. The figure towered over the guards and other ponies, making them look like foals beside her.*

*"I can see her!" she squeaked into her father's ear, her forelegs wrapped around his neck for balance.*

*He whickered quietly, amused. "Keep watching, Sparky. It hasn't started yet."*

*On the stage the alicorn princess spent a moment watching the mountains. Then, as the newborn sun's rays broke over the horizon, she leapt, her massive wings lofting her into the air. With a final beat she hovered in front of a golden crescent sculpture that very nearly matched the mark on her flank, and the full light of the sun behind her washed over the plaza. The longest day of the year had begun.*

*Every year since, for as long as she lived in Canterlot, Twilight Sparkle never missed the Summer Sun celebration.*

\*\*\*



Canterlot hadn't changed much since Trixie's last visit. No surprise there; the city was a reflection of its ruler, a millennia-old alicorn princess. Celestia had long ago decided she was happy with the state of Canterlot, and that was good enough for most ponies. If you didn't like it, well, there was a wide open world you were free to explore.

In truth, there was much to love about Canterlot. Every street was a work of art – carefully laid cobblestones, soft on the hooves, led to wide intersections decorated with fountains and statues. Ornate lampposts pleased the eye during the day, and lit the way at night. Graceful bridges stretched across placid streams, and everywhere there was green. Trees, grass, flowers, gardens; the whole city sometimes seemed more like an elaborate park than a place where ponies actually lived and worked.

Above it all, perched on the side of a mile-high mountain, was Canterlot Keep. Celestia's castle, the capital of Equestria; a dream wrought from marble and rainbows.

And home to ponies with more money than sense. Trixie's favorite kind of pony.

The Great and Powerful Trixie moved through the crowds like a fish through water. As she walked she remembered the rhythms of the city, the steps of the artful dodger she had once been. She watched the ponies around her with a practiced eye, gauging the flow of traffic and the open spaces where crowds might form.

Eventually she came to one of Canterlot's famous plazas, a broad courtyard of pink granite flagstones and sparkling fountains. Ponies relaxed beneath trees and on wrought-iron benches, enjoying one of the first beautiful days of spring. The central fountain was nearly fifty paces across and ringed by a broad marble bench. Families sat on the edge of the fountain, watching their foals splash about in the water.

When she still had her wagon, Trixie had preferred to give set performances, using her grandest spells and tricks in more-or-less the same routine. But before she owned her own stage she had been a master improviser, able to turn any situation extraordinary by her mere presence.

And now it was time to improvise. She hopped up onto the fountain's edge, spells and routines tumbling through her head. She wanted something impressive but not ostentatious. Canterlot was a poor place for boasting – the city itself was the greatest star, and difficult to compete with.

*The key is not to do the impossible*, she thought, part of the mantra she always recited before performing. Her horn glowed as she cast the first of many spells. *It is to do the impossible, and make it look easy.*

She took a step, and walked out onto the water as though it were solid earth. Eyes closed, she paused with her head tilted up and her mane tossed behind her shoulder in an arrogant silver wave.

Her performer's instinct told her to wait. Wait until the hum of conversation died down as ponies noticed her. Wait until she heard hoofsteps drawing closer. Wait until the crowd began to chatter again.

Water-walking was a difficult skill. Most unicorns, if they bothered to learn it, could only take a few steps before sinking. A magician unicorn might be able to stand on water indefinitely, if they were careful. But she was no mere magician.

The Great and Powerful Trixie began to dance.

She started slowly, cantering in a circle with her eyes still closed, legs crossing as she pirouetted about the water. An excited babble started in the crowd, and a few ponies stomped their hooves in appreciation.

The sounds of approval were like nectar, like delicious wine. She hopped forward three times, then leapt high into the air, hooves extended, before landing perfectly on her forelegs. Someone in the crowd cheered.

*The key is not to do the impossible.* She darted forward, her hooves skating across the water like ice. She crouched and then jumped again, spinning in the air to land backwards, still gliding over the water in a wide circle that brought her to a slow stop near the crowd.

*It is to do the impossible, and make it look easy.* Exhaling, she raised a single hoof, and her horn glowed as the performance truly began.

The water in front of her roiled, as though being stirred by an invisible hoof. Faster and faster it spun, until out of the whirl a blob of water the size of a pony appeared, rising to the surface before her. The amorphous form slowly attenuated and drew tighter, assuming a shape as it shrank. She heard shouts from the crowd as she focused her magic, wielding it like a knife.

The crowd was utterly silent when her spell finished. Before them on the water stood two unicorns – one of flesh and blood, the other sculpted entirely from liquid water. Its mane was gently flowing mist, its horn like an icicle, all atop a gracefully arching neck and imperiously tilted head.

If she had stopped there it still would have been a magnificent show, certainly more than anypony ever expected outside a performance hall. But she was the Great and Powerful Trixie; magnificent was just a starting point for her.

She turned her hoof upward, holding it out to the water sculpture. With a fluid grace it raised its leg, gently clasped her hoof with its own, and together they resumed the dance.

The crowd went insane.

Hundreds of ponies had jammed the open space around the fountain. Some, toward the edges, had even climbed into the water to get a closer look. Soon the crowd itself became part of the attraction, as ponies wandering by stopped to see what the cheering was for.

She spun elegantly across the waves, each hoof placed with a precision and grace that would have been at home in Canterlot's finest balls. The water sculpture mirrored her movements, sometimes close enough to touch, other times far enough away that they seemed to be dancing separately.

The noise around her was deafening. Ponies shouted, cheered and stomped their hooves. She could barely hear herself think.

It was wonderful.

After a few final orbits she came to a stop just feet from the front of the crowd, the water unicorn by her side. With a casual gesture of her hoof she dismissed the magic binding it, and it collapsed back into the pool without a trace. She reared back on her hind feet, hooves spread wide, head tossed back in abandon, as though ready to embrace every pony in the crowd. The cheering somehow grew louder.

She stood that way for a long while, drinking their adoration like a flower drinking sunlight. Small splashes sounded around her, and she realized they were tossing bits into the fountain.

Not a bad start. Not bad at all.

\*\*\*

Twilight Sparkle was having a good day, and she hadn't even gotten out of bed yet.

She had set her alarm extra early the night before. Part of her hadn't wanted to go to bed at all, and just stay up bouncing around the library in excitement, but that was foalish and she was no longer a foal. She was a sensible mare who knew the importance of getting a good night's sleep.

So she went to bed. Reluctantly.

Finally the alarm went off. It didn't wake her – she'd been awake and staring at it for more than twenty minutes, silently willing it to move faster.

She was up and out of the bed so fast she might as well have teleported. The covers hadn't even landed back on the bed and she was already out of the room, trotting down the stairs to the Library proper.

"Spike! Spiiiiike! Wake up Spike!"

There was a muffled crash from upstairs, followed by a thrashing sound, like someone was having a fight with their pillow.

"Get up Spike!" she called again.

“Wha... what? Twilight?” He poked his head over the loft where he slept, eyes bleary with sleep.

“Good morning, sleepy head!”

“Twilight, it’s... the sun’s not even up, Twilight.”

“I know! Do you want some breakfast? I think there’s some jade left.”

The tiny dragon wandered into the kitchen, rubbing his bleary eyes. “What’s got you so excited?” he asked, and wandered over to the pantry to start pulling ingredients for breakfast before Twilight could try to do so herself. He had learned to head that disaster off at the pass.

She hopped in place. “Do you remember last month when Celestia invited us to attend the Summer Sun Celebration in Canterlot?”

He nodded. He remembered most of the messages he coughed up as part of their correspondence.

“Well, she said I could bring as many of my friends as I wanted!”

He poured some water into a kettle and breathed on it, quickly heating it to a boil with his flames. He waited for her to continue, but she simply stared at him with the eager smile she used when she wanted people to ask her stuff.

He sighed. “Okay, so why is this morning important?”

She clapped her hooves together. “The Formal Events Etiquette Manual says that you should wait until 60 days before an event before inviting your friends, if they will be attending as your guests.”

He disguised rolling his eyes by turning to grab a bag of dried oats. He measured some into a bowl and poured the steaming water into it, giving the whole mixture a stir with his claw before putting it on the table for her.

“Let me guess. Today is 60 days before the – hey, don’t eat that yet! Let it sit for a minute.”

Twilight looked up from the oatmeal she had been about to stick her muzzle into, chagrined. She hated waiting for her breakfast.

“So, ah, yes, today is 60 days before the Celebration, which means I can start asking people to come!” She paused, then added, “Would you like to come, Spike?”

“You know, just because a book says something doesn’t mean...” he trailed off as she narrowed her eyes. He coughed and continued, “Count me out. The last time I attended that thing, Nightmare Moon tried to take over the world.”

She took a tentative bite of the oatmeal, and then blew on the bowl, trying to cool it off a bit faster. “I guarantee you that won’t happen this year, Spike,” she said, before trying another bite.

“I’m sure you’ll find some other disaster, Twilight.”

“Gee, thanks.” At least the oatmeal was good.

\*\*\*

The sun was just barely over the horizon as she made it out the door, filling the misty air with a gentle golden glow. She hopped once to settle her saddlebags, then levitated a scroll out of one of her pockets, stretching it open in front of her. On it was the checklist she had prepared last night – mostly errands, but also the names of the six friends she hoped would accompany her. One, Spike’s, had been sadly crossed out.

Checklists were one of Twilight Sparkle’s guilty pleasures. Anything and everything that could be organized into a checklist, was. Checklists turned the chaos of life into neat, ordered rows to be individually ticked off as they were accomplished. For a bookworm who found pony relations sometimes confusing, they were a source of comfort. She couldn’t help but feel smug when using them; more organized and logical than other, non-checklist-using ponies. Sometimes, when no one was watching, she would draw empty boxes with no associated tasks and check them off, just for fun.

She had arranged her friends in the order they were likely to wake up, so she could visit them more efficiently. Applejack, probably already out

tending apple trees, was at the top. Rainbow Dash, who wouldn't leave her cloud before noon, was solidly at the bottom, below the other ponies, shopping and lunch.

Sweet Apple Acres was already in full swing when Twilight arrived. Earth ponies were out in the orchards, pruning branches, planting new trees and making repairs to the irrigation system. Applejack, as Twilight expected, was directing work at the barn with her brother.

The orange earth pony trotted out to meet her, calling out a cheerful greeting. "Howdy Sugar! What brings you 'round here?"

Twilight gave her a friendly nuzzle. "Good morning AJ," she said, and then stood back a step and cleared her throat.

"As you may know," she started her rehearsed invitation, "Princess Celestia will be holding the annual Summer Sun Celebration in Canterlot in two months. She has graciously decided to invite me and anypony of my choosing to attend as her special guests in the Palace seating section. I would be honored if you would agree to accompany me to this event."

"Aw, Sug, I'd love to," she answered. "But it won't be like the Gala, will it?"

There was an uncomfortable silence as they both relived the catastrophe that had been the Grand Galloping Gala.

"Er, no," Twilight finally said. "This will be much less formal. Almost everypony in Canterlot will be there, not just the aristocracy."

Applejack stomped a hoof in approval. "Well, count me in then. Who else is coming?"

Twilight brought out her checklist and ticked off the box next to Applejack's name, enjoying a secret thrill as she did. "Just us so far. I'm sure the rest of the girls will too, though."

\*\*\*

“...graciously decided to invite me and anypony of my choosing to attend as her special guests in the Palace seating section. I would be honored if you would agree to accompany me to this event.”

Pinkie Pie gasped and clapped her hooves over her mouth as Twilight finished, her eyes wide as saucers.

“Twilight Sparkle, are you asking me to be your DATE?!”

“What? No, Pinkie, as my guest.”

“Well it soooooounds like you’re looking for a date, silly filly,” Pinkie replied, bouncing in a merry circle around the bemused unicorn.

Twilight turned, trying to track the hyperactive pony. “Don’t be ridiculous. Applejack is coming too, and she didn’t call this a--” she didn’t get to finish her sentence.

“Applejack too?! Oooooohhhh, it’s *that* kind of date,” she said slyly, giving Twilight a giant stage wink.

Twilight resisted the urge to smack herself in the forehead. “It’s not a... oh, nevermind. Can you come?”

“Of course I can!” Pinkie hopped in place, her hooves fluttering wildly. Suddenly she froze in mid-hop, a puzzled look on her face.

“Wait, what day did you say it was?” the pink pony asked.

“The... Summer Sun Celebration? It’s the day of the Summer Sun Celebration, of course.”

Pinkie tilted her head to the side slightly, her hoof rubbing her chin as she thought.

“Hmm.... I thought there was another party that day,” she said.

“Somepony’s birthday?”



Pinkie shook her head, chewing her lip as she thought. “Nope, no birthdays.”

“A wedding?”

Pinkie giggled. “Silly Twilight, I’d never forget a wedding! They’re the BEST parties!”

Twilight sighed. “Well, what was it, then?”

Pinkie knocked her hoof against her head, as though trying to jar the memory loose. “It was some kind of celebration, I think,” she said. “OOH! It had to do with the sun!”

Twilight closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her hooves.

“Was it the Summer Sun Celebration, Pinkie?”

Pinkie shrieked and wrapped her forelegs around the unicorn in a bone-crushing hug. “THAT’S IT! Twilight, you’re a GENIUS!”

Twilight couldn’t breathe. *This is how diamonds are formed*, she thought. Finally the pink pony released her, and the grey tunnel receded from her vision.

“So, can you come?” she asked a bit weakly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Twilight.” She really did look sorry; the world itself seemed to lose some of its color as she pouted. “But there’s a party here to celebrate the Summer Sun Celebration. If I go with you, who will run the party?”

Part of Twilight wanted to tell Pinkie to forget the party, that it wasn’t important. Fortunately, the part of Twilight that didn’t want to be buried in a shallow grave in the Everfree forest won out.

“Oh, it’s alright Pinkie,” she said, and gave her friend a nuzzle. “We’ll be fine without you, and I’m sure it will be a great party.”

Pinkie beamed at her, and the color came back into the world.

\*\*\*

Three hours later, Twilight Sparkle was feeling a bit grumpy. She munched on a daisy flower and grass sandwich outside the Hayseed Café and reviewed the checklist resting in front of her.

Applejack's name had a satisfying check mark next to it, but so far her other friends had been less receptive to her invitation.

Pinkie Pie's parties obviously took precedence. The town was relying on her to organize the celebration, and knowing Pinkie it would probably rival the festivities in Canterlot.

Rarity had said she would "rather die" than see Prince Blueblood again. Twilight thought that was a bit overdramatic, even for Rarity, but the girls had never gotten the full story from her of what happened on the night of the Gala.

Fluttershy had sounded happy about coming, until Twilight started talking about how exciting the crowds were, and how thousands of ponies would see them up on stage with the princess. It had taken her an hour to talk the shivering pegasus out from under the table.

That just left Rainbow Dash, who should be waking up soon. Twilight finished her sandwich, left a precisely calculated tip, and cantered off to find the blue pegasus pony.

It was a short search. One of the treetop-high clouds near the edge of town had a garish, multi-hued tail hanging over its edge. She trotted as close as she could, and started yelling.

"Daaaaash! Wake up!"

The tail gave a flick and vanished on top of the cloud. Twilight rolled her eyes.

"I know you're up there, Dash! Come down!"

No response.

"I have important news regarding an upcoming event!" she teased.

Still nothing. She scowled.

"Don't make me come up there!"

She heard what sounded like a cross between a snort and a giggle come from the cloud.

"Some ponies..." she muttered to herself. Well, fine. She could play that game too. She spun together the cloud-walking spell she had learned for their visit to Cloudsdale, her hooves glowing a light purple for a moment as the magic sank in. She tapped her hooves together to make sure the spell was firmly set, then turned to look up at the cloud, closing her eyes and imagining herself standing atop it.

Her horn flashed, and when she opened her eyes she was on top of what felt like fluffy cotton, next to a startled blue pegasus.

Dash yelped and rolled away, nearly tumbling off the cloud before her flapping wings frantically to recover. She settled back onto the cloud with a dour look for the giggling unicorn.

"You know, Twilight, the reason pegasus ponies can stand on clouds is so we can't be bothered while we're sleeping."

"Good morning to you, too!" She glanced up at the sun. "Or should I say, good afternoon?"

Dash grumbled something just below Twilight's hearing range. Her mane looked like a bird's nest that had survived a paint factory explosion.

"So what's so important that you had to interrupt my nap?" Dash fluffed the cloud with her hooves and then flopped onto her belly.

"As you may know, Princess Celestia will be holding the annual Summer Sun Celebration in Canterlot in two months. She has graciously decided to invite me—"

“Boring!”

Twilight frowned, but pressed on. “Ahem. She has graciously decided to invite me and anypony of my choosing to attend as her special guests—”

“Still bored!”

Twilight scowled. “Rainbow Dash, we are being offered a chance to attend an important historic event of immense cultural significance. You should be excited about this opportunity!”

“Uh huh.” Dash rolled onto her side, facing away from the unicorn. “Ask Scootaloo – she loves important historic events of boring significance.”

“Really?” Twilight perked up. “I didn’t know she was so culturally inclined. Maybe this will have something to do with her cutie...” she trailed off as she noticed Dash snickering.

She decided to attack from another angle. “You know, I hear the Wonderbolts will be attending,” she said casually. A blue ear swiveled around to face her.

“They’ll be giving one of their biggest performances of the year,” she continued. “They’ve been working on new routines all winter, I’m told. I’m sure it will be ‘awesome’.”

Dash rolled onto her back, staring up at the higher clouds with feigned nonchalance. “Go on,” she said.

“I bet they’ll even stop to speak with all the guests in the VIP section.” She paused, then struck. “You know, where we’ll be sitting.”

Dash sigh and rose to her hooves. “Fine, fine. But it better be awesome!”

Twilight hopped with a delighted squeal and smothered the pegasus with a hug. “Oh, thank you Dash!”

“Hey, watch the mane!”

Twilight was so happy she forgot to mark her checklist.

# Chapter 3

## The Treasures of the Night

The past few weeks had been extremely kind to Trixie.

Other ponies might have felt lucky in her shoes. They might have wondered what they had done to deserve being showered with bits, or staying in fine inns and eating three hot meals a day. Some of them, the wiser ones, might have started making plans for the future that didn't rely on blind fortune.

Trixie wasn't that kind of pony. It was obvious to her what she had done to deserve all those things: be herself. The hardships of her months on the road were an aberration, a series of unfortunate events that in no way reflected on her value as a pony. A monumental wrong was being undone and the universe itself was now a better place.

Still, she reflected, things could be better. Her performances in the streets and parks were pulling in a steady stream of income, but they weren't generating much respect. Outside Canterlot she was the Great and Powerful Trixie; here she was just another street performer, applauded and soon forgotten as ponies went about their business.

So despite being warm, and fed, and having a place to sleep at night, Trixie came to an unusual conclusion – she decided she wasn't a happy pony.

Yes, she *felt* happy most of the time, especially when surrounded by cheering crowds or scooping up the bits they tossed her way, but that wasn't the same as *being* happy. The only way she could truly *be* happy was as the Great and Powerful Trixie.

And that was looking increasingly unlikely, as long as she stayed in Canterlot. The Great and Powerful Trixie required the worship and adoration of her fellow ponies, and worship was a limited resource when you lived in a town with a pair of celestial gods who moved the heavens on a daily basis. They had something of a monopoly on worship.

She mulled over her troubles while enjoying a sumptuous dinner at a cozy upscale bistro in Canterlot's unicorn district. The Prancing Pony had

become something of a hang-out for her, to the point that the cook already had her dinner laid out when she arrived. Lightly toasted oats drizzled with honey were artfully arranged on her plate, garnished with a delightful wood sorrel whose acidity gently offset the sweetness of the grains.

What to do, what to do. She pondered the question between bites, washing down the sumptuous mouthfuls with sips from a mug of warm, spiced cider.

She could leave Canterlot again, but that would mean, well, leaving Canterlot. She wasn't *that* unhappy yet. A waiter pony carefully slid the empty plate out from in front of her, replacing it with a slice of frosted carrot cake still warm from the oven.

Halfway through the cake (which was unspeakably delicious) she had a sudden epiphany. Canterlot offered her the physical comforts and riches she deserved, but the ponies here were too blinded by the city itself to recognize her greatness. The ponies in the small towns and villages she visited, despite their quaint and humdrum lives, were in the best position to acknowledge her power and glory (and adore her appropriately). She was like the moon in their night sky, bringing radiance and magic to their darkness.

Oh, cruel fate! she lamented, finishing the last of her cake and licking the few crumbs that had escaped her from the plate. Forced to choose between a life of luxury and the worship she deserved! The dilemma was so painful she felt she should be crying.

She waited for the tears. They stubbornly refused to come.

She was probably just dehydrated from a long day of performing, she decided. After all, she was such a hard worker – probably the most industrious pony in all of Equestria, come to think of it.

The streets were dark when she finally left the bistro, the ornate gas lamps lining the streets just starting to light for the evening. The steady hum of ponies at work began to give way to the sounds of Canterlot's nightlife – laughter, music and singing, and ponies shouting greetings to friends.

All the walk back to the hotel she pondered her dilemma. Stay and be comfortable but unfulfilled, or abandon Canterlot and go on the road again to be recognized as the Great and Powerful Trixie?

She was still thinking when she came to a particularly wide intersection, filled with fountains and trees and ponies playing with their friends. High above, unblocked by the buildings, loomed the alabaster towers of Canterlot Keep, home to Celestia and seat of her rule.

*Perhaps*, Trixie thought to herself, *there is a third choice*. She tended to view the world in terms of black and white, and the thought of a third way startled her badly.

There were unicorns up there who had all the things she wanted, she realized. Members of Celestia's court, rich beyond belief, honored and treated wherever they went.

And what had those aristocrats done to deserve such fortune? Nothing! She fumed at the injustice. She should be up there, as an honored member of the court – no, as the court magician!

She spent a few moments fantasizing about her new life in Celestia's court. Other ponies were starting to give her odd looks when she finally snapped back to the present. With a blush she continued on her way.

\*\*\*

Some members of Celestia's court were lucky – that is, they were born into their positions. The unpopular Prince Blueblood, heir to a long line of unicorn nobility that had been among the first to rally behind Princess Celestia's rule, was one such individual. His ancestors had done some brave and dangerous things, and generations later he reaped the benefit of Celestia's gratitude. Barring some unforeseen genealogical discovery, this path to the court wasn't in the cards for Trixie.

Most members of the court, however, earned their spot. Ministers, officials, officers, recorders and guards – even the servants were chosen for their positions based on merit and experience. This had the effect of creating a well-run and competent government, with Celestia herself mostly performing ceremonial duties, or occasionally making significant decisions that couldn't be delegated. If the aristocrats sometimes complained that they had no real power, well, no system was perfect.

This second path was also unlikely at the moment. Although she was certainly the most qualified pony for the job of court magician, her recent record was... checkered, she decided delicately. It was unlikely she'd get a



hoof in the door with her current resume if she tried applying for any court positions through the normal channels.

Fortunately, there were other ways to insinuate oneself into the halls of power. The princess was a mare of the people – she tried to be away from the court as often as possible, either out in Canterlot or visiting the distant parts of Equestria. When she couldn't get away from Canterlot the court was often in open session, where any pony with a grievance or petition could appear before her and make their case. It was part of what made her such a popular monarch.

It was also terribly boring, Trixie had been informed. Although the issue of watering rights along the Split Hide River south of Hoofington might be of importance to farmers who trekked all the way to Canterlot to make their case before the princess, a day full of such presentations could be difficult to stomach. Even Celestia, with the literal patience of a god, sometimes grew tired of the proceedings.

Which was where the Great and Powerful Trixie came in.

"Name?" asked a middle-aged unicorn with a white coat, deep blue mane, and an air of utter and complete boredom that must have taken years to perfect. She was seated behind an imposingly large desk in the Hall of Petitioners (more of a room, really), writing down the particulars of everypony who had arrived that day to appear before the princess. Trixie was toward the end of the line, having decided that she had better things to do with her time than wait in a queue all day.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie!" she declared in her most imposing stage voice. The other petitioners turned to her in curiosity and surprise.

"Name," the clerk repeated. It was not a question this time.

She shrunk slightly, stung. "Ah, Trixie will do, for paperwork purposes."

The white unicorn squinted at her over the top of rather old-fashioned reading glasses. "That's your full and true name, dearie?"

"It's what I'm known as, yes!"

"Did I ask what you were known as?"

Trixie spluttered. She had half a mind to teach this insignificant paper-pusher some respect, but prudence came galloping to the rescue.

Realizing this mare held the keys to her meeting with Celestia, she clenched her teeth and forced a smile onto her face.

“Beatrice’ will do,” she said, politely.

“See? That wasn’t so hard.” The clerk’s quill scratched across the paper, levitated by her magic. “Complaint or petition?”

“Trixie has neither a complaint nor a petition!” she said, slipping back into her stage voice. “She has heard that Her Majesty is tired of these simple proceedings, and has come to delight and amaze the court with spectacular feats of magic!”

The clerk raised an eyebrow, the first actual change in facial expression Trixie had seen on her. “Really? Well, that’s different at least,” she said. Her quill made a few more scratches on the parchment. “I might step in to see that. This job does get a bit dull at times.”

Trixie gave her another smile, and then moved to wait in a comfortably stuffed arm chair, mentally reviewing her upcoming routine.

\*\*\*

One fortunate consequence of being last in line among the petitioners was that Trixie was also the last to appear before the court. She was the closing act of the day, which was exactly how she liked it.

For days she had been preparing a carefully calibrated routine, combining equal parts dance and illusion. It was among the most sophisticated she had ever produced, designed to appeal to the refined tastes of the court, who valued skill and originality over sheer power and flashiness. It would serve as an appropriate introduction for her long-term stay.

The large double-doors leading to the throne room cracked open, and the unicorn clerk she had given her name to poked her head through the door. “Beatrice, you’re up.”

Trixie resisted the urge to correct her name. She hopped to her feet, checked to make sure her hat and cape were sitting correctly, and trotted through the doors.

The Court of the Sun Princess had a tendency to overwhelm ponies the first time they saw it. One of the largest enclosed spaces in Equestria, it

had been the center of Celestia's reign for over a millennium, and the years of authority and power had sunk into the very stones of the floors. Narrow windows, stretching dozens of feet up the stone walls, looked out both sides of the room onto the rising and setting suns and the city a thousand feet below. White marble flagstones, polished until they seemed to shine with their own light, clinked beneath the hooves of hundreds of ponies, crowding on either side of a red carpet that ran the length of the court. Overhead the vaulted ceiling had been decorated with suns and moons, stars and comets, and all the colors of the sky.

The red carpet beneath Trixie's feet led from the double doors behind her all the way to the far end of the court. To her left and right ponies milled about, waiting for the court to end and the evening's festivities to begin. She reached the end of the red carpet, knelt on the golden sunburst icon conveniently stitched there, and bowed.

Celestia, Princess of Equestria, Bearer of the Sun, The First Light of Dawn, looked down at the blue unicorn with the gentle smile she nearly always wore. To her side her majordomo, a brown earth pony with a white shield cutie mark, stomped his hoof three times on the floor, calling the room to silence.

"Presenting the unicorn Beatrice!" he announced. His voice rang effortlessly though the massive hall.

"Rise, Trixie," Celestia said. Her words, though spoken softly, were heard by every pony in the hall. "I understand you are here to entertain us?"

Trixie came to her feet, her heart beating faster as it always did before performing. The lights seemed brighter, every sound seemed sharper – the world itself never felt more alive than when she was standing before an audience.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie is honored to appear before her majesty, to entertain the court with feats of spectacular magic!" She imitated Celestia's voice trick, her words filling the ears of every pony present. She was about to launch into her routine when a tiny, niggling question appeared in her mind. Foolishly, she spoke it aloud.

"Er, if it pleases your majesty... how did you know Trixie's name?" she asked.

Celestia tilted her head slightly, the gentle smile never leaving her face. "It is my business to know all my subjects," she said quietly, her words for Trixie alone. "But in your case, I had some help." A piece of parchment, resting on a stand by the princess's side, suddenly glowed and floated into the air.

"A dear student of mine wrote to me about you, not so long ago," she continued. "A blue unicorn with a magic wand cutie mark, who taught her a valuable lesson about friendship."

The floor seemed to drop out from beneath Trixie. The edges of her vision went grey, and a rushing sound filled her ears. For a moment she saw herself back in Ponyville, cowering before the Ursa Minor, waiting for the claw to fall and swat her like an insect.

"Now then," Celestia said, rolling the parchment back up and placing it on the stand beside her. "The floor is yours, Trixie." She gave the unicorn a kind smile.

Everything Trixie had rehearsed fled from her mind. Her routine, the spells, her speech, even her reason for being in the court were all gone in an instant. Long seconds dragged on while hundreds of ponies stared at her.

Most mares wouldn't have recovered in time, but Trixie wasn't most mares. She was a Great and Powerful mare, and before the audience could realize how deeply Celestia's words had cut, her performer's instinct kicked in.

"Behold!" she cried, rearing onto her back legs. Reflex took over, and her mind defaulted to the standard performance she gave on her stage. It wasn't as appropriate for the court as the elaborate dance routine she had been rehearsing, but it was better than standing in front of Celestia like a frightened filly. She had done this performance hundreds of times; she could do it in her sleep.

Her horn glowed and every light in the court vanished, replaced by a suffocating darkness broken by a magical spotlight with her at its center. Ponies gasped in surprise, and then crowded forward, eager for a closer view.

"Witness the spectacular magic of the Great and Powerful Trixie!" She spun in place, hooves splayed, as her magic replaced the darkness with a

dozen shifting landscapes – a burning desert, a somber forest shrouded in fog, a spectacular mountain crested with snow. The crowd ooh'd and aah'd appropriately.

“Gasp in awe at her power!” Still going through her automatic routine, she waved a hoof over her head, setting off a chain of brilliant blue and silver fireworks that perfectly matched her coat and mane.

At this point Trixie noticed several things simultaneously, all of them bad.

First, she remembered why she had tried to develop a new routine specifically for the court.

Second, she realized the court, despite her magical illusions, was an *indoor* venue. Fireworks were highly inappropriate for indoor use.

Finally, she was granted a new insight into pony psychology. Although not normally high-strung creatures, ponies could be startled by loud, unexpected noises and explosions.

The fireworks detonated just below the roof of the court, slamming the crowd below with dozens of thunderous claps that shook the walls and knocked many off their hooves. The soaring glass windows on either side of Trixie exploded outwards in a rain of shards that tumbled hundreds of feet down the mountainside. An acrid, burning smoke instantly filled the room, stinging eyes and snouts and generally contributing to the chaos as the entire crowd began screaming and stampeding for the exits.

At the front of the hall, still lit by her silly spotlight, the Great and Powerful Trixie stood frozen with her hoof above her head, a look of shock and horror slowly dawning on her face. Only Celestia seemed unperturbed by the debacle as she gazed up at scorched ceiling.

Well, Celestia and a small herd of royal guard ponies, who leapt from the wings of the hall and tackled Trixie to the ground.

\*\*\*

Trixie was, once again, an unhappy pony.

She was no longer in chains, which was an improvement. The guard ponies had quickly concluded the disastrous performance was an accident after she hadn't been able to stop crying for nearly an hour. They were

about to throw her out of the keep when the furious majordomo arrived at the guard station where they were holding her.

A quick accounting of damages to the Court of the Sun Princess was provided to Trixie. Incinerated tapestries, shattered windows, blasted frescoes and smoke damage were all neatly listed on a sheet of parchment. Lacking the means to repay the court, she was turned over to the kitchen staff to work off her debt, or labor for one month, whichever came first.

And so the Great and Powerful Trixie, master magician and performer, found herself washing dishes in the Canterlot Keep kitchen. She wasn't allowed to use her magic – like a common dirt pony, she used her hooves to scrub and rinse and dry. It was an odd combination of humiliation and irony: she had managed to join the court after all, though not in a position she wanted.

The third night of her new career found Trixie alone in the kitchens. The final meal had long since been served and the guests gone to bed, and the Keep settled into the quiet routines of the evening. She was racking the last of the dishes when she heard a set of quiet hoofbeats behind her.

"Excuse me," came a soft, almost timid voice. "Are you the Great and Powerful Trixie?"

Trixie blushed, refusing to turn around. She hadn't heard that name in days. An uncomfortable silence filled the kitchen, which she finally broke: "Yes, I am Trixie."

The hoofbeats came closer. "I just wanted to say that was an amazing performance the other night."

Trixie hated being mocked. She scowled and spun around, ready to give the pony a piece of her mind.

The dark blue unicorn in front of her took a tentative step back, startled by the sudden move. A pair of large wings beat nervously at the air before settling back to her side. Not a unicorn – an alicorn.

Trixie realized she was staring and quickly lowered her head. There were only two alicorns in Equestria, and this clearly wasn't Celestia. "Princess Luna, forgive me," she said. "I didn't realize it was you."

“That’s quite alright,” the soft, high voice said. Trixie felt a hoof beneath her chin, tilting her head up. “Please be at ease. I am not my sister.”

The alicorn’s touch was gentle as moonlight. A feeling of deep peace filled Trixie’s troubled soul, and displaced the grievance and shame of the past few days. The world around her seemed softer, its harsh lights dimmed and its sharp edges dulled by the power of the night. Her eyes closed, and for a moment she would not have regretted never opening them again.

Then the hoof was gone, and the cruel world rushed back to fill its place. She opened her eyes to see the inquisitive face of Equestria’s second princess just inches away.

Trixie gulped. “Thank you for your kind words, your majesty.”

“Please, call me Luna.” The alicorn gave her a slight smile, and looked for a moment almost like her sister, despite being her complete opposite. “I was sorry to hear you were arrested after the performance.”

A bit of the bitterness of the past hour returned to Trixie’s heart. “That was hardly a performance,” she said, forcing the words between her clenched teeth. “That was just the opening for a crude, flashy act Trixie gives to peasants. Trixie had an exquisite, breathtaking performance planned for the court!” She sighed. “But she forgot herself, and gave that foolish disaster instead.”

Luna stepped around her, her gaze fixed on the unicorn. “Nevertheless, it was impressive. Celestia told me she hasn’t had that much fun at the court in years.”

Trixie’s head lifted slightly, buoyed by the praise. “Really?”

Luna nodded. “Oh yes. Celestia and I are very powerful, but we lack the control and finesse of the greatest unicorn magicians. We are like hurricanes,” she said as she fixed her large eyes on Trixie, “but you are like a glass-blower. Only one of us creates art.”

Trixie stared at the alicorn, unable to form a reply. Luna giggled at the unicorn’s state, and then cantered toward the exit.

“It was good to meet you, Trixie,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m sure I will see you again.”

\*\*\*

The Canterlot gardens were scarcely populated at night. A few ponies wandered the paths, nodding to their princess as they passed. Lamps lit the castle grounds, though the light of the full moon was bright enough to see by.

“So what possessed you to want to perform before the court?” Luna asked. They had stopped by one of the many fountains scattered around the gardens. A stone pegasus, mortally wounded by a spear, stretched a hoof to the sky; from its wounds a steady trickle of water flowed into a wide basin. Tiny fish, barely visible in the moonlight, darted through the waters in the pool.

Trixie dipped the tip of her hoof in the water, sending the tiny fish scattering. “I thought if I impressed the princess, she might offer me a position as court magician,” she said. She had long since stopped using the third-person to describe herself around Luna.

The alicorn giggled, the sound filling the garden like silver bells. “Silly unicorn,” she said. “There hasn’t been a court magician in centuries. I’ve been gone for a thousand years and even I know that.”

Trixie scowled at the darkness, and gave her friend a gentle shove with her shoulder. “I wanted to be recognized,” she said. “What good is being a magician if no one cares? If all you do is earn enough bits to survive?”

“There are many ponies who seem happy without being rich or great,” the princess replied. “The world would be a very sad place if only the great and powerful were happy.”

Trixie frowned, dropping her hoof on the edge of the fountain with a loud clomp. “Trixie is not most ponies,” she said. She looked up at the night sky, her features softening slightly. “Ever since I got my cutie mark I’ve known I was different. Even as a filly I could perform magic like few other unicorns. But it meant nothing -- it means nothing unless the world recognizes it.”

Luna extended a wing, draping it over the unicorn like a blanket. “And do you still believe that?”

Trixie was silent for a while. Finally she nodded, a stern cast settling on her features. “Yes.”

They were silent a while longer.



“Trixie,” Luna finally said, “being great and being happy are not the same.”

“Yes they are!” she snapped. “The Great and Powerful Trixie was happy! I was happy! Now look at me!” She tore away from the alicorn before she could reply.

“I was adored!” she continued, speaking to the empty night, refusing to look at Luna. “Now I wash dishes, a dozen yards from the center of the court where I should be standing!”

“Trixie...” Luna tried to break in.

“This is not right!” she shouted. Her horn started to glow. “How can they do this to me? To Trixie!”

“Trixie please calm down.”

“Trixie will not calm down!” Flecks of foam flew from her muzzle as she shouted. The glow from her horn brightened as her magic leaked out, escaping her control. “Trixie asks... no, Trixie demands her rightful due!”

The silver light from her horn washed over the garden, overpowering the moon and lanterns. The grass beneath their hooves began to bend in an unseen wind, and the trees rustled overhead. The stone pegasus atop the fountain creaked, then slowly moved, its head turning to stare at the raging unicorn.

“ENOUGH!” Luna shouted. The sudden outburst stunned Trixie, who had never heard Luna raise her voice. The light surrounding her horn went out like a snuffed candle.

She sat down hard, her head bowed. After a long minute she found her voice.

“I’m sorry, Luna,” she said softly. “I just never imagined things ending up like this.” She sniffled.

Luna sighed, and walked over to the unicorn. “Trixie, take it from someone who learned the hard way. It is better to be a good pony than a great pony.” She gave Trixie a friendly nuzzle, and then tugged her to her hooves. “Come on, it’s late. Let’s get you to bed.”

Together they walked back to the castle.

\*\*\*

“Only a few days left in the kitchen. Have you decided what you’re going to do next?”

Trixie sighed. They were out in the garden’s again, Luna’s favorite part of the castle. “I won’t be staying in the kitchen,” she said. “Aside from that, I haven’t given it much thought.”

“You could stay in Canterlot.”

“I probably will, for a while at least.” Luna visibly perked up as Trixie spoke. “Until I decide what to do next.”

Luna nodded, and the two resumed watching the gardens in silence. Eventually Luna spoke.

“Bit for your thoughts?”

“Oh, just wondering how some of this castle was built,” Trixie admitted. “There’s no other place in the world like it. I can’t imagine the magic it took to construct.”

“Oh, we cheated a bit.” Luna said, startling the unicorn. Sometimes Trixie forgot how old her friend was. “It would’ve taken decades to build using just earth pony muscle, or pegasus wings, or unicorn magic. Fortunately we had some lenses to help things along.”

Trixie blinked at the alicorn, completely lost. “Lenses? Like, telescope lenses?”

Luna shook her head. “It’s just a name. Lenses are magical artifacts that can focus a unicorn’s power, making them stronger at certain tasks. Like a lens focuses light, except they can look like almost anything. The magic wand on your cutie mark is a type of lens.”

Trixie stared at her flank in surprise. Wands had long been a part of pony folklore, but she’d never known they were real.

“Do they still exist?”

Luna tilted her head, as if surprised by the question. “I’m honestly not sure. They were rare when I was banished, but I haven’t seen any since my return, except for Celestia’s. I wonder if the secret of their creation was lost.”

Trixie deflated. It was like being given a present for your birthday, and opening it to find a saddle instead of a toy. Then she parsed the rest of Luna's answer.

"Wait... Celestia's?"

Luna nodded. "That gold torc she always wears is a lens. I'm not sure what its function is, but it's definitely the most powerful I've ever encountered."

Their conversation drifted onward, but for the rest of the night Trixie found her mind wandering back to lenses, and the golden torc ever around Celestia's neck.

# Chapter 4

## The Harsh Light of Morning

Ponyville was not far from Canterlot by most measures. Twilight Sparkle had made the flight in a few hours in a hot air balloon during her first visit to the town. A fast pegasus could fly there in 30 minutes if the winds were good. Even the slowest method of travel – by hoof – took less than half a day if you kept a quick pace.

Twilight knew all this intuitively. She had spent the previous evening meticulously planning for their trip, making checklists, packing supplies, consulting maps and checking with the weather patrol for the day's forecast. She very easily could have estimated, down to the minute, when they would arrive in Canterlot.

And yet, she pondered, travelling with Rainbow Dash somehow made the trip seem twice as long.

"Ugh, can't you two walk any faster?" the cyan pegasus said, floating alongside them with her forelegs crossed over her chest. "Celestia's going to be old by the time we get there."

Twilight bit back the reply she wanted to give the pegasus. After all, Rainbow Dash was her friend and guest on this trip. Getting snippy wouldn't help the situation.

"Celestia is already old, Dash," she said instead. "Today is a travel day. We are exactly on time."

"You made me get up early for this!"

"Ten in the morning is not early, Dash." She and Applejack had stopped by Dash's cloud home on the way out of town, eventually waking her with their combined shouts.

"C'mon Dash, bit of a walk never hurt anypony," Applejack said. She seemed immune to the pegasus's complaints. "You can fly around if you want. I doubt Twilight and I will git too far away from ya."

No sooner said than done. She snapped her wings down with a sharp clap, instantly lifting a dozen feet into the air, and then sped off like an arrow. Moments later she was a tiny blue dot starting a wide turn at the edges of their vision, streaking toward a bank of clouds in the distance.

“Not the type for a leisurely stroll, I reckon,” Applejack said, adjusting her Stetson hat. “You alright, Twi?”

Twilight smiled at her friend. “Just fine, AJ. This is going to be a wonderful trip, even if some ponies are a bit impatient.”

“So what’s it like, the Summer Sun Celebration? Ah’ve only seen the one, and it didn’t end so well.”

The unicorn tossed her head, refusing to be discouraged by thoughts of last year’s debacle. “Normally Nightmare Moon doesn’t escape and attempt to take over Equestria,” she said. “That was, uh, special.”

Applejack chuckled. “It ended fer the best,” she said. “Say, why was it in Ponyville in the first place? I thought it was always held in Canterlot?”

“It used to be, until about 50 years ago. Celestia decided to hold it in difference cities every fourth year. Last year just happened to be Ponyville’s year.”

Applejack gave her a sidelong glance. “Doesn’t that seem a mite convenient?” she asked, her voice filled with doubt. “It just happened to be in Ponyville, which just happened to be next to the Everfree Forest and the Elements of Harmony?”

Twilight shrugged. She’d already given the matter many hours of thought, and short of asking the princess herself there was no way to know how much of last year’s events had been arranged in advance. It wasn’t unreasonable to expect a thousand-year-old sun goddess to make complicated plans.

“Like you said, AJ, it ended for the best.” She let out a sigh, a dreamy smile coming over her face. “Oh, but you have to see it in Canterlot! Imagine thousands of ponies, all gathered to see her raise the sun for the longest day of the year. It’s so beautiful.”

“Welp, as long as we get good seats.”

The two continued down the road in comfortable silence. When they reached the outskirts of Canterlot that evening Rainbow Dash was waiting for them, asleep on a low cloud on the side of the path.

\*\*\*

Luna was, as usual, waiting for Trixie when the kitchen staff released her for the evening. They exchanged a friendly nuzzle like they were sisters, ignoring the odd looks and whispers from the other ponies.

“So, staying up all night for the celebration?” Luna asked. It was traditional for ponies to stay awake the night before the Summer Sun Celebration, waiting for the dawn of the longest day of the year. Long naps were also a traditional part of the festivities, usually observed a few hours later.

“Only for a few hours,” Trixie answered. “Some of us have jobs, you know.” She gave the princess a friendly jab with her elbow as they walked to add some levity to her words.

Luna pantomimed a grievous injury, clutching her hoof to her side. “Assaulting a member of the royal blood!” she said with mock outrage. “A year’s duty in the kitchens!”

“That’s all? What can I get for five years in the kitchen?”

“Hm...” Luna paused, rubbing her chin with a hoof. “Contemplating hard crime now, are we? Well, not that I would know, but five years sounds like a suitable punishment for despoiling a princess’s virtue.”

Trixie puzzled over that for a moment, and then spluttered. Ahead of her the princess giggled and took off running to the gardens.

When Trixie caught up the last light of evening was fading in the west, filling the gardens with a soft golden glow. The alicorn was sitting and staring at the setting sun with wide eyes as Trixie walked up beside her.

“The problem with long days is short nights,” Luna said quietly. “Before I was banished I could stay up during the day if I wanted to. Now, unless I’m at her side I can barely rise an hour before sunset, or stay awake an hour after sunrise. I am tethered to the night.”

Trixie frowned at the sad tone in her friend’s voice. “That doesn’t seem fair. I see Celestia all the time after the sun sets.”

“She’s older, more powerful,” Luna replied. “She says that as I get used to this new body I’ll be able to do the same, but it might take a few years. Decades, maybe.”

What could a scullery maid say to that? “I’m sorry,” she finally offered, the only words that seemed appropriate.

Luna shrugged, her wings opening and closing silently. “Don’t be. It’s a small price to pay for being free of Nightmare Moon.”

Around them the gentle glow of twilight slowly faded, yellows giving way to reds and blues as the gloom of night embraced the world. Luna inhaled deeply, her eyes wide and shining as the encroaching dusk empowered her. The clock tower in the town below chimed out the time, nine faint rings barely audible in the mountaintop castle.

“Bit for your thoughts?” Trixie asked, in what had become a game for the two.

Luna was silent for a moment before turning to the unicorn with a smile. “Just thinking about tonight. Celestia asked me to host the celebration.”

Trixie blinked. “She asked *you* to host the Summer Sun Celebration? That seems a bit...” she struggled to find the right word. “Counterintuitive?”

Luna stood and walked forward a few paces, draping her forelegs over a railing that overlooked a lower section of the garden. “Long ago it would have been,” she said. “Before I was banished there was no celebration the night before the longest day of the year. It wasn’t until hundreds of years after I was gone that ponies finally started to celebrate the night.”

Trixie joined her friend at the rail, having to stretch a bit to match the taller pony. Although not yet as large as her sister, Luna had grown substantially in the twelve months since being released by the Elements of Harmony, to the point that only the tallest of stallions looked down on her.

“I think she wants me to feel welcomed,” Luna continued. “That even though this is her day I am still a part of it.”

They were silent for a while. Behind them the usual sounds of the castle in the evening were gradually replaced by music and the hum of conversation as the first guests arrived.

“I think that’s your cue,” Trixie said, turning to listen to the nascent party.

“It is. Feel like accompanying me for a bit?”

“As long as I don’t have to perform any tricks. I’m not sure I could stand another month in the kitchens.”

Luna gave the unicorn a friendly head butt, careful not to use her horn, then giggled and raced to the castle. Trixie followed at a more sedate pace, the first smile of the evening lifting up the corners of her mouth.

\*\*\*

Luna was in the middle of an animated conversation with her sister when Trixie found her. The indigo alicorn was bouncing with excitement, a foalish grin on her face, while Celestia looked down with the same gentle smile she always seemed to wear.

“...and after midnight we’ll serve the *second* banquet, right before the Wonderbolts start their performance!” she caught the younger princess saying. Trixie had known about the various feasts being prepared – she had helped make them – but that was the first she’d heard of the Wonderbolts demonstration. She stopped a discrete distance away, not wanting to intrude on the royal conversation.

Luna would have none of it, though. As soon as she spied the unicorn she darted over, grabbing Trixie’s silver mane in her mouth and dragging her back to the sun princess.

“Tia! You remember, Trixie, don’t you?” Luna said. “She gave that wonderful performance last month that everypony’s still talking about.” Next to her Trixie blushed furiously and attempted to sink into the floor.

“I could hardly forget,” Celestia said, turning to face the embarrassed pony. She lowered her head so they were practically eye-to-eye. “I’m sorry we’ve had to keep you in the kitchens for so long, but my majordomo threatened to revolt if we didn’t find some way to recoup the repair costs.” All three glanced up at the freshly painted ceiling.

“Trixie is, ah, that is, I am just happy no one was hurt,” Trixie managed to reply, barely able to keep herself from bolting out the room. “And I’ll be out of the kitchens soon enough anyway.”

“Well, I hope your time with us hasn’t been an entirely negative experience,” she said, giving Luna a brief, sidelong glance.



“Ah, not entirely negative,” Trixie allowed, ducking her head.

Celestia rose back to her full height, covering her mouth with a hoof as she laughed. “So precious,” she said, and then turned to her sister. “Walk with me a moment, Luna?” The two trotted off, chatting quietly and leaving Trixie to digest what had just occurred.

\*\*\*

“We’re not s’pposed ta be wearin’ a fancy dress for this, are we?” Applejack asked, staring up at the tall gates of Canterlot Keep. The last time the three had passed through had been the Grand Galloping Gala, for which fancy dresses were considered de rigueur.

“No, this is strictly informal,” Twilight Sparkle answered. “The Summer Sun Celebration was started by earth ponies, who live by the turning of the seasons and had reason to be thankful for the arrival of summer. The Gala, of course, was started by unicorns, who have always been more inclined to--” her history lesson was mercifully interrupted by a hyperventilating Rainbow Dash.

“Look! Look! AJ look!” she squealed, half tackling the orange earth pony. “It’s the Wonderbolts! They must be performing tonight!” She pointed with both hooves toward one of the nearby gardens where, sure enough, a trio of costumed pegasus ponies were chatting amiably with guests. The largest, a blue stallion with a winged lightning bolt cutie mark, spied the frantically gesticulating Rainbow Dash and waved.

“Ohmygosh ohmygosh ohmygosh! AJ, he waved at me! Soarin waved at me!” She squished her cheeks together with her hooves, eyes wide as dinner plates, looking for all the world like a love-struck filly. Twilight was almost embarrassed just to be seen next to her.

“Ayup, he sure did,” Applejack drawled. “Why doncha go say hello? Don’t let him do any sweet talkin’ tho--” She didn’t get to finish her thought; the rainbow pegasus practically teleported over to her idol in a multi-colored blur.

Applejack sighed. “That one’s gonna git her heart broken, I jus know it.”

“Aw, I think it’s sweet,” Twilight said. “Besides, Soarin seems like a nice enough pony.”

“Mhm, nice an’ clueless. I bet he’s left a trail of cryin’ fillies all over Equestria without even realizin’ it.”

Twilight giggled. “Applejack, I had no idea you were such a cynical and calloused soul! So wise in the ways of the world, and yet so young!” She pawed at the ground, trying desperately not to snort with laughter.

Never one to take offense easily, Applejack stuck her snout in the air. “Ah know trouble when ah see it,” she pronounced.

Twilight recovered her poise, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. “Rainbow Dash is a big filly, AJ. I’m sure she’ll be fine. Come on, I bet the princess is somewhere inside.”

A princess was indeed inside, though not the one they were expecting. Atop the main staircase just inside the gates, politely greeting ponies as they arrived, was Princess Luna. She spotted the two, excused herself from a small crowd of admirers, and trotted down to meet them.

They each dropped to a knee, lowering their heads in supplication. Luna quickly tugged them to their feet.

“Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, welcome to the Summer Sun pre-Celebration,” she said lightly. “And please, there is no need to bow, especially you. I am not my sister.”

Twilight looked up at the princess. She seemed much taller than when they had last met, almost exactly a year before. Soon, she guessed, Luna would be nearly the same size as Celestia, and equally as powerful.

That was an unsettling thought. She did her best to push it out of her mind, at least for the evening.

“Princess Luna, it’s good to see you again,” Twilight said. “I have to admit I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“Well, Celestia asked, and how could I say no to her?” Luna said. “She’s done a lot for me in the past year. This is a small way of repaying her kindness.”

“That’s mighty kind of ya,” Applejack said. “I should bring you to meet Apple Bloom, maybe teach her to listen to her big sister.”

“I can’t promise any magic,” Luna said. “Or can I? No, no, that wouldn’t be ethical. Still, I would love to visit Ponyville again.” She paused, glancing between the two of them. “Speaking of Ponyville, did the rest of the Elements come with you?”

“Rainbow Dash is outside with the Wonderbolts,” Twilight said. “Everyone else had, uh, conflicts with their schedules.” *Or conflicts with other ponies*, she thought to herself, an image of Rarity viciously trampling Prince Blueblood springing unbidden into her mind.

“That’s fine,” Luna replied. “As long as you all come to the next Grand Galloping Gala!” She didn’t notice the two suddenly going pale beneath their coats.

“Oh, uh, absolutely!” Applejack said, a strained smile on her face.

“Wouldn’t miss it!” Twilight added.

Luna smiled and swept them both into a hug, her wings wrapping around to embrace the two. “I’m so glad you could make it tonight. Tia’s inside and I know she’ll be glad to see you again.”

At the mention of her mentor Twilight perked up, straining to see over Luna’s shoulder. Applejack thanked the princess, and together the two ventured into the keep, leaving Luna behind to continue her greetings.

\*\*\*

Trixie wandered through the party with practiced ease, submersing herself in the growing crowd of ponies. Some recognized her from her disastrous court performance, but rather than ridiculing her like she feared, they seemed either awed or slightly afraid. A few of the braver stallions attempted to strike up conversations with her, but these she deflected with practiced ease. She wasn’t interested in making new friends at the moment.

A small chamber orchestra was set up near the head of the hall, providing some light music to keep the crowd entertained. In front of the orchestra a dance floor had been cleared, but so far no pony was brave enough to put it to use. A serious-looking mare with a charcoal coat and treble clef cutie mark led the ensemble in a slow waltz, deftly wielding a bow across a large contra-bass taller than most ponies.

Still no takers on the dance floor, Trixie noted; perhaps later she would offer a demonstration. She briefly wondered if Luna knew how to dance.

The quiet hum of the party became a louder buzz behind her. Turning, she saw Celestia towering over a small crowd of ponies, engaging them in casual conversations as she circulated around the hall. More ponies flocked toward the princess, orbiting her like planets around a sun.

Trixie moved against the flow, taking up a station near a well-stocked buffet table. She didn't have anything against Celestia, but she needed some more time to think before confronting that gentle smile and probing gaze again.

Still, she found her gaze occasionally wandering back to the monarch, to her faintly glowing mane, to her white coat tinted with the barest hint of pink, but most of all to the golden torc resting around her neck.

\*\*\*

"Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student! I'm so glad you and your friend could join us tonight."

Twilight and Applejack bowed for the second time that evening. Even as Applejack came to her feet Twilight had already bounded forward, pressing herself against the princess's massive chest. Celestia lowered her head to give her student a friendly nuzzle, and they stood back, both smiling.

The part of Twilight that had never grown up wanted to climb onto Celestia's back and ride around with her for the rest of the evening, like she had as a filly. Fortunately for all present (but mostly Applejack) she managed to restrain herself, making do with conversation instead.

"Thank you for inviting us, Princess," she said. "It's always a pleasure to return to Canterlot."

"Indeed. Things are always more interesting with you and your friends around. Especially formal occasions."

Memories of the Gala came flooding back. Twilight stammered while Applejack blushed. Desperate for a new subject, Twilight cast her gaze around the room, eventually settling on the ceiling.

"Say! Aren't those new frescoes up there?" she asked. "Those look new and completely unrelated to the Gala."

Celestia peered up at the ceiling, her snout easily twice as high off the floor as the next tallest pony in the room. When she looked back down there was an unusual twinkle in her eye.

“Oh, I thought it was time for some redecorating,” the alicorn said. “In fact, we redid most of the hall about a month ago. I’m very happy with how it turned out.” Her words carried a sense of hidden laughter, though Twilight couldn’t imagine what was so funny about redecorating.

“We saw Luna out front,” Applejack chimed in. “That was very nice of yer majesty to make her the host tonight.”

Celestia’s smile widened as she looked toward the foyer and her sister. “She’s grown so much in the past year. I’m starting to get my sister back, thanks to you two and your friends.” She turned back to the two ponies, and leaned forward to whisper: “Can you two keep a secret?”

They nodded together, confused but willing. Celestia’s massive wings stretched out and wrapped around them, forming a snug, feathery cocoon that sealed off the rest of the party.

“I’m afraid I’ve been meddling a bit,” the princess confided, her eyes hooded with glee and satisfaction. “When you get to be my age, well, it comes naturally.”

Twilight thought back to some of the more exciting incidents of the past year, many of which had Celestia’s stamp on them. The dragon she asked them to evict; the gala she used them to invigorate; the dying phoenix she introduced to an animal lover.

“I had no idea,” Twilight said, diplomatically. Applejack looked like she was about to object until Twilight’s hoof found the side of her leg.

“She’s finally coming out of her shell,” Celestia said, just to them. “Becoming the princess Equestria needs. Little things like this ball, or a new friend I’ve arranged to live here for a while, they’re all bringing back the Luna I knew.”

The white wings retracted, folding into place against the princess’s back. She looked down at the two with her gentle smile again.

“I think I’m going to retire for the evening,” she said. “This is Luna’s night. She should have it all to herself.”

They bowed to her again. "We'll see you in the morning, princess," Twilight said, and stepped close for one more nuzzle.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, my little pony," Celestia said. "Now, go enjoy the rest of the evening with your friends."

\*\*\*

Rainbow Dash wandered into the main ballroom with a dazed smile on her face. Although the hall was technically a no-flying zone (there were signs posted at the entrance warning pegasus ponies to stay on the ground), she didn't hesitate for a moment to lift into the air, spying out her friends near the center of the crowd.

"AJ! Twilight!" she cried, zipping up next to them and drawing annoyed mutters from the ponies she bumped into along the way. "Soarin asked me to go flying with him later! Alone!"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "See, Twi? This is what I was talkin' about."

Even Twilight seemed taken aback. "That's, um, very nice, Dash." She paused and glanced at Applejack before turning back to the pegasus. "Do you think that's really a good idea, though?"

"Well of course! How else am I supposed to show off my signature moves?" She jabbed her hooves at the air, making \*whoosh\* noises with her breath.

Twilight cringed. Applejack shook her head. Rainbow Dash noticed neither, fantasizing over the upcoming flight. Suddenly she broke out of her reverie, a startled expression on her face.

"Oh, he also asked for some pie!" she said. "See you later!" She took off toward the buffet tables, once again ignoring the no-flying signs.

"This is how it starts," Applejack said under her breath. Twilight massaged her forehead with a hoof, already imagining the worst.

\*\*\*

Trixie was still standing next to the buffet when a multi-colored blur came to a sudden stop beside her. She barely held in a startled shriek as she jumped back, bumping into the table and setting its desserts atremble. The blur resolved into a young pegasus mare, apparently oblivious to the near heart attack she had caused.

There was something familiar about the mare, Trixie thought. A garish, uncombed rainbow mane and tail clashed hideously with her cyan coat. Sleek, muscular wings slowly folded back into place as she leaned over the desert table, sniffing at the various pies on display. After a moment she noticed the unicorn staring at her. She opened her mouth to say something – probably a smart remark – then stopped.

“No way... Trixie?” The pegasus jumped back and settled into a fighting stance, her head low, wings spread wide to make her appear larger.

Trixie peered down her snout at the young mare. Something about that mane...

“Rainbow... Rainbow Flash?” she took a guess.

“Dash!” The pegasus stomped a hoof for emphasis. Her voice was rough and scratchy, as though she spent most of her time shouting. “What are you doing here? Let me guess, lied your way past the guards? Told them you were a ‘great and powerful’ magician?” Other ponies in the crowd were turning to stare at them. Conversations trailed off into whispers.

Trixie drew herself up, placed a hoof over her chest and summoned her best stage voice. “The Great and Powerful Trixie has no need to lie, little filly,” she said. “In fact, Trixie is a personal guest of none other than Princess Luna. So if you know what’s good for you—” she was interrupted by a sudden voice behind her.

“Trixie, thank goodness!” The kitchen door behind the buffet was partly open, and an older mare in servant’s garb had stuck her head out. “We need some help setting out the next course. Can you lend a hoof back here?” The head vanished back into the kitchens, the door slowly swinging shut behind it.

Dead silence. Trixie stared at the closed door and then slowly turned back to the pegasus. Rainbow Dash stared at her, confusion and puzzlement slowly fading from her face, replaced by a wide grin.

“Oh... oh this is too good...” the pegasus was starting to shake with suppressed laughter. “The Great and p-Powerful Trixie is here... ha ha... as a servant!” Her forelegs finally buckled and she fell to the floor, rolling onto her back as she laughed uncontrollably. “Bwa hahaha! A servant!” A small crowd was now staring at the spectacle, looking back and forth between Trixie and Rainbow Dash.

Trixie felt her ears and face burning. Unable to form a coherent reply, she did what she always did in the face of ridicule, the one foe she had never been able to defeat. She turned and fled, bursting through the door into the kitchen.

Rainbow Dash eventually recovered and realized the subject of her mirth had vanished. Still giggling, she got back on her hooves and, oblivious to the stares of the crowd, grabbed a particularly delicious looking apple pie with her mouth. For the third time that night she broke the no-flying rule, and soared through the hall back to the moonlit gardens.

\*\*\*

One hour and a few tears later, Trixie felt ready to return to the party. If nothing else this was Luna's special night, and she didn't want to ruin it by acting like a silly filly.

The rainbow pegasus was nowhere to be seen when she stepped back in. Taking that as a hopeful sign, she slipped into the crowd, heading toward the dance floor. The lights overhead had dimmed in an approximation of night, with tiny flickering candles all along the walls playing the role of stars.

Somepony had apparently taken the plunge, and there were now several couples on the dance floor, moving in time with a slow waltz being played by the ensemble. Far more ponies stood on the sidelines watching than actually dancing, but she knew the floor would be crowded with bodies as the night wore on and alcohol loosened inhibitions.

Inhibitions, of course, had never held much sway over Trixie. A brief search discovered a handsome, athletic looking stallion standing by the side of the floor. She slipped up beside him and waited until a new song was about to begin, and then lightly brushed his shoulder with hers before stepping onto the dance floor.

If the stallion was startled he didn't show it – a heartbeat later he was at her side, his tan coat and blonde mane nicely complementing her own colors (another reason she had chosen him). Without a word she extended a hoof, which he lightly touched to his own, and they began to move.

It was a simple dance, by her standards, She let him lead, stepping lightly through a quick polonaise that reminded her of the earth pony village dances she sometimes attended on the road. Her partner knew the steps



well enough, but it was the extra taps and flourishes she added that drew the crowd's attention. By the time the song finished a small open area had formed around the pair, and a few ponies even clapped their hooves in appreciation.

She exchanged a polite bow with the stallion, and turned to find another partner for the next dance. One quickly presented herself – an older ivory mare who moved with the rare grace and assurance that marked her in Trixie's mind as a fellow performer. The ensemble struck up a moderate gavotte, and they began.

\*\*\*

Many dances and partners later, Trixie reluctantly bowed off the dance floor, followed by a round of enthusiastic applause. Several stallions and not a few mares looked disappointed not to have had their chance. She felt refreshed, the incident with the crass pegasus nearly gone from her mind as she walked back to the buffet for a drink.

Shunning the alcoholic drinks, she selected a simple apple cider and turned back to the crowd. Most of the attention was still on the dance floor, but a few ponies were gathered around the foyer and the tall, dark form of Princess Luna.

She should have asked Luna to dance, she realized. Did the princess know how? What would be more enjoyable, partnering with her for a flamboyant routine to set the crowd ablaze; or slowly teaching her how to move, how to set her hooves in time with the music, how to slide her body alongside her partner?

Such thoughts would have continued more or less indefinitely, had not a quiet voice next to her drawled, "Some fancy moves there, partner." A tall, orange mare with a ridiculously large hat was lounging against the wall. Something about the tone of her voice warned Trixie that this was not a friend.

"Just some simple country dances," she said to the mare cautiously. "Trixie is capable of much grander performances, to be sure."

"Ah've seen yer performances, Trixie," the mare said, pushing off the wall and walking toward her. "Thought you mighta learned sumthin', but ah can see ah was wrong ta expect anythin' better from you."

What was this, a reunion? Trixie took a step back, putting some space between her and the orange pony. "What do you know of Trixie?" she demanded.

"Ah know yer a liar," the pony said, stepping forward. "Ah know all about the 'Ursa Major' you s'pposedly defeated. Ah know you travel from town ta town, bilkin' ponies outta their bits."

Around them the party rolled unabated. Their conversation was too quiet, too personal to draw more than a passing glance, for all the heat and intensity in the earth pony's words. Trixie took another step back, her legs shaking as she recognized the mare from the same disastrous town as the rainbow pegasus.

"If there's one thing I can't stand, it's lyin'," the earth pony continued. "And yer the queen of dishonesty, Trixie. I never got ta say it before, but yer a fraud, and you should be ashamed." The mare turned up her head and spun, disappearing back into the crowd.

The orchestra started another song, a low, somber nocturne whose melody was the night itself. Trixie sat back on her haunches, wondering if she would ever escape that damn town.

Quite some time later she found the strength to return to her hooves. There was one pony in the crowd, at least, who didn't care about her past, who treated her like a friend. Stepping back into the crowd, she went looking for Luna.

\*\*\*

"Lose your friends?" the princess asked. Luna's smile was wider than Twilight Sparkle had ever seen on her; apparently the pre-celebration was going well.

"Not as such," Twilight said. "Applejack went to get something to drink, and Rainbow Dash is, uh, preoccupied."

"Preoccupied?" Luna tilted her head. Twilight tried to answer, but blushed before she could contrive another euphemism. "Oh, 'preoccupied.'" The princess giggled, covering her mouth with a hoof. "Doing some research of her own into the magic of friendship?"

Twilight pondered. "Something like that," she eventually allowed.

The two wandered through the crowds, enjoying the laughter and happiness around them. Luna positively glowed, looking happier than Twilight could ever recall.

“Oh, speaking of friendship, I have someone I want you to meet tomorrow,” the alicorn said. “A very good friend of mine, and someone I think you already know.”

That brought Twilight up short. All her friends lived in Ponyville – she had acquaintances from her years in Canterlot, but aside from Celestia, no one she was close to.

“Who?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“I’m not supposed to tell you yet.” Luna said. “Tia said it would be a surprise.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “You know, Princess Celestia certainly likes to make things more complicated than they need to be. One of these days somepony’s going to turn the tables on her.”

Luna laughed quietly, drawing curious glances from the ponies around them. “I wish that pony the best of luck. You need to get up pretty early in the morning to outsmart her.”

Their wanderings eventually took them near the dance floor. Luna glanced at it, a small smile on her face.

“Say, do you know how to dance?” she asked the smaller pony.

“I’ve read about dance theory. I’m sure the application of theory into practice is a fairly simple matter of--whoa!” she trailed off as the princess, laughing, dragged her onto the dance floor to the cheers of the crowd.

\*\*\*

Trixie was an unhappy pony.

She watched them, the princess and the unicorn, from a safe distance. They were deep in conversation with each other, giggling and laughing, and far too preoccupied to notice her staring.

She recognized the purple unicorn instantly. Twilight Sparkle, the third pony from that same damned town where everything fell apart. The one who showed her up, humiliated her, took her life and stomped it into the dirt

in front of everyone. Apparently they had put together a special group tour to come and humiliate Trixie.

But the unicorn wasn't the worst of it. The worst part was seeing Luna with her, laughing and smiling as they stepped onto the dance floor.

She felt something she had never felt before. Hollow, like a giant ice cream scoop had taken out her insides. Detached, like she was viewing the world through some other pony's eyes. Some inconsiderate soul had wrapped a thin wire around her heart, and with every beat it drew tighter, squeezing the life from her.

Every bit of happiness the last month had blessed her with evaporated. Her dreams of staying in Canterlot vanished like morning mist. Silly, foalish illusions of friendship died within her.

She turned, unnoticed, and walked out of the hall into the dark corridors beyond.

\*\*\*

The rest of the keep was quiet by comparison. Only a few torches were lit at this time of night, casting isolated pools of light in the dark corridors.

As a kitchen servant she was allowed access to most of the keep. The few guards she encountered simply nodded as she passed, recognizing her from her arrest and subsequent service.

The upper levels were a different story. Although Equestria was a peaceful nation and threats to the royal family were virtually unknown, the guards in the personal quarters would not be so lax as to simply let anypony wander in, particularly at night.

Trixie, of course, was not any pony. She stopped halfway up the stairs to the royal quarters, where no one could sneak up on her, and worked her first spell of the night. Her horn glowed with a brief silver light, then suddenly snuffed out as the night's darkness covered her like a shroud.

It was a simple trick, one she used on stage to mask her movements. At night, in a dark hallway, it was as good as being invisible.

None of the guards saw an odd shadow sweeping by. The marble beneath her hooves was absolutely silent, thanks to a simple cantrip that dampened sounds. Even the currents of air she stilled with her magic, lest a stray breeze alert the guards to something unusual.

The end of the hallway was taken up by a massive pair of golden double doors, stamped with a stylized sun. Two armored pegasus guards stood alert in front of them, oblivious to her presence even as she strode close enough to touch them. Faint sounds of music and laughter bubbled up from the party far below, the only hint of any waking life in the castle beyond the dark corridor.

Opening the doors would be impossible to mask, even for her, so she didn't bother. She had been in the room beyond many times as a servant, delivering and collecting dishes, and it took no effort at all to form an image of the room in her mind. Her horn flashed again, invisible behind its spell, and when she opened her eyes she was no longer in the corridor.

Celestia's personal quarters were surprisingly sparse. The goddess apparently didn't feel the need to stuff her room with treasures, instead filling it with comfortable furniture, rows of bookcases, and tasteful paintings of scenes and ponies from Equestrian history. The anteroom she found herself in was virtually empty, decorated only with an ornate golden armillary hung from the ceiling -- a collection of concentric rings twisted into a sphere, representing the motion and locations of the heavenly bodies. If she hadn't looked up to check for traps she would have missed it completely.

She could sense magical alarms tingling, on the verge of tripping and alerting the castle to her intrusion. Reaching out with her magic, she calmed them, muting them like vibrating strings. Although elaborately crafted, the alarm spells were ancient, and had never been designed to stop a true magician from entering.

The bedroom lay beyond a large archway, which was tall enough for the alicorn princess to stride through without having to duck her horn. The room was decorated with soft, dark colors, so unlike the sun and day she epitomized. Midnight blue drapes concealed windows; azure rugs felt soft and luxurious beneath hooves. The only artwork was a small, framed painting of the Princess Luna, so old the colors had faded and the paint cracked like dry earth.

Trixie spent several minutes in silence, going over the room and its contents. The massive bed was shrouded with translucent curtains, hiding its occupant. Next to the bed was her target, a tall wood rack on which hung a large golden torc and a pearlescent crown, both removed from their bearer for the night.

Perched atop the rack was an unwelcome surprise – a large, sleeping phoenix with its head tucked under its wing. She had mistaken the creature for a lantern when she entered, but the bird itself filled the room with a soft, mellow light similar to a candle. There was no way to remove the torc from the rack without lifting it completely over the phoenix as well.

Again, what would have been a challenge for most ponies barely caused Trixie to break a sweat. She levitated the torc delicately away from the pegs it rested on, and lifted it up the length of the rack. The phoenix didn't even stir as she lifted the torc over it, and then across the room into her waiting mouth. It was larger than she expected, but fortunately folded along several concealed joints, and she was able to fit it into her saddlebag with some difficulty.

The next part was far harder. Walking back into the anteroom, she focused her magic on the golden armillary, insinuating her will into the fabric of its being. The sculpture shuddered and popped as she gave it a few mental twists, and with a final flash it vanished, replaced by a mirror image of Celestia's torc. She levitated the forgery back into the bedroom, carefully sliding it onto the rack over the sleeping phoenix.

A simple imitation might fool most ponies, but probably not Celestia, and Trixie couldn't take that chance. Her horn glowed again as she probed at the real torc in her saddlebags, letting it press against her magical senses.

It felt... heavy. Far heavier than it should. Even though she knew its mass and could carry it around without difficulty, it gave the impression of immense weight, of mountains and glaciers and deep, deep oceans.

That was unsettling to the unicorn, but her illusions were up to the task. She laid another spell on the false torc, carefully twisting it to manipulate the impressions of its wearer. When she finished she was certain that it could withstand anything but the deepest inspection by the princess, or another powerful magician.

Her prize firmly in her grasp, she turned to leave the bedroom. She paused for only a moment before teleporting back into the corridor, a single melancholy thought penetrating the fog in her mind.

*Forgive me, Luna.*

\*\*\*

Less than an hour later Trixie was on a train heading to Appleloosa, the furthest station she could afford a ticket for. She tried convincing herself that she was elated, thrilled with her theft and the untold power the torc in her saddlebag promised. A lens, Luna had called it, perhaps the last one in all of Equestria.

And it was hers.

She tried to imagine the glory and adulation she would soon win, with the power of the lens augmenting her own magic. Who knew how great she might become? Who knew what heights she could conquer with its aid?

But for some reason her thoughts always returned to a single point, a smiling, laughing face, the only pony who had shown her kindness or friendship.

She did her best to push those thoughts out of her head. It was late and there was no celebration for her to attend in the morning. Better to get some sleep.

Her cabin was empty of other passengers, so her restless dreaming disturbed nopony else.

\*\*\*

"You know, I haven't watched Celestia do this in well over a thousand years."

Twilight Sparkle gave Luna a curious glance. They were standing on the side of a wooden platform, so similar to the one she saw from a distance as a child. At the center of the stage a large, sun-shaped ring rose high into the air, ready to frame the rising sun as Celestia worked her magic.

"But I thought you were banished exactly a thousand years ago? That's what the legend said," Twilight responded with some confusion.

Luna nodded, her eyes on the frame above them. "I stopped coming many years before that. It just seemed like Celestia was trying to rub salt into my wounds, to prove how much more the ponies loved the day and summer than the night and winter."

She paused for a moment, her gaze softening as she remembered events that had been forgotten long before Twilight's birth. "Did you know I once held a Winter Moon Celebration? To mark the longest night of the year?"

“You mean Winter Solstice Day?” Twilight asked. “We still celebrate that. It’s one of the biggest holidays of the year, especially for foals.” She grinned, remembering the presents her parents hid around their house on solstice day. One time she had taken to telepathically dismantling the walls in her searching. After that her parents just left the presents in a large pile for her to find in the morning.

“No, Celestia started that holiday after I was gone,” Luna said. “There were no presents, no families or parties as part of my Celebration. It was just me, inviting all of ponykind to watch me raise the moon on the coldest, darkest night of the year.” She sighed. “Only one pony showed up.”

“Who?” Twilight asked, though she suspected she knew the answer. She leaned in close, resting a hoof on the princess’s shoulder.

“Celestia, of course.” Luna’s voice was soft, almost a whisper. “Even though she knew how much I resented her, she still showed up to offer her support.

“It was a terrible winter that year, Twilight, and Canterlot wasn’t like you see today, with these streets and buildings.” She took a breath, and continued. “It was just a large town outside our keep. The streets weren’t lit and nopony went out at night, especially not in such terrible weather.

“But she came,” Luna finished. “She sat in snow nearly up to her neck while I raised the moon. She said it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.”

The princess slumped as she recalled the memory, her head hanging below her shoulders and the tip of her horn nearly touching the platform.

“And I hated her for it.” She closed her eyes before any tears could escape. “She showed me more love on that one night than I showed her in an entire year, and I hated her for it.”

Twilight was silent. Around them the Solarium was filling with ponies; already thousands crowded close to the stage, and more streamed into the plaza from the surrounding city.

“I was such a stupid filly, Twilight.” Her words were blunt and even, with no more emotion than if she had remarked on the weather.

Nothing in Twilight’s studies of friendship had prepared her to deal with a melancholy goddess. She looked across the platform to her friends,



Applejack and Rainbow Dash, but both were occupied with other, happier conversations.

“Luna,” she finally said, “I haven’t known Celestia as long as you, obviously, but she practically raised me from a filly. I think I know her pretty well. And I can tell you the only time I’ve ever seen her happier than last night at your party was the day we freed you from Nightmare Moon.”

Luna, princess of Equestria and goddess of the moon, sniffled. “Really?” she said.

Twilight nodded. “Uh huh.”

The princess sniffed again, then straightened, a weak smile on her face. “You’re a good friend, Twilight.”

She blushed. “Well, I’m learning.”

\*\*\*

The rose tint of dawn was coloring the eastern sky when Celestia appeared, striding up onto the platform. She paused long enough to give her sister and Twilight Sparkle a smile, then moved to the center of the stage, just beneath the ornate sun sculpture.

The crowd was silent as Celestia gazed to the east. Although she could technically raise the sun any time she wanted, she never seemed to be in any particular rush to do so. Instead she waited, letting the sun continue on its appointed path.

Finally, as the sky whitened and the clouds began to glow with the sun’s light, she leapt into the air, her massive wings easily lifting her into the empty center of the sun sculpture. Behind her the tip of the sun peaked over the mountains, and the rays of dawn washed over her and into the wildly cheering crowds.

And then the sun princess did something Twilight had never seen. She froze in mid-air with her wings outspread, no longer flapping to keep herself aloft. For a moment she seemed to defy gravity.

But only for a moment. Before Twilight even realized something was wrong the princess plummeted back to the platform without attempting to land properly. Ponies shouted in alarm as the structure shook under their hooves, and several planks buckled and broke beneath the force of Celestia’s crash.

Luna recovered first. "TIA!" she yelled, and darted toward her sister. She pressed against the larger mare, helping her back onto her hooves.

Twilight was at her side next, her eyes wide with alarm. "Princess, are you alright?" The cheers of the crowd were beginning to die off as those ponies not on the platform realized something was happening.

The huge alicorn shook her head, as though trying to clear it. "I-I'm sorry," she said, stumbling over her words. It was the first time Twilight had ever seen the princess in any sort of distress. "I just felt a little light-headed there for a moment."

Luna pressed her muzzle against her sister's neck, then drew back in alarm. "Stars, 'Tia, you're burning up! Why didn't you say you were sick?"

Celestia rose to her full height, fluttering her wings to settle her feathers before relaxing them against her body. The crowd began to calm down, some of their initial alarm passing as they saw their princess recover. "I didn't think I was, beloved sister," she said. "Something about the sun just felt odd, something I haven't felt in a long time..." She turned to the east, where the rising sun finally illuminated the platform itself. Celestia stood transfixed, staring at the orb as though she had never seen it before.

Twilight stepped toward her mentor. "Princess, perhaps we should go back inside and..." she trailed off. The air around the princess was beginning to shimmer, like heat rising off of hot cobblestones in the summer.

"'Tia, you're scaring us," Luna said, stepping up next to Twilight. Applejack and Rainbow Dash followed behind her, staring at the princess with alarm and confusion.

"No... no, this is wrong," Celestia said, almost whispering. She stared at the sun until the smell of smoke caught her attention. A glance at her hooves revealed the wood platform beginning to smolder beneath them. She jumped back, her wings fanning out in alarm.

Twilight stumbled back with her friends. The blast of air from Celestia's wings was like standing before an open oven. Only Luna seemed unaffected.

"What's wrong?!" she cried, her voice starting to break. "'Tia, what's happening?" She ignored the burning air and stepped toward her sister.

The crowd began to rumble again as those closest to the stage shied away from the heat.

Tiny flames began to lick at the wood under Celestia's hooves. She danced away but the flames followed, forming a trail of burning hoofprints around her. The air around her began to crackle ominously. After a few alarmed steps she stopped and ignored the fires, instead turning again to the sun as she realized, too late, what was happening.

She was in the middle of a city of nearly a hundred-thousand ponies. In a few minutes all of them were going to die.

There wasn't enough time to fly away. She tore her eyes from the sun long enough to give her sister a final, aching look, and began to weave the largest spell she had ever attempted, her horn glowing like a second sun.

Twilight saw none of this. The heat pouring from Celestia's body was like standing next to a blacksmith's forge. She covered her eyes with her forelegs as the temperature began to spike, and felt the hairs of her coat curling as they started to burn.

There was a final flash, visible even through her clenched eyes, and suddenly the heat was gone. When she looked around, she was no longer in Canterlot.

\*\*\*

When the glow of her spell faded Celestia was alone on the platform. Every living pony in Canterlot had been wrapped in her magic and sent miles away. She considered teleporting herself out of the city, but quickly discarded the idea. A blind teleport could drop her anywhere, and probably kill anyone or anything she landed next to.

The wood platform was fully engulfed in flames. A column of smoke visible throughout the city was starting to rise from the Solarium. A moment later the stage buckled beneath her hooves and collapsed.

Her thoughts, which had seemed so clear just moments ago, were beginning to unravel. The merciless rays of the sun hammered at her mind.

Teleporting all those ponies away should have been impossible, she thought absently as she kicked her way out of the ruined stage, scattering burning wood for hundreds of feet around. The spell should have taken

more power than even she could wield; instead she had hardly noticed the drain.

But at least they were safe, even though she could barely remember their names now, with the sun's brilliance drowning her thoughts. They had been important to her.

She glanced around the plaza, annoyed by the smoke pouring from the dozens of small fires she had just started. The cobblestones beneath her hooves started to glow a dull, cherry red.

She looked up at her home, the keep perched far above the city on the side of a mountain. Her horn flared, and she was gone.

\*\*\*

The keep was fortunately empty when Celestia appeared in her throne room with a flash. The same spell that evacuated the city below had reached far enough to remove everyone from the castle as well.

The moment she materialized the tall glass windows lining her throne room, replaced just a month ago, exploded outward as the air in the room superheated and violently attempted to escape. Her huge throne, dozens of feet away, blackened and burst into flames after just a few seconds next to her brilliance.

Tiny rivulets of gold were running down her chest, she realized. Her torc, which should have been able to survive unharmed inside a volcano, was beginning to melt like wax.

She tore it off with a hoof in a sudden rage. It flopped to the crackling floor at her feet with a wet \*plop\*, already halfway to becoming a puddle. She stomped on it furiously, screaming as the spells around it collapsed and it turned back into a ruined, melted version of her armillary sphere.

Somepony had stolen her torc. Somepony had stolen her torc, not realizing what it was for, and because of their foolishness the world was going to burn.

Fires raged throughout the keep, carried by currents of air that were nearly aflame themselves. Within minutes of her arrival every organic item in the castle was burning.

Dozens of acres of gardens, among the finest in the world, began to ignite. The trees turned into massive torches, their crowns lighting the

mountainside for miles around. Carefully manicured topiaries twisted in cruel mockeries of the forms they had been carved to emulate. Above the roaring fires a series of deafening cracks sounded, as tiny pockets of air trapped in the stone sculptures expanded and burst. Thousands of animals screamed or shrieked or remained silent, each according to their natures, as they burned.

There was another flash from within the keep, and every living thing still in the gardens mercifully died.

In her throne room the being that had once called itself Celestia looked around in confusion. Still shaped like an alicorn, it bore only fragments of her personality and thought, all crowded out by the brilliance of the star burning inside her.

The marble beneath her hooves liquefied and flowed away from her in streams. There was no more fire around her, for there was nothing left to burn. The stone columns holding up the roof sagged and finally surrendered the fight; no longer supported, the ceiling attempted to simultaneously collapse and explode.

One thought remained in the tumult of her mind: her torc. It was still out there, she could sense. Far to the west, and moving further away with every passing second.

Below her the marble ceased to melt and instead simply evaporated. Tiny flickers of ghostly light surrounded the few solid objects remaining in the room as their composition broke down into thin tendrils of plasma.

She could still fix this. With the torc, she could again be whole.

She fanned her wings, flapping them to no effect. The superheated air around her was thinner than the void between the stars, and nowhere near dense enough to support her weight.

But that was fine – alicorns had never needed wings to fly. She continued to flap, entirely out of habit, as she rose into the air. Once she was clear of the ruins of the keep she began flying west, slowly picking up speed.

Like the stars' own spear she lit a burning trail through the skies.

# Chapter 5

## The Roof of the World

Once, when Twilight Sparkle was a young filly, she very nearly fell into a firepit.

Like most foals she went through an adventurous phase, during which she was convinced of her own invulnerability. She jumped off roofs trying to fly like a pegasus. She attempted dangerous spells that would give expert magicians pause, despite barely having any magic in her horn. She explored the streets of Canterlot at night, not comprehending that even in the Celestial City some areas simply weren't safe.

It was a trying time for her parents, to say the least. Their daughter, normally so quiet and reserved, seemed determined to either make them die of worry or get killed herself.

Her final filly adventure, so to speak, occurred just a few days before the end of summer, a time when families gathered for reunions and feasts. Even unicorn ponies, not normally given to such plebian activities as 'cook-outs,' would gather for outdoor vegetable roasts beneath the fading evening skies to celebrate the approach of autumn. Pumpkins, squash, zucchinis, corn, carrots and apples – so many apples – all would be tossed onto grills and roasted, filling the air with an indescribable mixture of scents. The very act of breathing became a feast for the senses.

On that night her father plucked an apple from the grill with his magic and floated it over to her waiting hooves. Its skin, still a bright golden yellow, had blackened and split from the heat, and from the steaming flesh of the fruit rose a savory caramel scent that begged – no, demanded – to be devoured. And devour it she did.

Because it was a summer feast and because she was a foal, no one scolded her for licking the still-warm apple juices from her hooves. Her father just laughed and promised to get her another apple, once they were done roasting.

That seemed like a long time to wait for such a delicious treat. Too long, in fact. And so the young Twilight Sparkle took it upon herself to fetch another apple.

The grill was a long metal rack suspended over a large pit dug in the sandy earth of the park. The pit was packed with charcoal and embers nearly to the level of the ground, and filled the air above with sparks and low flames. Juices from the fruits and vegetables suspended above would drip down into the pit, instantly vaporizing with a loud hiss that added to the background noise of the party.

Try as she might, Twilight couldn't quite lift anything from the grill with her magic – she simply wasn't strong enough yet. Instead she leaned over the edge of the pit and stretched a hoof up to the grill, reaching for a simmering red delicious just out of reach.

An adult, a tan earth pony tending the grill, noticed her efforts. He was about to help by grabbing the apple when the sand beneath her shifted suddenly, dumping her onto her belly with her forelegs and hooves crashing into the embers. Instead of the apple the earth pony grabbed her mane in his teeth and pulled her away from the pit, just as the first wails escaped her lips.

The damage could have been far worse. As it was the hair on her fetlocks was entirely burnt away, and the skin beneath badly blistered. Her soles were tender for weeks, and her parents spent months lathering a special cream on her hooves to keep them from drying out and cracking.

Bed-ridden for more than a week, she turned to books for solace. It was the beginning of a life-long obsession with the written word, and in time she would come to be thankful for the accident and the book-filled days that followed.

\*\*\*

When Twilight Sparkle opened her eyes, she was no longer in Canterlot.

The last thing she remembered was covering her face with her forelegs. Even through clenched eyelids she could see the shape of her hooves, and as the terrible bright light reached a peak she thought she could see the outlines of bones and blood vessels within them. Then there was a final flash that stole all of her vision, and suddenly the heat was gone.

All around her was darkness, like someone had painted the world with pitch. Slowly she became aware of a tiny point of light just above the horizon; as her eyes adjusted she realized it was the sun.

Around her came the sounds of other ponies in similar distress. Lots of ponies, in fact – her nose picked up the scents of hundreds of terrified mares and stallions, all starting to recover their voices and call out to each other.

The light slowly returned to her eyes, fading splotches of afterimages swirling and shifting and eventually giving way to the sight of mass confusion. A sharp, sickening scent of burnt hair filled her nostrils, and when the world finally came into focus she saw that the tips of her coat had singed into brown curls.

She tried to speak, and found that her mouth was completely dry. All she could manage was an incoherent mumble as her tongue stuck to teeth and lips. She paused for a moment to work up some saliva, and tried again.

“Is... is everyone alright?” she asked, and turned to the nearest pony.

It was Luna, who was still staring into the space where her sister had just been. None of her fur was burned, Twilight noted with some annoyance.

“Twi! What the HAY just happened?” Applejack’s voice came from behind. She turned to her friend, prompting the orange pony to recoil in shock.

“Stars, Twilight! Are you alright?” Applejack asked, her eyes wide as she stared at the unicorn’s blackened coat. Rainbow Dash stumbled to her side, mouth agape as she took in Twilight’s condition.

“I’m fine, Applejack,” she said, managing to keep all but the faintest quaver from her voice. “Trust me, I’ve been burned worse before.” She rubbed her coat with a hoof, knocking off the burnt tips of the hairs and revealing the healthy lavender fur beneath.

“T-tia?” They heard Luna say. The alicorn looked around, stunned, eventually settling on the girls. All around them hundreds of ponies were going through identical stages of shock. The air was filled with confused cries, shouts and sob. A great number apparently thought they were dead and that this was the afterlife.



Applejack recovered first. She stomped over to Luna, dragging Twilight with her by the mane. Rainbow Dash followed the pair, her ears pressed flat against her skull and her wings held tight against her body.

“Luna?” Applejack poked the princess’s shoulder with a hoof. “Luna! C’mon girl, we need you.”

The alicorn stared at the offending hoof, then up at its owner. A sharp focus returned to her eyes, and the stunned filly was gone, replaced by the goddess of the moon.

“She teleported us,” she said. “I don’t know how she did it, but somehow she teleported us... here? Where are we?”

The four looked around, taking in the crowds of ponies around them. They seemed to be in the middle of a large meadow bordered by a mix of tall trees. A well-worn trail beneath their feet, crowded with ponies, cut through the tall grass and led into the forest.

Despite the thousands of ponies crowding the landscape as far as she could see, Twilight instantly recognized the spot. She and Applejack had walked on that very road less than a day earlier.

“This... this is the Whitetail Woods,” she finally said, looking around in confusion. “I think we’re just a few miles from Ponyville, actually.” To the south she could just barely make out the perpetual clouds that covered the Everfree Forest like a shroud. Much further away to the north rose the heights of the Sidesaddle Mountains. The vague shape of Canterlot Keep was visible even at this distance, perched on the side of the nearest peak.

“Why would she do that?” Luna said, following Twilight’s gaze to the north. “Why send us all here?” The towers of Canterlot began to shine as the first light of dawn struck them, filling the air with the dazzling radiance Twilight had always associated with the city.

“Who cares?!” Applejack interjected, stomping her foot. “She almost cooked us back there! Why the hay did she do that?”

“I don’t think she could help it, Applejack,” Twilight said. She took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to remain calm. “She seemed confused and... hurt.” Luna shot her a pained look.

The alicorn opened her mouth to say something when suddenly she froze, her eyes widening in alarm. Twilight stared at her for a moment, and then turned to see what was so important it could silence a royal princess.

High above and far away, Canterlot began to burn.

\*\*\*

It started with a thin trickle of smoke rising from the side of the mountain. Within moments the smoke expanded, smothering the peak and rising high into the air. Tiny sparks flashed in the windows of the castle, lighting the mountainside and city below like flashbulbs. Despite the distance the flashes left pinpoint afterimages in the eyes of the watching ponies.

The tiny sparks turned into a brilliant flare that drowned out the sun. The keep vanished from view, replaced by a burning ember that filled the sky above with a towering cloud of smoke that soared thousands of feet into the air, dwarfing the mountain range below.

The faint form of the keep was still visible through the aura of flames that consumed the mountainside. As they watched pieces of the structure cracked and fell away, tumbling down the mountain in a shower of wreckage and molten rock.

There was a final flash, blinding even from dozens of miles away. When the sky faded and vision returned, the keep was no more. In its place was a slowly expanding ring of debris lifting into the sky; thousands of red-hot stones, some the size of buildings, traced arrow-straight lines of smoke in the air as they flew away from the shining star perched on the burning mountain.

The star, too brilliant to gaze at for more than a moment, seemed to hover in mid-air just above the cliff. After a moment it began to rise, violently dispersing the column of smoke that rose from the ruined mountain. Higher and higher it flew, shining like a second sun.

Eventually it came to a stop, and started drifting to the west, away from the rising sun.

\*\*\*

Twilight watched in horror as her home, her entire life, vanished in flames.

The city she was born in lay hidden beneath a pall of smoke. Shortly after the keep exploded a river of lava had poured down the mountainside, crashing through the stone buildings below like they were nothing more than sand. Within moments half the city was in flames.

The Keep itself, where she had spent years with her mentor learning the ways of magic, was simply *gone*. The gardens, the towers, beautiful libraries, Celestia's halls and throne room – all destroyed in the blink of an eye. Aside from the debris still soaring through the air, nothing remained of the greatest work of art ever created.

Even the shape of the mountain had changed. Still glowing, still burning, it looked like some errant god had taken a dollop from its side with a giant ice cream scoop. At the back of her mind the academic in her calmly noted that geographic maps of the mountain range would need to be redrawn. Then she remembered that the maps were all stored in the Canterlot library anyway.

The ponies watched in silence as the world they had known came to an end.

After a while – Twilight couldn't have said how long – they became aware of a quiet keening sound. Luna was doubled over, her horn scraping the ground as she sobbed. Around them dozens of other ponies were going through the same stage of grief as they realized their homes were gone – buried or reduced to ash on the wind. Twilight felt a pang of guilt for her own feelings of loss: at least she still had Ponyville and her friends. Many others had lost everything.

"What... what was that thing?" Rainbow Dash finally asked. The shining star that had risen from the ruins passed behind another mountain range and was gone, leaving only the glow from the fires of Canterlot behind.

"It was her," Luna said. Her voice nearly broke on the final word. "It was Celestia. I don't know what she's doing or what happened, but that was her."

"But no pony could survive that," Twilight said, staring up at the still-rising tower of smoke that now blotted out nearly a quarter of the sky. "I know she's powerful, but—"

"She's the sun goddess, Twilight," Luna interrupted, her voice thick with emotion. "Emphasis on the word *sun*. She could do this." The princess

shivered slightly as the light of morning finally found them in the forest, and she seemed to slump. "Sister..." Twilight heard her whisper.

They were silent for a while longer. Finally Luna forced herself to her feet, and walked unsteadily to the three friends.

"Listen," she said, slurring the word slightly. "I can't stay awake during the day without her. You need to follow her for me, until night returns and I can find her."

"How the hay are we s'posed ta follow that?" Applejack asked. "And what are we s'posed ta do when we catch up ta her?"

Luna's head started to sink, then jerked back up as she caught herself. "I... I don't know, Applejack," she said. "She's not moving very fast. Stars, commandeered one of the western rail lines. Tell them I said you could take it."

"I could catch her!" Rainbow Dash shouted. She was already halfway off the ground when Applejack yanked her back to earth, her teeth firmly clenched around the cyan mare's rainbow tail. Dash gave her a hurt look.

"Tha's prolly not a good idea, Dash," she said after spitting out the tail. Twilight was inclined to agree.

So was Luna, apparently. She rested a hoof on the pegasus pony's shoulder, drawing her closer. "No, Rainbow Dash, I have a special task for you..."

\*\*\*

Less than ten minutes later Rainbow Dash was in the air, streaking away from Ponyville and her friends. Far to the west the sky still glowed with the light of the departing sun goddess, who was slowly making her way to points unknown.

She wanted to be with her friends. They were running toward the danger while she was running away, which seemed like a terrible thing to do, especially for the Element of Loyalty.

At Luna's request she was flying at full speed, high above the earth. The thinner air at high altitudes meant less wind resistance, and therefore higher speeds, but also required more energy and endurance from the pegasus to stay aloft.

She flew north, following Luna's instructions. The Saddleback Mountains grew beneath her from low ridges that surrounded Canterlot into grim, rocky peaks that reached nearly as high as she was. The trees below changed as she flew, from the thick oak and beech forests of Ponyville to stands of identical aspen. Their leaves, dark on top and light on the bottom, seemed to turn the mountainsides into shimmering green blankets as they shook in the wind.

By noon she was further from home than she had ever flown before. The landscape below was alien – a tangle of valleys and ridges and peaks that looked almost like the veins in a leaf. The trees had changed again, into small, stunted pines that clung to the crevasse, their roots digging into the solid rock in search of a desperate solid purchase. Centuries of wind had contorted them into twisted shapes, more horizontal than vertical.

Luna, nearly incoherent with fatigue, hadn't given her much to go by. Fly north, she had said, until you find the tallest mountain in Equestria – the Roof of the World.

"How will I know which one's the tallest?" she had asked. For all she knew there would be another, higher mountain just over the horizon. She could spend days inspecting mountains, trying to figure out which one was the tallest.

You'll know, had been the answer.

Her last words, before collapsing into an unbreakable slumber, hadn't made any sense at the time. Even Twilight could only guess what she had meant by begging the stars for aid.

Ahead of her, perhaps an hour's distance, the clouds grew thicker, and higher, warning of possible storms. One cloud bank in particular rose high above the mountains, reaching up to the edge of the stratosphere.

As she flew the clouds thinned and dispersed with the advent of evening. All but the tall bank of clouds, which had only grown larger in her eyes.

It was not, she eventually realized, a cloud. It was a mountain unlike any in the world, impossibly high. It made the other mountains around it look like foothills – from a distance the entire mountain range seemed like flat earth, compared to this monster.

She headed for the summit.

\*\*\*

The roof of the world was far too high to reach on wings. The barren, rocky peak of the tallest mountain on Equestria stretched far above the clouds. It reached so high that even snow was a memory; the few wind-blown flakes that managed to find their way to the summit rapidly sublimated into the dry, thin air.

Rainbow Dash gave up flying more than a thousand feet below the peak, landing instead on a relatively flat outcropping of rock cleaving to the sheer mountainside. Her wings burned from flapping almost as fast as a hummingbird's in a futile attempt to produce enough lift to keep her up. The rest of the way to the top would have to be on hoof.

Whoever created the roof of the world at least made some allowances for pedestrians – a narrow path had been hewn from the cliff, tracing upward in a broken, irregular slash that seemed wrap all the way around the mountain. The part she could see was wide enough for two ponies to walk side-by-side, if they didn't mind being friendly with each other. Some kind soul had even left sconces along the edge of the path, though any torches they might have once held had long since burned or rotted away.

Off to the west the disc of the sun was nearly touching the mountains as it set. There was probably less than an hour of light before the stars would start emerging, she figured, and she had to be on top by then.

*Piece of cake*, she thought, and started cantering up the path at a brisk pace that would have done Applejack proud. *Be up there in no time*.

Five minutes later that assessment was looking a bit optimistic. She was less than a quarter of the way up and her legs could barely support her weight. The path in front of her swam in and out of focus and the light from the sun seemed to tremor in time with her pulse. A crushing headache was introducing itself to her brain as she tried to decide between throwing up or passing out.

*Okay*, she thought. *Air's a little thinner than I expected. Deep breaths, Dash, just like at flight school*. Young pegasuses were all taught to recognize oxygen deprivation, in case they ended up flying too high before their lungs developed enough to power their wings at altitude. More than

one young pegasus had tried flying to the moon their first time in the air, usually with bad results.

The deep breaths worked. She waited another minute just to be sure she wasn't going to faint, then started back up the path, this time at a much more sedate pace Twilight Sparkle would have appreciated. From time to time a gust of wind forced her to stop and huddle against the rock wall, until she realized the stone was leeching heat from her body faster than the wind could ever hope to. After that she simply rested on her knees and mantled her wings when the wind grew too strong.

By the time she neared the top the winds were blowing constantly and her hooves were numb. Only by staring at the path in front of her could she make sure each leg was planted before lifting the next.

Cold, as far as Rainbow Dash knew, had never directly killed a pegasus – nature had adapted them to the frigid air high above the ground. Ice had claimed more than one pegasus' life, but only because they had flown from a drenching rain straight into a blizzard without noticing the ice building up on their wings until it was too late.

Still, there was a first time for everything, and it was starting to look to Rainbow Dash like she might be the first pegasus to actually freeze to death. Another record for the blue mare, though not one she was excited to claim.

Instead she climbed. Even as her mane grew stiff with frost, and her wings drooped numbly to drag on the path beside her, she never considered turning around. The thought, quite honestly, never occurred to her.

So it was for the best when, as the last of the sun's evening rays vanished into twilight, with her last ounce of strength and last breath of air, she crested the last step and reached the highest point in Equestria – the roof of the world.

And promptly collapsed.

\* \* \*

Her first thought upon waking up was that she must have gone to the wrong mountain after all. In fact, she didn't even seem to be on a mountain

of any sort. The rock her face rested on was flat and polished to a mirror-like shine so perfect she could make out the reflections of the stars above.

*Stars*, she thought, her mind still fuzzy with cold. *So pretty. Rarity would love you. I should take some of you back with me...*

Her second thought was that it was much too warm to be on top of a mountain. Feeling had returned to her hooves and her left wing, though she seemed to have come to a rest on top of her right wing somehow. Rolling slightly to free it, she got her first look at the sky.

On a normal night ponies could see a few thousand stars from the ground. A pegasus pony, far overhead with dark-adapted eyes, might see ten times that number, and make out the stain of the Milky Way on moonless nights. Only with a telescope like the one in Twilight's library could a pony hope to see more.

From the roof of the world, Rainbow Dash saw more. Stars like gemstones blazed in the sky, filling the darkness with every color of light. Vast, glowing nebulae banished any hint of the night, and the Milky Way sparkled like a sunlit river overhead.

"The roof of the world is a stepping stone," Luna had said. "It is the threshold between Equestria and the void. Do not forget you are closer to them when you are there, and further from us."

Tearing her eyes from the sky she saw that she was still on the mountain. Rather than coming to a normal peak, someone had sheared the mountaintop clean off, leaving a flat, polished plateau perhaps 30 yards wide. At the center of the plateau rested a boulder about the size of a pony. Nothing else interrupted the featureless expanse of the roof.

She trotted closer to the boulder for a better look. It had seen better days; unlike the polished perfection of the plateau it was clearly unworked. Pitted and seared, it looked like a metal ingot fallen from a giant's forge. Blisters and flakes of rust discolored every inch of its surface, and she thought she could taste the tang of iron on the air around it.

It was also old. Even without touching the boulder she could feel in her bones that it was far more ancient than the forests or the oceans or the mountain it rested upon. It was probably older than the world itself. *Maybe as old as the stars*, she thought, absently.



“Older than us, even,” a voice sounded from above. The words were tremulous, reedy, as though coming from a great distance. Looking up, Dash saw that one of the stars, Polaris, was shining far brighter than it had just minutes ago.

“Are you a star, then?” she shouted up at the sky. It was a silly question in retrospect, but shouting made her feel confident and she wasn’t known for thinking before opening her mouth.

“Yes, but you knew that. You came looking for us,” the voice drifted back from the heavens. “What do you want, little mortal?” At the word ‘mortal’ the entire sky spun overhead for an instant; only the North Star, still blazing, remained constant.

She gulped. Luna hadn’t given her much to go by, except to ask for help. She decided to be direct.

“I am Rainbow Dash, the fastest pony in all of Equestria!” she shouted. Even when petitioning the stars she couldn’t help but brag. “Princess Luna sent me, to—”

“Luna, you say?” the star cut her off before she could finish. “Sent you to repay her debt, perhaps? So glad she remembered us. Though you don’t look like you’re in a condition to pay anything.”

Another star, a dark incarnadine ruby hanging just above the horizon, flashed with a brief light. *Nothing at all*, something whispered in Dash’s head, followed by a humorless laugh.

Luna hadn’t mentioned anything about debts. Or payments. Especially payments, come to think of it. Coming here was starting to seem like a bad idea. And was the North Star starting to glow a bit brighter?

She decided to start over. “No, she sent me to ask a favor! We—”

The sky exploded as every star suddenly blazed like a tiny sun. A horrendous cacophony flooded the pony’s mind as thousands of voices shouted for supremacy, blending together in an incomprehensible babble that drove her to her knees with her hooves uselessly pressed over her ears.

“SILENCE!” the North Star screamed into chaos. “ONLY I SPEAK HERE.” The other voices slowly faded away, though overhead the stars still

glimmered. With its dominance reestablished the star turned its attention back to the trembling pony.

“No, little mortal,” the star spoke with its distance voice. “We have given enough aid to your princess. Tell Luna to wait another thousand years if she wants our help again.” Overhead the stars began to dim, as though receding from view. The air grew chill and thin again.

“Wait!” she yelled. “You have to help us!” Nothing; the sky continued to dim. Even the North Star was fading back to its normal light.

*Think, Dash! They won't do it for you, and they won't do it for Luna, who will they do it for?* The answer was so obvious it took her a moment to put the words together.

“Celestia!” she screamed at the fading stars. “It's for Celestia!”

The heavens froze. The North Star, almost gone, began to twinkle and then shine with a tentative light.

“Celestia, you say?” the star replied, its voice still faint. “That is a name we have not heard in many years.”

*Ages*, one of the other stars whispered in her head. She briefly wondered how long that was for a star.

“What does the fair sun goddess need from us?” Polaris asked, now shining as bright as it had before. “Why does she not come here herself?”

*Pride*, a high-pitched voice sounded in her mind, almost like the tinkling of a bell. *She was always so prideful.* Overhead a tiny yellow star sparkled in time with the words.

“No! Celestia is kind and generous and loving!” she shouted up at the sky. “She didn't come because something happened. There was... there was an accident,” her voice nearly broke on the last word. She sat on her haunches and described everything that had happened at Canterlot, from the Solstice Ceremony to Luna's parting instruction. By the time she finished her wings were wrapped protectively around her body, and it was all she could do not to cry.

The stars twinkled overhead, apparently discussing the matter amongst themselves. Occasionally words or bits of sentences would press against

Rainbow Dash's mind, but they were as tenuous as the wind and instantly forgotten. Finally the North Star turned its light back to the huddled pony.

"So, Celestia," it said. "The god who wanted to live as a mortal... impossible, of course. But we gave her the next best thing."

*Better, even,* another star intruded in her thoughts. *Still a god.*

"Yes, quite. You can't unmake a god, little mortal, but you can take them down a peg, if you have the right tools. You could even make one look like a pony, if you wanted."

Despite her emotional exhaustion, that sounded a bit too much like an insult for Dash. "What are you talking about? She is a pony. I've seen her, I've even touched her! And what's wrong with being a pony?!"

The stars above glimmered as laughter filled her mind.

"We mean no offense, little mortal," the North Star finally responded, "but she is no more a pony than I am. The Celestia you know is a shell that is starting to crack and fall away."

*Pity,* a brown, lightless star whispered, *she seemed so happy.*

"Soon only the radiance of a god will be left," the star continued. "I'm not sure what that will result in. Nothing good, probably. Stars shouldn't fly so close to planets."

*Dangerous,* an emerald star whispered, followed by murmurs of assent from the others.

'Nothing good' actually seemed like a dramatic understatement, if what she had seen at Canterlot was any indication. "So will you help us or not?" she demanded, her brash attitude starting to resurface.

"You? No, and why should we?" the star replied. "The affairs of mortals mean nothing to us. Celestia, on the other hand... Celestia has done much for us in the past." The star paused, and conferred again with its company, illuminating the sky with flashes of color.

"We may be able to help Celestia," it finally said. "Tell me, have you ever seen this?" As the star spoke an image floated into view over the iron boulder at the center of the plateau. A golden necklace, like the Element of

Harmony she earned fighting Nightmare Moon, but much larger and heavier.

"Yeah, it's Celestia's necklace," the pony said. "She always wears it."

"Well, she isn't now," the star replied. "If she were this wouldn't be happening. In fact, let's see if we can't..." the other stars flashed again, slowly fading one-by-one until only a single yellow zircon remained lit. "Aha, there it is."

"What... why does that thing matter?" the pony asked, confused. "If she's really a god why does she need a piece of jewelry?"

"It's not jewelry, it's an energy sink," the star responded with a distracted voice, as though it was busy with something else. "You must understand, mortal, Celestia was a terribly lonely god. When she found your world and the young races just born upon it, she thought she had found a home.

"But despite the love she felt for your world she could not draw near it, not without causing terrible damage," the star continued in its absent voice. "She begged us to find a way to live amongst you. The torc you see there was our solution. It dampens her brilliance and allows her to masquerade as a mortal. Indeed, I think she may have forgotten her true nature as time passed."

*Forgotten us*, a tiny red star lamented.

"She seems to have mislaid the torc somehow," the star concluded. "Return it to her and she'll be restored to her, alas, nearly mortal state."

*Mortal*, several of the stars whispered, all with mockery in their voices.

"Awesome!" This was the first good news Rainbow Dash had heard yet. "So, where is it?"

There was no response. The stars glimmered overhead, some brightening, some dimming.

"Hey! I said, where is it?" Patience was not her strong point.

Still was no response. The stars continued to confer with each other for what felt like hours while the pony shouted every threat and imprecation she could think of. Finally, the North Star spoke again, its brilliance shining down on her like a spotlight.

“You are a very brash and demanding mortal,” it said. “You come here on Luna’s behalf yet offer no payment for her outstanding debt, and have the audacity to demand another favor?”

*Tiny as an insect*, a black, hollow star whispered. The others seemed to shy away from its cold words.

“Um, well, that is, I was going to—”

“Be quiet,” the star reprimanded her. “We know what you were going to offer: nothing.”

The pony cringed, trying to find some way out of this mess. She wished for a moment Twilight could have been with her – the lavender unicorn was so much better in these situations.

“But,” the star continued, “we can be generous. We will tell you where Celestia’s torc is, in exchange for one small request.”

*That is a lie*, a bright sapphire star warned. *There is nothing small about his price.*

“Uh, well, I was kind of thinking I could go and get the tor... uh, necklace real fast, because I’m the fastest pony in Equestria, then I would come back and pay you,” she said.

“Indeed, just like Luna did.”

Rainbow Dash cringed again. She wondered if anypony had ever actually paid the stars back for their favors.

“No, I don’t think that will work for us,” the star said. “We’ll be needing this payment up front.”

She tried a different tack. “But you are stars! What do I have that you need?!”

“Nothing, I assure you. But that’s not the point. What matters is how much it is worth to you, little mortal. I wonder, what do you value most of all?”

The pony stepped back, suddenly frightened. Unbidden, her wings folded tightly against her back, as though trying to hide.

The North Star pulsed with laughter. “Yes, you see now,” it said, and a pair of invisible hands gripped her wings and pulled them open, stretching them painfully wide and lifting her onto her back legs. A panicky fear began to build in her brain, pushing out everything but the image of her wings being ripped off by a careless god.

“These will do. Give us your wings, little mortal, and we will tell you where the torc may be found.”

She tried to twist free, but whatever held her was stronger than iron. She lashed out with her hooves at the empty air. A gnawing dread clamped around her heart as she struggled. Someone was sobbing, she thought, and only after running out of breath did she realize it was her.

*I can't do this, she thought. I'll go back and tell the others the stars wouldn't listen. I'll blame Luna – tell them the stars demanded she pay back her debt first. It's true! They won't blame me, they'll blame her, no one will blame me, they'll blame her, they'll blame her –* the words stuck on repeat in her mind. She could already see her friends casting Luna out, blaming her, and thanking Rainbow Dash for trying. Her friends...

Her friends, chasing down an out-of-control god, depending on her.

Her friends, risking their lives, trusting her.

The epiphany was so abrupt she would have collapsed, if her wings weren't still being held. After a few shaking breaths she jerked her head back up to the sky and the waiting stars.

“You're wrong!” she shouted. “Take my wings for all I care! I'll still be the fastest pony in all of Equestria!” The stars overhead froze in place for the first time since her arrival.

“If you think these wings are all I care about, you know nothing!” she screamed. “Nothing, you hear me?! You may be ancient, and powerful, and cruel, but you know NOTHING!”

“These wings aren't the most important thing to me! MY FRIENDS ARE!”

One by one the stars dimmed and went out. The bright nebulae and galaxies faded away, until only four points of light remained: the North Star and three other gems hanging alone in the sky.

The dark ruby to the west sparkled briefly. *You see, it whispered, she is loyal after all, and then faded away.*

*Is that proof enough?* the sapphire overhead asked, and then it too vanished.

*I am convinced, Polaris,* the yellow zircon said as it went out.

Only the pony, the North Star, and the iron boulder remained. The sky, the plateau, and the world around them were empty and black.

The invisible hands holding Dash up suddenly vanished. A reflexive flap of her wings kept her from landing badly, though she still ached from being held for so long.

“Well, it seems you really are the Element of Loyalty,” the diamond star finally said. “Your willingness to sacrifice yourself for your friends proves that.

“The torc is in the possession of a pony who calls herself ‘The Great and Powerful’ Trixie,” the star continued, saying the magician’s with a bit of hesitation, as if not quite sure how seriously to take it. Despite her shock at the revelation, Dash could sympathize. “She is west of Canterlot, near the town you call Appleloosa.”

Overhead the stars were slowly reemerging, but as she normally saw them from the ground. A cold wind blew across the plateau as the magic of the roof faded away with the approach of morning. The North Star was barely brighter than normal when it spoke again.

*The sun will rise soon, it whispered, get the torc to Celestia before then, or hide during the daylight. You may be brave and loyal, but she will burn you to a cinder after the dawn.*

Dash didn’t need to be told twice. With a running leap she flung herself off the precipice, gaining speed as she fell to the warmer, thicker air below. With a loud crack her wings snapped open to catch the air, and she sped west like a shooting star.

*Oh, and one more thing,* a faint voice whispered in the back of her mind. *Tell Luna to visit sometime, we have so much to talk about.*

Much indeed. Dash looked forward to her own chat with the princess.

# Chapter 6

## Appleloosa Blues

The nearest rail station was just a few miles from Ponyville. There had been some discussion of adding a feeder line to connect the town to the rail network, but that would have required building dangerously near the Everfree Forest. Most ponies were content to simply walk.

Twilight Sparkle and Applejack stopped in Ponyville long enough to drop off the comatose Luna and explain, to the best of their knowledge, what had happened in Canterlot. It was a lot for the stunned mayor to absorb.

"The entire population of Canterlot is *in the woods?!'*" she shrieked. She was still dressed in her formal saddle and bow for the local Summer Sun Celebration, which had been interrupted by the explosion in the capital.

"Trust me, it's better than stayin' in Canterlot," Applejack said. She and the mayor had retreated to the town hall with the sleeping princess, while Twilight frantically loaded her library into a borrowed wagon, to the earth pony's frustration. When Applejack had told her to pack supplies for the trip, she hadn't meant books.

The older mare took a deep breath. "We don't have enough food or shelter for even a tenth of those ponies here," she said, pouring over a stack of papers on her desk. "Fillydelphia's the closest major city. We can start moving ponies there. The pegasi should be fine; they can fly to Cloudsdale or other cities if they haven't already."

"Can't we just call fer help?"

"Call *who* for help, Applejack?" the mayor said. "The entire government was in Canterlot. The only figure of authority we have left is Luna, and she won't wake up."

They glanced at the sleeping alicorn, who was draped as comfortably as possible over a small couch in the mayor's office. Aside from breathing, she hadn't so much as budged in the past two hours.

"I can send fliers to the nearest cities to explain the situation, but until she wakes up we're going to have to deal with this piecemeal," she continued.



“If you want that train you’d better grab it fast – there’s going to be a lot of ponies looking for a ride soon. Just because Luna said you could take it won’t stop a frightened herd.”

\*\*\*

“Twilight, that’s enough,” Applejack said. The unicorn had somehow managed to load an entire apple wagon with at least a thousand books, and was going back into the library for more.

“Just a few more, AJ!” she shouted from inside the library. “Do you think I’ll need my telescope?”

“I think we need to go! Stop worrin’ about all this!”

“But—”

“Sugar, I’m leaving in five minutes. She’s already two hours ahead of us an’ we have no idea if the tracks will even take us to where she’s headed.”

“Fine!” There was a loud crash inside the library, as though someone had just dropped a pile of books. Applejack thought she could hear Spike protesting within.

Twilight stomped out, her telescope floating in the air behind her. She gave the library a final look, her eyes tight with worry, then turned to Applejack.

“But what if there’s something in one of these books?” she asked. “We might catch her and not know what to do!”

“Then we’ll improvise,” Applejack answered. “It’s an Apple family specialty.”

Less than an hour later the train pulled away from the station. All but one passenger car had been detached, and the conductor ponies had all the incentive in the world to hurry.

They set several local speed records for the line as they drove west, following the faint glow over the horizon.

\*\*\*

The gentle hues of the Pastel Desert, illuminated by the high morning sun, filled the train’s cabin when Trixie finally woke.

For a panic-filled moment she forgot where she was. The rocking, rumbling car was so unlike her room in the keep – her small, comfortable room in the keep – that she shot to her hooves, ready to flee or fight. She sucked in a gasp of air, and then coughed as the heat and dust of the desert scratched her lungs. By the time her coughing fit subsided she remembered how she came to be in the train, and simply felt foolish (and relieved that nopony else had seen her frightened display).

Her old acquaintance, regret, joined her in the empty cabin. The harsh light of morning was never Trixie's friend – all her choices, so wise and meaningful the night before, now seemed distant in their rationale. She felt empty, as she always did after waking in the wrong bed or the wrong town with the consequences of her actions staring her (sometimes literally) in the face.

Outside the desert landscape sped by. She wished it were faster.

She frowned, annoyed by her own maudlin thoughts. It was already daylight, Celestia must be awake, and her illusionary torc had apparently worked. If it hadn't, flights of pegasus guards would have undoubtedly intercepted the train by now and taken her into custody. She appeared to have gotten away with her theft.

Her theft. The thought washed over her like a cold rain, banishing any lingering hints of sleep. She was not a virtuous pony by any account, even her own, but she had never stolen from another pony before last night. Much less a god. Already her brazen decision, not even 12 hours old, was beginning to seem like a mistake.

And yet... the heavy weight in her saddlebags, worn throughout the night, pulled at her mind like iron filings to a magnet. After a quick, nervous check of the cabin to make sure she was still alone, she opened the flap and gazed at the golden treasure within.

It was still there, waiting for her. The rest of the world – the scent and color of the desert, the rattling of the train – seemed to recede, leaving only the torc. It stared back at her from the depths of the saddlebag. A feeling like leaning over a high cliff, about to fall, briefly intruded in her mind.

It called to her. It wanted to be worn.

But for all the foolish things she had done, Trixie was not a fool. Across Equestria ponies would recognize the torc from the ubiquitous images of

Princess Celestia that decorated her realm. While its theft might not be immediately known, there was no telling how long that would last, and at some point wearing the necklace around in broad daylight would be a dangerous invitation to pointed questions or worse.

So she closed the saddlebag, and adjusted its cinches to make sure it fit tight and snug around her body. It would be the height of irony to gamble everything for the lens, and then lose it because her saddlebag wasn't worn correctly.

Appleloosa lay further ahead, waiting for her slow passenger train. The full light of noon baked the platform when the train finally pulled to a halt, and she and the other few passengers disembarked for the arid, desert town.

\*\*\*

Appleloosa was... quaint. Smaller than she expected, with only one real street, which itself was a generous term for the long, straight empty space between the two rows of buildings. Apparently they weren't big on paving stones in the west. Still, the packed dirt was soft on her hooves as she hopped off the platform, and not too hot, either. Real stone would have singed the soles of her hooves after just a few seconds under this sun.

"Pardon me, sir," she called to a fit-looking earth pony stallion with a yellow coat and soft, tussled orange mane. He looked over in surprise, and then trotted up to her, tipping a wide-rimmed felt cowpony hat respectfully.

"Well howdy ma'am," he said, his wide green eyes filled with the humor and goodwill that seemed to be the trademark of earth ponies. "Welcome ta Appleloosa!" He paused, giving her horn and cutie mark a quick glance, and spoke again. "It's mighty nice of ya ta visit us. We don't get many unicorns out here."

She cursed inwardly. Of course they didn't get many unicorns in a frontier town, and she hadn't even bothered to hide her horn or cutie mark. She may as well have just worn a sign with her name on it. Other earth ponies were beginning to give her curious looks as they passed.

"Yes, well, it is their loss I am sure," she said. "I don't suppose you could direct me to an inn or boarding house?"

“Ah can do better’n that!” he said, and reared up in excitement. “Let’s go on the grand tour of our beautiful town! Ah can show you our dancin’ square, our horses drawin’ horse-drawn carriages, our beeeeeeautiful apple orchards, our—”

Trixie interrupted before he could drag her off to the tour. Visions of being introduced to everypony in the town as the blue-unicorn-with-the-magic-wand-cutie-mark swam in her head; it would be faster to just take the next train back to Canterlot and turn herself in.

“That’s quite alright, good sir,” she said. “But I am very tired from the train ride, and simply desire a place to rest for a few hours.” The earth pony slumped in rejection, and she tempered her next words. “Perhaps you can show me the town tomorrow?”

He perked back up, a smile returning to his face. “Well, I reckon that’ll work too,” he said. “We got the finest hotel in all the West just down the street. It’s right above the saloon – if’n ya tell Big Mike that Braeburn sent ya, ya’ll get a newcomer discount!”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Thank you, kind gentlestallion,” she gave him a demure smile, one well-practiced from years of appealing to the better natures of male ponies. To judge by his enthusiastic smile and slightly besotted expression, she hadn’t lost her touch.

The saloon cum hotel was the largest structure on its side of the street, just opposite the slightly larger town hall with its attached bell. A steady trickle of earth ponies, all wearing the mandatory cowpony hat, wandered through its swinging double doors. She made a mental note to get one of those hats as soon as possible. A wide wooden patio ran the length of the building, on which sat or stood a variety of mares and stallions, either chatting amiably or simply watching traffic pass by.

Inside the saloon an apparently drunk stallion was violently abusing an old honky-tonk piano, torturing both it and the ears of the patrons around him. Strangely no one else seemed to mind the out-of-tune cacophony – a few ponies were even banging their glasses on the table in rough time with the ‘music.’ Hoof marks scratched into the veneer atop the piano hinted at the type of dancing the saloon featured after dark.

The part of Trixie that had grown comfortable in Canterlot, surrounded by high culture and the finer things in life, wanted to turn around and leave.

The part of Trixie that had survived months on the road, freezing temperatures and lack of food shoved the other part into a mental box and locked it away for the time being. She let experience take over, and slid through the crowd like a fish through water.

Barely visible in the dim light was the bar itself, a long wooden affair with a polished countertop tended by a small, dapper-looking mare with a cheery yellow mane and a somber expression. She gave Trixie a sidelong glance as the unicorn approached, and continued wiping down the bar.

"I'm looking for Big Mike," Trixie said.

"That's me," the mare answered without pause.

Um. Trixie blinked and actually missed a beat, an unusual occurrence for the skilled showmare. Apparently the barkeep was used to the reaction; she kept wiping the bar, though to Trixie's eye it was already clean enough to eat from.

She recovered quickly. "Braeburn sent me," she said. "He said you might have a room to rent for a day or two."

The yellow mare put the rag below the bar. "Mhm," she started, "I bet he also said I'd give you a discount if you mentioned his name." Trixie bit the inside of her cheek.

"Let me guess," she tried. "Ex-coltfriend?"

Big Mike laughed out loud, a surprisingly musical sound that filled the saloon with transient joy. A few patrons looked up in surprise.

"You're a perceptive one," she said, a smile now on her face. "Or just a lucky guesser. Did he also offer to show you the town?" Trixie nodded.

"Figures," she continued. "Always the first one to greet new fillies. So, what brings a unicorn to these parts?"

"Just passing through," she said truthfully. "I wanted to get away from Canterlot for a bit. You know how it is."

The mare chuckled. "I suppose I do. No one comes out here unless they're getting away from something." She paused and gave Trixie an appraising look. "Anyway, yeah, we have rooms. I suppose I can even give you a discount, being new to town and all. Just don't tell Braeburn."

Trixie smiled. "I'm good at keeping secrets," she said.

\*\*\*

The room was small but cheap. Given her dwindling finances, she didn't care. It was clean and had a soft bed that was calling her name. Although it was only mid-afternoon she was still exhausted from the restless train ride and her preceding adventures in Canterlot.

The door was equipped with an ominously large deadbolt lock, which she dutifully latched. Confident that no one short of Celestia herself could break down the door, she allowed herself to relax for the first time since Luna's party.

She stripped off the saddlebags and hung them, with their precious contents, on the corner bedpost. It felt like a thousand pound weight had been removed from her soul.

The Great and Powerful Trixie howled in her mind, demanding that she seize the torc and don it now, the sooner to discover its secrets. She was already a powerful unicorn – with the lens to focus her magic, she could be the greatest. So powerful that Celestia herself might hesitate to challenge her. Everything she had ever desired – fame, power, acclaim – waited in the saddlebags, whispering to her of urgent needs and heady promises.

But she resisted that voice. There would be time later for the torc – right now she needed rest, and the bed was simply too soft and inviting to ignore.

As she drifted off to sleep images of grandeur floated through her mind, interspaced with quiet memories of an indigo friend.

\*\*\*

The sun was leaning toward the horizon when Trixie woke. A faint headache that was her brain's way of complaining about irregular sleep patterns squeezed the back of her skull in its vice. Tempting as it was to stay slumped atop the soft mattress and pillow, she had wasted enough time already. Time to get up.

She stood and stretched her neck in an unsuccessful attempt to banish the headache. Some food might help, though her finances were growing thin enough that she couldn't afford to splurge on extra meals. Better to grab some hay and wait until morning for a real meal.

But food could wait. There was something she had been putting off for too long.

Her horn glowed with a soft silver light as she opened her saddlebag, levitating the torc into the air before her. It was such a simple ornament – a large mass of gold with a light filigree tracing, designed to hold a hoof-sized amethyst over the heart of its bearer. Inside the jewel she thought she could see the image of a four-pointed star refracting the dim light of the room.

This was the moment of truth. She took a breath and gently lowered the torc over her head until she felt the metal band come to rest around her neck. The cold shock of its contact provoked a slight flinch, but otherwise nothing. No instant-death traps, at least – not that she thought Celestia would use such things.

She felt... well, a little silly, actually. The torc was so large the tip dragged on the ground. It weighed so much that she nearly toppled forward when the levitation spell vanished, and she had to reset her hooves simply to stay upright. Wearing this thing for more than a few minutes at a time wasn't going to be comfortable. Maybe she could wear it like a saddle?

She channeled a tiny bit of magic into her horn, just enough to lighten the weight of the torc, when she felt the metal shift.

For a moment she was too stunned to react as the cold metal suddenly warmed. It crawled over her neck like a writhing snake; the edges bit into her skin as they squeezed, and she felt the sharp rim pressing against her windpipe.

The brief paralysis wore off and she let out a shrill scream before her throat closed in panic. She tried to dig her hooves under the torc before it could close too tightly around her neck, but already the metal was fully against her skin. It seemed to flex with her movements, forming no seam for her desperately prying hooves to exploit. Her heart felt like it was going to explode out of her chest.

The edges of her vision started to turn grey. Sometime tomorrow, after she failed to pay her bill, the somber yellow bar mare with the unusual name would find her lying in this room, strangled to death by a murderous magical artifact. She could only hope nopony else would try to wear the

accursed thing. A loud buzzing noise filled her ears as her brain began to shut down from a lack of oxygen...

And suddenly everything was still. The torc was unmoving against her breast, and the room was silent except for the gasping of her breath. For a long while she simply lay on the floor, panting, while the sun slowly sank into evening.

Eventually she found the courage to move, reaching a shaking hoof up to gently touch the torc. A quiet \*ting\* filled the room, but otherwise there was no reaction. It may as well have been a normal, innocent piece of jewelry that didn't attempt to strangle unsuspecting unicorns.

She stood slowly, her legs trembling as the remaining adrenaline worked its way through her system. There was a mirror on the far wall, she remembered, and she cautiously walked toward it, terrified that every step would set the torc off again. Finally she drew close enough to turn toward the mirror, and beheld herself.

The torc had shrunk to fit her delicate form perfectly. Nearly three-quarters of its mass had simply vanished in the space of a second, a feat that should have been impossible. The heavy golden weight still tugged at her neck, but it no longer threatened to send her toppling over her front hooves.

"It resized itself..." she mused aloud. How considerate of it. She wondered if its makers were sadistic or just clueless as to the trauma their helpful little artifact could cause.

Even in the scratched, tarnished mirror, the torc was a thing of beauty. Granted, anything worn by her was automatically elevated to the level of artwork, but the necklace was sublime on its own merits. For all that it was a simple gold band with a single crystal, it was somehow more elegant and appealing than anything else she had ever worn.

She could have stared at her reflection for hours. She would have stared at her reflection for hours, had not the bell tower across the street chimed out the time; seven loud gongs that heralded the diminishing sun. Outside the streets began to fill as the heat of day began to dissipate, and ponies ventured forth for the evening.

She shook her head to clear it. As much as she admired her own reflection, staring endlessly into a mirror was unusual even for her. Among



its other magical abilities it could apparently enthrall observers. Such a delightful little nightmare it was turning out to be.

There was only one ability she cared about, though, and that was making her more powerful. She took another breath, marshaled her thoughts, and focused on levitating her saddlebags. Best to start small, she figured.

Nothing happened.

Literally, nothing happened. Her horn didn't glow. The saddlebags didn't glow. They certainly didn't lift into the air like they were supposed to. She blinked, stunned, and tried again.

Nothing.

A worm of worry began burrowing in the back of her mind. She gritted her teeth and tried again, this time focusing on the bed with enough magical power to send it flying through the roof.

The whisper of the curtains in the wind was the only movement in the room; her rapid breathing the only sound.

She spun in place and cast the first spell that came to mind – a light-dimming cantrip that should have filled the room with darkness. It remained lit. She tried to summon a flame with her horn, but couldn't produce even a whiff of smoke. Frantic, she jabbed a hoof at the center of the room, attempting to summon a firework that, had it materialized, would have blown half the building's façade off.

It didn't.

*Don't panic*, she thought, feeling a scream welling up her throat. *We just don't understand how the torc works yet. No need to panic.*

She reached up with a hoof to peel off the torc, and yelped in surprise and pain as it caught on the rim. The skin beneath the necklace was stuck to it – not her coat, *her actual skin* had fused to the solid metal. Pulling at the torc was like trying to pull off her own horn, and just as effective. Desperate, she tried to magic it off, remembering too late that her magic was gone.

Now was actually looking like an excellent time to panic. The scream that had been hiding in her chest escaped, though her throat was so tight that only a shrill squeak emerged.

*Oh no no no no no*, her mind stuck in a loop as the realization that her magic wasn't coming back anytime soon crashed into her. She bucked and kicked frantically, her hooves smashing against the walls and floor as she tried to shake the thing off. She even tried to bite it, but her neck wasn't quite flexible enough to reach the band with her mouth. *Nooooo no no no no no no no...*

Desperate times called for desperate measures. She slammed herself against the wall, hoping the impact would jar the torc loose. It didn't. Thoughtlessly, she banged her hoof against the amethyst until it cracked – her hoof, not the crystal. So great was her panic that she was going through her saddlebags for a knife or other sharp object when a sudden loud knock came from the door.

"Hey! It's Big Mike. Is everypony alright in there?" came a muffled voice from the other side of the thick door.

That broke through the fog in her mind. If there was one thing Trixie could always do, it was maintain appearances.

"Yes!" she cried. "Just fine! Nothing wrong in here!"

There was a pause. "We heard some odd sounds," said Big Mike. "Can you open the door?"

Stall! "Not just yet," she said, "I'm..." she trailed off. Sleeping? Eating? Trying to remove a malicious stolen god-artifact? "...getting dressed," she finished lamely.

There was another pause. "So? Open up."

Damn dirt ponies! They had no sense of propriety. She gave the room a quick once-over to make sure there was nothing obviously broken or displaced, and then trotted over to the door. Trying to unlatch the bolt with her mouth rather than her magic was a clumsy and distasteful adventure, but she finally managed to flip the cursed thing and pull the door open.

"Sorry about that," she said to the yellow mare waiting outside the door. Her voice sounded impressively calm in her mind. "Had a little accident with my saddlebags, but everything is alright now!"

Big Mike gave her a dubious look, her teal eyes narrow as she glanced into the room behind the showmare. Finding nothing immediately amiss, she returned her attention to the unicorn.

“I’m not going to regret letting you stay here, am I?” she asked.

Once again her remarkable ability to antagonize ponies wherever she went reared its ugly head. She forced a smile, and spoke in her most reassuring voice. “No, no, you won’t hear another peep out of this room. In fact, I was just about to come down and pay you in advance...” her attempt at mollification stumbled to a clumsy halt as she noticed the mare was no longer paying attention.

The earth pony was staring at the torc with wide, guileless eyes. Her mouth hung slightly open, as if she were about to speak, but no words were forthcoming. From downstairs, ignored by both mares, came the quiet hum of the slowly filling saloon.

Trixie stood still, afraid to break the spell. Big Mike continued her impression of a statue; only the slow rise and fall of her chest gave any hint that she was alive. Trixie got the feeling they would be standing like this for a while, absent any interruptions.

Because she had plans that didn’t involve standing forever in the hallway with this mare, Trixie finally moved. She turned slightly to the side, just enough to angle the amethyst away from the yellow mare’s gaze. Big Mike flinched slightly, then looked sheepishly into Trixie’s eyes.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to stare,” she said. “That’s a beautiful necklace you have, though. Where did you get it?”

“Family heirloom,” she lied easily, a story instantly assembling itself in her mind. “From my mother’s side. It’s the only piece left of an old fortune, before we fell on hard times.”

The mare nodded slowly, her eyes drifting back to the torc. “Well, be careful wearing it around here. It would be a shame if someone tried to steal it.” She gave Trixie a final, more respectful nod, and returned downstairs to the saloon.

*Shameful indeed*, she thought.

\*\*\*

If nothing else, the visit by the bar mare gave Trixie a chance to calm down. The panic she had felt earlier, after trying and failing to remove the torc, still lurked in her mind, but it no longer drove her to foolish lengths.

Still, just because she wasn't panicking didn't mean that everything was suddenly fine. The accursed necklace was still bound to her skin and was still blocking her magic, as a quick attempt to levitate her saddlebags revealed. Flummoxed, she lay down on the bed with her hooves tucked under her, and thought.

She still had some magic – simply being alive proved that. History was filled with stories of ponies who, by accident or disease or spell malfunction, had been entirely stripped of magic. It was invariably fatal; something intrinsic to the nature of all ponies required magic to survive. Without it they withered and died in just a few hours, even supposedly non-magical earth ponies.

That didn't appear to be the case with her, though she would find out for sure in a few hours. No, the torc seemed to block only active spell-casting.

Perhaps it would allow the more subtle arts? She took a deep, calming breath, closed her eyes, and attempted to center herself. When she felt as steady as possible, given the circumstances, she opened her senses to the gentle flows of magic that ran through the world.

Through her still-closed eyes the room gradually resolved as a silver echo of its real form. It lacked the details of reality – the walls were uneven, shifting planes that represented breaks in the free flow of magical energy, rather than actual, physical matter. Through the walls and floor she could see the faint glow of other ponies going about their business.

For years the art had been called Truesight. Later, wiser mages termed it Dreamsight or Silversight, depending on their perspective. There was simply too much dispute over what exactly it revealed. Across the ages, magicians had agreed on only one thing – it was not to be trusted. Unless carefully restrained it showed the viewer what they *wanted* to see, not what they *needed* to see.

Hence its common name: Sirensight.

The first thing Trixie noticed was the glowing silver cord emerging from her chest, right where the torc should have been. The lens was absent for some reason in the Sirensight world, though she could still feel its weight around her neck.

The cord pulsed in time with her heartbeat. It rose from her body, weightless, toward the center of the room, where it dipped and vanished

into a large stone well. She knew without opening her eyes that the well did not really exist. Like the cord it was simply a metaphor for something she already knew. Sirensight had no ability to reveal new information to the user. It could not, for instance, look into a sealed box, unless the pony using it already knew what was inside. Or what they wanted to be inside.

She stood from the bed with extreme care. Moving while using Sirensight was *exceedingly* dangerous – it often neglected to show important things like doors, cliffs or traffic. More than one unicorn artist had tried to live entirely through Sirensight; they usually abandoned the experiment after their first major injury.

Still, she was confident she could cross the room safely. With slow, careful steps she walked toward the well. The cord moved with her; it swayed slightly in the air, as though waving in an unseen breeze, but its two ends never left her heart or the well.

She drew close enough to touch the well, and peered over its edge. The cord descended down the hole for what seemed like hundreds of feet before its gentle glow became too dim to see by.

Curious, she attempted a simple spell to summon sparks from her horn. No sparks appeared, but the cord pulsed with a brilliant silver light that flowed down its length into the depths of the well. She tried another, more powerful, spell that resulted in a similar but brighter glow from the cord.

Hm. She opened her eyes and the cord vanished along with the well. The torc was back around her chest, its heavy weight pressing just above her heart. She returned to the bed, lost in thought.

Outside her window the sun touched the horizon. The longest day of the year came to an end.

\*\*\*

Luna dreamed of the moon.

She could feel it rising as she slumbered. The heavy weight of the sun diminished as the world rotated away from its star. Her namesake called to her; even below the horizon she heard its gentle song. It sang of the night and love and stars. It sang her name, and she woke.

Dozens of ponies in various states of hysteria filled the mayor's office. Piles of paper were haphazardly collected in any open space that would fit

them. Loud voices vied for supremacy as officials, farmers, refugees and townsponies argued over a hundred different problems.

At the center of the storm, behind her desk, sat the mayor of Ponyville. Despite the chaos around her she retained a remarkable poise, and calmly issued orders and verdicts on the issues before her. After spending a year witnessing the pomp and circumstance that surrounded every minor decision in Canterlot, it was refreshing to see such straightforward decision making. Luna only wished the circumstances could have been happier.

The cacophony died as she stood, every pony in the room trailing into silence as they turned to their monarch. Just as suddenly the noise returned tenfold. Finally the mayor shouted the crowd into submission and herded them into the hallway, leaving her alone with the princess.

"Thank Celestia you're awake," she said, finally shoving the door shut despite the ponies in its path. "It's been chaos here ever since you showed up in the woods."

"How are the others?" Luna asked. "We had most of Canterlot with us."

"We're building corrals as fast as we can. By tomorrow we should have enough space for everyone, but quite a few are heading back to Canterlot."

Luna winced. "Is there anything left to return to?"

The mayor riffled through some papers on her desk, eventually pulling a weather patrol report from a large stack. "About half the city is gone, mostly the parts close to the mountain," she said. "Fortunately the fires couldn't spread very far, due to the stone construction. But it's just not safe to return yet; the mountain is still on fire, and the weather teams say it will be days before they can get close to the keep."

Luna trotted to the north window. Through it she could see the Saddleback Mountains in the distance. A steady stream of smoke rose from the nearest peak, wider but more diffuse than the one she had seen in the morning.

"And my sister?"

"No word, your majesty. Twilight and Applejack left this morning for Appleloosa, but we haven't heard anything from them."

She did some quick math in her head. "They should be almost there by now."

"Assuming they don't stop," the mayor said. "Your majesty, what should we do? I've been trying to manage this as best I can, but this is well outside my scope of authority."

The princess glanced around the room and the hastily organized plans. Outside she heard discussions continuing in the hallway, as ponies attempted to pick up the pieces of the disaster.

"You're doing very well, mayor," she finally said. "And I need you to keep doing this. I have to go after her."

"But... your majesty, I don't have the authority to do even half of what I've been doing! Everypony could ignore me if they wanted to!"

That was an easy fix. Luna trotted over to the door and opened it. The hallway suddenly grew silent.

"Excuse me a moment," she said. "Until further notice the mayor is acting in my and my sister's stead. Please serve her as you would serve me." Before anypony could argue she closed the door, and turned back to the stunned mare.

"There," she said. "That should suffice for a few days at least, until the aristocrats get back on their hooves. I'd suggest letting them take over recovery efforts in the city once they do, if only to keep them busy."

"B-but..."

"Just act like you know what you're doing," Luna advised. "That's Celestia's secret, and it seems to work for her. Now, if you'll excuse me I'm afraid I have some catching up to do."

Before the mayor could protest further the alicorn walked out onto the balcony and took to the air. She flew toward the setting sun with speed that would have made Rainbow Dash proud.

\*\*\*

More than 14 hours after leaving Ponyville to chase down their errant princess, Twilight Sparkle finally found a moment to rest.

The dry desert air cooled rapidly following the sunset. Devoid of clouds, the ground radiated its heat into space at a surprising rate. Desert rats, snakes and hares emerged from their daytime burrows to forage. Nighthawks flew overhead, darting and weaving as they caught insects attracted to the light of the fires.

Twilight noticed none of this. She sat near the edge of the molten pool of rock entombing the silent alicorn. For nearly two hours she slowly crept closer and closer to the fallen princess as the ground cooled and grew dark. By the time the moon reached its zenith she could nearly reach Celestia, though the furnace-like heat of the stone around her mentor eventually forced her to retreat.

She attempted to lift the lava away from the princess with her magic, but it was like trying to carry water with a net. The molten rock splashed around briefly as she stirred it, then flowed back into the crater. She briefly considered attempting to teleport the lava away, before pondering all the possible ways that could backfire. Instead she elected to wait. And talk.

"I don't know if you can hear me, princess," she said, "but if you can, I want you to know that we're going to fix this."

The wind shifted, blowing smoke and cinders from a nearby fire into her face. Coughing, she circled around the glowing pool to a spot of clear air, and resumed her vigil.

"Applejack's gone for help, and soon we'll have an entire town of earth ponies aiding us," she continued. "We'll get you out of there and back to Canter..." she trailed off. "Yes, back to Canterlot. We'll fix the castle--" her voice caught, images of the searing fireball that consumed the palace flashing in her head.

"A-and everything will go back to the way it was." She smiled hopefully at the unmoving goddess. Tears left faint clean runnels in the dirt and ash coating her face.

More time passed, and the circle of solid rock grew tighter around Celestia. Only a thin rim of molten stone still surrounded her when the moon began its descent from the heights of the sky.

Twilight stood and carefully moved forward, testing each step before letting her weight rest on it. Even though it was firm, the stone was brittle



and sharp beneath her hooves, closer to pumice than solid rock. She reached out a hoof, and hesitantly touched it to the tip of Celestia's horn.

It felt cool. Whatever residual heat it held had long since bled away into the night air.

Buoyed, she pressed her hoof against the princess's forehead. It was warmer, but nowhere near as hot as the rock she was stuck in. If they could get her out of the ground it would be—

The stone beneath her other leg snapped and sank several inches. Bright yellow light shone on her lavender coat as fresh lava seeped up the cracks and washed over the tip of her hoof.

Panic preceded pain. She jerked back reflexively, sending tiny droplets of lava into the air, and shrieked as her chest convulsed involuntarily. A bolt of horrible, numbing agony shot up her leg as the edge of her hoof flickered with flame. Memories of falling into a firepit, forgotten for nearly a decade, flooded her brain before the searing pain dragged her back into the present.

Fortunately, the pain only lasted a moment. The exhaustion that had stalked her for hours pounced, and a brief feeling of light-headedness was the only warning she had before the world tilted around her, and she collapsed.

She was still lying on the warm stone when Applejack returned, less than an hour later.

\*\*\*

Trixie was not a happy pony.

After her brief experiment with Sirensight she made a mental list of every spell she knew. Most unicorns would have trouble drafting such a list in their heads, but it was an old exercise for Trixie. Just one more way for her to keep score.

She went down the list, attempting every spell in turn. Not a single one worked. She may as well have been an earth pony.

Whatever else the torc was, it was thorough. She tried sticking her hoof under the rim again, and winced as it stretched the skin painfully. Nothing she tried loosened its grip on her chest – if anything, it seemed to dig

deeper. Every beat of her heart was echoed in the faint trembling of light reflecting from the amethyst crystal.

She pulled an old serving cloak from her saddlebags – one of a few souvenirs of her time in the kitchens – and draped it over her shoulders. It didn't completely hide the torc, but concealed enough to not draw too much attention. The last thing she needed was a crowd of enthralled ponies following her around.

The saloon was moderately crowded when she made her way downstairs, filled with a mix of mares and stallions drinking away their earnings and their cares. A different pony was at the piano, though he apparently also confused it with a drum. Big Mike was nowhere to be seen.

She ignored the music and grabbed a bag of oats from the bar, passing a few bits to a large copper stallion with a wheat sprig cutie mark. He thanked her with the annoying smile earth ponies seemed to be born with.

More ponies trickled in as the night wore on. She finished the oats and was working on a mild ale when a loud commotion outside broke through the clamor of the piano. A large crowd appeared to be gathering in the street.

Curious, she got to her hooves and pushed her way outside. Ahead she heard excited shouting, followed by a small stampede as dozens of ponies charged down the street toward the rail station.

"What's going on?" she asked a stallion leaning on the saloon railing. He seemed a little too old to be involved in the excitement around them.

"Young filly just ran in," he said, pointing his hoof toward the crowd. "Said Celestia's just outside of town..."

Whatever else he might have said was lost. Sounds fell away from the world as his words sank in, replaced by a loud ringing noise. A grey tunnel appeared around the edges of her vision.

Celestia. Here.

How did she know? It didn't matter. Trixie was doomed. She briefly considered going back up to her room and flinging herself out the window, and then discarded the idea. Her room was only on the second floor.

There was no way out of town, no trains scheduled to leave until morning. Half the ponies in Appleloosa knew of the blue unicorn staying at the inn.

“When does she arrive?” she managed to ask. Her voice sounded distant, as though she were listening to someone else talk.

The stallion shrugged. “No clue,” he said. “The filly spoke to the mayor for a bit, and they all ran off to the train station.” He took a sip from a bottle of sarsaparilla. “Ah wonder what she came for.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough,” Trixie said. For once she was being perfectly honest.

# Chapter 7

## Flight

"I told you, I'm fine!"

Applejack gave Twilight Sparkle a dubious look. The lavender pony's coat was beaded with sweat despite the cool night wind. She gulped down rapid, shallow breaths of air, and even from several feet away Applejack could hear the wheezing in her lungs.

"Sugar, don' take this wrong, but you look like yer about ta fall over," Applejack said. She paused, and added, "Again."

"I was just resting!" Twilight protested. Even to her ears it sounded weak. "I can still help!"

Applejack shook her head. Around them dozens of earth ponies hauled wood beams and tools from the train to a small staging area a few dozen yards from Celestia's unmoving form. Under the direction of a pair of engineer ponies a large wood gantry was slowly taking shape over the molten crater. Four massive beams set several pony-lengths apart supported a wood scaffold high above the ground. A system of pulleys and ropes hung from the center of the structure, dangling just a few feet above the princess. Other ponies, wearing thick leather aprons and face masks, chipped and dug at the soft stone at the edges of the crater, creating channels for the still-liquid rock hiding beneath the surface to flow away.

In the space of less than an hour the ponies of Appleloosa had set up a makeshift camp and were well on their way to unearthing the fallen alicorn. If Twilight hadn't spent the past year living in an earth pony town, she would have been stunned by their industriousness. Instead she was merely impressed.

She was also hurting badly. A bare spoonful of lava had washed over the rim of her hoof, but it had been enough to burn the nail-like tissue through to the pulp. A sky blue mare with a stethoscope cutie mark had shaved off the most badly damaged portions, and placed a plaster cast around her fetlock. Tiny black spots speckled her coat where drops of molten stone

had splashed and eaten into her skin. The scars would likely be permanent, the mare said.

“You can help by listenin’ to the nurse and gettin’ some rest,” Applejack said. “They’ll have the princess dug out of there in a few hours, tops, an’ then we’ll need you ta figure out what’s wrong with her.”

An amber stallion trotted past the two, a thick coil of rope held in his mouth. He set it next to a pile of other rigging equipment being readied for the eventual hoist, and walked over to the two mares. Like most of the earth ponies around them he had an apple-themed cutie mark. It was hard to tell, given her somewhat delirious mental state, but Twilight thought he looked vaguely familiar.

“Cousin Applejack,” he said, nodding to the mare.

She returned the nod. “Cousin Braeburn. Again, ah can’t say thanks enough for all the help ya’ll are providin’.”

“Well shoot, it was a boring night anyway,” he said. His bright green eyes slid over to Twilight, darting from her haggard expression to the charred pits in her coat, down to her hoof cast, and finally back to Applejack.

“How’s your friend? Anything we can do?” he asked Applejack. Twilight opened her mouth, ready to protest.

“Ah think she’ll be fine, once she gits some rest,” Applejack said before Twilight could speak. “Speakin’ of which, any chance we can git a room in town?”

“You two know I can hear you, right?” Twilight asked. She glared back and forth between the two ponies, of whom only Braeburn had the decency to look abashed. Applejack just rolled her eyes.

“Sug, if you’re not gonna take care of yourself, then other ponies are gonna have to do it for ya,” she said. “We’ve both been goin’ almost two days straight now. If you try helpin’ any more you’re just gonna get hurt again. Then what am I supposed to tell Celestia when she wakes up?”

Twilight blinked. That was perhaps the longest speech Applejack had ever delivered in their year-plus of friendship. She tried to formulate a response, but her tongue refused to cooperate. Her eyes watered – from the harsh fumes rising from the molten stone just yards away, she told

herself – and she sat back on her haunches, lowering her head so the two earth ponies would not see her distress.

Applejack sighed and gently nudged the stallion. He took the hint, gave her a friendly nuzzle, and retreated back to the laboring herd surrounding Celestia. Distant voices welcomed his return and shouted new directions as their work continued. Alone again with her friend, Applejack sat next to the unicorn, and watched the recovery effort in silence.

“I just w-want t-to help her,” Twilight said, her voice stumbling as she gulped in air. “I’m u-useless,” she finished with a hiccup that shook her body.

Applejack draped a foreleg over the trembling pony, drawing her closer. In the yellow light of the fires and lanterns brought by the townsponties her orange coat appeared nearly white, almost ghostlike in the darkness. She sat with the unicorn until the hiccups and shivering stopped.

“Sug,” she whispered, her warm breath rustling Twilight’s mane. “No one thinks you’re useless. Yer as strong as Big Mac, as loyal as Rainbow Dash, and smarter than anypony I’ve ever met. But you don’t have ta do everythin’ yerself.”

Twilight was silent for a while. The wind shifted to the west, and a draft of fresh, cool air replaced the harsh sulfur tang of the fires. Above them the gentle moon broke through the pall of smoke for the first time that night, bathing them in a faint silver glow infinitely cooler than the hellish glare of the lava.

“Really?” she finally asked. Her voice was quiet, full of equal parts hope and fear.

“Really,” Applejack replied. She hugged the unicorn tighter.

Around them the camp continued to bustle. More ponies arrived on a second train, bringing with them additional lumber and heavier tools, as well as camp supplies like tents, water and food. Applejack watched with an approving eye as they hopped from the cars and leapt into action.

The weight against her side slowly grew heavier. When she finally dared a glance at her friend, Twilight’s eyes were closed and her mouth open, allowing a slight trail of drool to escape.

Applejack smiled and gently lowered the unicorn to the ground. The lavender pony mumbled something unintelligible before drifting back off to sleep. For the first time since the day began, Twilight knew something like peace.

\*\*\*

Trixie's mood had improved somewhat over the past few hours. The numerous empty cider glasses on the bar in front of her may have been responsible.

Big Mike was back, collecting glasses from the empty tables and carrying them into the kitchen. Aside from Trixie she was the only pony left in the saloon.

"Hey," Trixie called, her voice slurred despite her best attempts to sound sober. "Where'd everypony go?"

The bright yellow mare snagged the last empty glass from a table near the door and carried it with her behind the bar. She dropped it in the sink with its brothers before turning to Trixie.

"Home, I guess," she said. "Or out to see Celestia. That sounded pretty exciting." She grabbed a fresh towel with her mouth and dropped it on the bar.

Trixie snorted. Or she tried to, at least – what emerged was more of a choking sound accompanied by a toss of her head that would have appeared elegant, were she on stage and not drunk. Big Mike glanced at her in concern, then returned to wiping down the bar.

"S'not exciting yet," she mumbled. "Wait 'til she finds me tomorrow! That'll be exciting."

"Oh? She came all the way out here, just for you?"

Trixie nodded. Big Mike just rolled her eyes and returned to her wiping.

Drinking with just hooves and mouth was harder than it looked, Trixie decided. The first cider of the night had been an adventure – subsequent glasses had been met with more success, until she could drink most of one without spilling any down her chin. It was progress. Humiliating progress, to be sure, but still progress.

For the hundredth time that night she tried her magic. The glass of cider on the bar refused to budge. She groaned and laid her head on her crossed hooves.

"I think that's enough for tonight," Big Mike said. She snagged the glass with cruel ease and pulled it behind the bar before Trixie's flailing hooves could catch it.

"Trixie really needs that drink," she pleaded. Big Mike was unmoved.

"I'll pay extra!" She pulled out her last bits and shoved them across the counter. She wouldn't need them in the morning, after all.

The barmare pushed them back with her snout, and returned to wiping down the polished wood surface. Trixie cursed under her breath.

From outside the faint sound of hoofbeats intruded. More ponies rushing to meet the princess, Trixie figured. After they passed, the stillness of the bar returned, broken only by the steady wiping motion of the cleaning bartender.

"Is it always this empty in here?" Trixie asked. Big Mike shook her head.

"No, we closed two hours ago."

Oh. That would explain why the chairs were on top of the tables rather than beneath them. Trixie pondered that with muddled thoughts before turning back to the other mare.

"So why are you still serving Trixie?" She had long since given up on hiding her real name. Something as simple as a pseudonym wasn't going to save her from Celestia, particularly when the evidence of her theft was glued to her chest.

Big Mike shrugged. "You looked like you needed it. Besides, when else am I going to get to see a drunk unicorn?"

"Unicorn!" Trixie cried. Even drunk and about to be stepped on by an angry god she couldn't help but infuse her words with the melodrama of the stage. "I don't deserve the name!" Tiny flecks of cider flew from her lips onto the bar, prompting a frown from the other mare.

"Are all unicorns like you?" Big Mike asked. She put down the rag and seemed genuinely interested in the response.



Trixie waved a hoof dismissively. "They should be so lucky!" She stumbled away from the bar and attempted to strike a pose, one leg extended dramatically into the air. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is the greatest and most powerful Trixie!" She paused. That hadn't sounded right. "Unicorn!" she corrected.

"But you just said you didn't deserve—"

"I know!" she wailed, and broke down sobbing.

It was long night for Trixie.

\*\*\*

The landscape below her was a uniform blur as Luna flew west. Individual trees and hills appeared on the horizon and were behind her faster than she could blink. Larger landmarks like rivers spooled out beneath her like spilled thread, visible only as silver reflections of the moon high above.

No normal pegasus could have reached such speeds, though Rainbow Dash might have put in a respectable showing if they were to race. It wouldn't have been a fair contest, of course; Luna cheated, using her magic to propel her faster than mere wings ever could.

The terrain changed as she flew, slowly shifting from the stately forests surrounding Canterlot to a mix of fields and woods, then to grassy plains broken only by the occasional tree. By the time larger mountains began to appear the endless grasses gave way to the scrub brush of the desert.

The only unchanging element was the scar Celestia carved in the world. A black scar hundreds of yards wide arrowed its way to the west. Tiny fires still burned around the edges, particularly in the grasslands, and filled the air with reeking ash.

Luna banked around the larger towers of smoke, unworried about losing track of her sister. Even if she were blind she could have followed the path of destruction with her nose.

Eventually the scrub gave way to the gentle hues of the Pastel desert. The streaks of color were visible to her eyes even in the monochrome of night – darkness had never been a barrier to her sight. The stars overhead were a thousand searchlights lighting her way.

The rose tint of morning was creeping into the sky behind her when she found the end of the scorched trail on the side of a large mountain, nearly a hundred miles inside the desert. An irregular, broken ring of fire hundreds of feet across circled a brightly lit camp, around which she could barely make out the tiny shapes of ponies working on some sort of scaffolding. At the very center, surrounded by a pool of glowing stone...

Luna's eyes widened. Her wings doubled their effort, and she fell like a shooting star down to her sister.

\*\*\*

Twilight Sparkle slept uneasily.

The trials of the day haunted her dreams. She watched in horror, again and again, as Canterlot died in a wash of flames. The stately marble buildings of her home became the city's pyre, the pall of smoke its funeral shroud. The sun set forever, surrendering the world to a night without moon or stars. Only the loveless, ravenous fires remained.

She stirred in her sleep. Her eyes cracked open for a moment before she fell back into unconsciousness and dreams.

She chased a tiny, floating star through a maze of shattered buildings. Crumbling, derelict ruins rose on either side, squeezing her within narrow streets that twisted and turned without design. The flickering light darted into an alley, and when she followed she found it hovering in a city square not unlike those of Canterlot. As she approached the ruins collapsed into dust, revealing a barren, desert wasteland stretching for miles around.

The dream shifted again, and she stood on a tiny island of stone, surrounded by a field of lava. The molten rock bubbled as it slowly rose, eating away at the island until nothing remained but the ground beneath her hooves. She lifted one hoof, then another, and finally attempted to balance on a single leg. Her outstretched hooves reached for the silent stars as though begging them for aid. The lava rose again and...

A strangled scream escaped her throat as she fully woke. Her hoof throbbed beneath its cast in time with her pulse, like some inconsiderate pony was stomping on it several times a second. Sweat drenched her coat despite the chill of the desert night, and she started to shiver again as the memories of fire and lava fled.

Applejack was at her side a moment later. The orange pony wrapped her arms around Twilight in a gentle hug, and held her until the worst of the shaking passed.

“Easy sug,” she whispered. “Was just a dream.”

Twilight drew a trembling breath. “But it wasn’t,” she said. “Canterlot is gone, Celestia is...” she trailed off, looking at the fallen princess.

“Celestia is fine,” Applejack said, her voice filled with its usual confidence. “We’re all gonna be fine.”

Twilight didn’t answer. It wasn’t polite to call a friend a liar. Still, she didn’t object to the earth pony’s comforting presence beside her. Together they watched as the herd of ponies readied for the difficult job of cracking the stone around Celestia and lifting her from the earth.

“They’re almost ready,” Applejack said. “Once the sun’s up they’ll start usin’ the heavier tools and tackle to get her outta there. With any luck we’ll be in Appleloosa by noon.”

That seemed optimistic to Twilight. She was about to say so when a faint whistling sound filled the desert air, like wind rushing through a mountain gorge.

“Do you hear—” she started to ask.

A dark streak fell from the skies, impacting with a titanic crash that shattered rock and shook the earth for hundreds of yards around. Ponies shouted in alarm and fell to their knees; the wooden gantry swayed ominously, but the ropes and anchors securing it held against the violent quaking. The thin crust of hot stone surrounding Celestia cracked and flowed, the dark rock broken by fissures glowing with an evil yellow light.

“TIA! SISTER!” a frantic, feminine voice thundered from within the cloud of dust that surrounded the impact site. The crack of hooves against rock and the rumble of tumbling stones followed, and a moment later Luna’s dark form emerged, scrambling toward the molten pit.

The regal princess of the moon was gone. To Twilight’s eyes Luna more closely resembled the Nightmare of old: her wings, fully extended, nearly doubled her size; her horn, wicked and sharp, glinted in the light of the fires. In the darkness she was a monster, a colossal raven fallen from the ancient night.

The impression lasted only a moment. The alicorn half-ran, half-crawled across the broken ground to her sister. She splashed through the lava like it was water, eliciting horrified shouts from the watching ponies.

“TIA!” She grabbed the white alicorn around the neck and tried to lift her from the stone, but only succeeded in pulling herself deeper. She snarled at the impudent lava and stomped at it with her hooves, sending droplets of the stone flying.

Twilight recovered first. Even as the other ponies scrambled back in fear she ran to the edge of the pit, ignoring the spray of lava.

“Luna!” she shouted. “Luna! Stop!”

The princess spun to face the unicorn, her eyes wide and shining in the baleful light. Her form shimmered in the heat rising from the lava now broken and exposed again to the cool desert air.

“Twilight?” the princess ventured. The thin, superheated air distorted her voice, making it sound childlike to Twilight’s ears.

Twilight nodded. “We’re trying to help her, like you asked.” She raised a hoof and beckoned the princess. “Please come out of there, you’re scaring us.”

Luna looked down, and then around, as if noticing for the first time that she was knee deep in molten stone. She gave her sister a quick glance, but nevertheless turned back to Twilight and slowly waded out of the pool. Droplets of lava ran from her pelt in thin streams as she emerged, or hardened in place and broke off with a faint clatter that reminded Twilight of wind chimes. Although her coat was unmarred by the heat, the metal shoes she wore glowed a bright orange against the dark ground, and only slowly cooled to their normal bluish-silver.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She turned back toward her sister. “I just... forgot myself for a moment. Was she like this since you found her?”

Twilight shook her head. “She was still flying when we caught her. As soon as the sun set she fell. We’ve been trying to get her out ever since.”

Applejack walked up beside her friend. She started to approach the princess, but shied away from the residual heat radiating from Luna’s body.

“We’ll have heavier tools here by mornin’,” she said. Once they’re in place we cin drain the lava and git her hoisted outta there.”

Luna stared at the pony, then turned to survey the camp, noticing for the first time the huge gantry suspended over Celestia’s still form. The other ponies slowly resumed their tasks, occasionally casting wary glances in her direction.

“This is impressive,” she finally said. “Celestia would be very proud of what you two have accomplished.”

Twilight winced. Applejack coughed politely.

“You should thank the town, yer majesty,” she said. “They did most of the work.”

*And I did nothing*, Twilight thought. She gave the princess a subdued bow, and returned to her silent vigil at the edge of the pool. The sky to the east slowly grew lighter.

\*\*\*

Celestia’s dreams were troubled.

She did not have nightmares, per se. She *could not* have nightmares; her absence defined the night, and it held no power over her. But she could know loss, and bereavement, and it was those two hollow emotions that plagued her sleep.

Fragments of memories long buried teased at her mind. Images from before she was a princess, before the stars gifted her with the torc and the new life it brought.

The memories played in her mind, appearing and dissolving before she could fully grasp them. Slowly they began to fade, replaced with the unusual sensation of being trapped in a warm embrace. She was surrounded by some incredibly hot material, which itself brought back memories of the time before.

Finally her thoughts cleared, and she opened her eyes to the dwindling darkness of the desert at dawn.

\*\*\*

“Twi... twilight?”

The faint sound of her name broke through Twilight Sparkle's moping. She looked up, expecting to see Applejack or Luna returning to cheer her up, but they were both occupied with the rescue effort. They were helping – actually making a difference. Unlike her.

She turned back to the pool when she heard her name again. From within the pool.

Celestia's eyes were open but unfocused. Her head twisted slightly in the lava, though the stone had cooled to the point that it was nearly solid at the surface, and held her in place.

"Twilight?" she tried again. Her free wing fluttered weakly as she tried unconsciously to fly out of the entrapping earth.

"Princess?" Twilight said, stunned. "Princess! CELESTIA!" The other ponies turned toward her in alarm.

"Applejack!" She spun in place, looking for her friend. "She's awake, Applejack! She's awake!"

Luna beat the earth pony to Twilight's side by a wide margin. She hesitated only for a moment before stepping onto the thin crust atop the lava, using her wings to support most of her weight as she walked out to her sister. She lowered her head to press against Celestia's neck and said something, though Twilight was too far to hear her words. After a moment she pulled herself together and straightened, and spoke loud enough for the gathering ponies to hear.

"This trial is over, sister. Just rest and we'll have you out of there shortly."

Celestia's mouth opened, though no sound emerged. Twilight leaned as far forward as she dared over the hot crust.

"It's okay, take your time," Luna said, encouragingly. "We're here to help. We're all here to help."

Celestia shook her head slightly. Luna's brow furrowed.

"We are," she said, louder. "We're going to get you back to Canterlot and everything will be fine. Please believe me."

The white alicorn's eyes were wide, the whites showing fully around her pinprick pupils. She tried again, and finally managed to speak.

“Run,” she whispered.

Luna stumbled back, her hooves breaking through the thin crust atop the lava. She stared at her sister in shock.

“What? No, we’re here to help!” she said. “We’re going home, sister. Please just wait.”

Twilight looked between the two princesses. Her joyous thoughts had come to a crashing halt. The other ponies murmured in confusion.

“What’d she say?” Applejack asked.

“She said...” Twilight started, then trailed off. She looked at the princess, then the slowly lightening sky to the east. Her thoughts flashed back to 24 hours earlier, during the Summer Sun Celebration, when Celestia attempted to begin the day.

Dawn was less than an hour away.

“Oh no,” she mumbled. Hundreds of ponies pressed closer, trying to get a view of their princess. Luna was shouting at her sister again, trying to make sense of her whispered warning.

“Applejack, we need to get out of here!” She pushed her way to back to the front of the crowd. “Luna! Luna we need to run!”

Luna tossed her an annoyed glance. “Calm down, Twilight, she’s just confused. We’ll keep digging and—”

“No!” Twilight interrupted. “The sun is rising! It’s like Canterlot!”

Luna blinked at her, and turned to her struggling sister. She stared for a moment, then tilted her head to the east and the rising glow of dawn. A moment later she spun back to face Twilight, understanding and panic written on her face.

“How do we—” she started.

“The train,” Twilight blurted. “If we leave everything behind there should be space for everypony. Applejack, can you--”

“On it, sug,” Applejack interrupted her in turn. The nearest ponies were already spreading the word and rushing to the train. There were a few protests from the engineer ponies, but they were quickly overridden as the

others reminded them of what happened to Canterlot. Within minutes the entire camp had been abandoned, except for Twilight and the two princesses. A steady trail of ponies led to the train, which was already being emptied of extra cargo and hitched to the conductors.

“Luna, you need to come too,” Twilight said. She edged closer to the molten pit. Faint shimmers of heat were beginning to rise from Celestia’s exposed head and wing. “We don’t have long.”

“I’ll be fine, Twilight.”

“Princess, you saw what happened to Canterlot. We need to leave now.”

“I said I’ll be fine,” Luna growled. She mantled her wings. “I can fly.”

“I know, princess. But how long can you stay awake?”

Luna stared at her sister in silence for a long moment, then at the brightening sky to the east. Finally she sighed.

“Very well. Let’s go.”

Several minutes later they were the last two to reach the train. It was crowded, with just two passenger cars for several dozen ponies, but they made room without complaint. Twilight found Applejack near the rear of the train, where the conductor ponies were settling into their harnesses.

“Why are they behind the train?” she asked. “Do they need to push for some reason?”

Applejack gave her an odd look. “You don’t push trains, sugar,” she said. “They’re gonna pull us east, so we’re outta Celestia’s way if she keeps moving west.”

Twilight thought about that for a moment. It was logical and smart, so it should have been no surprise that the earth ponies would make that decision, but something nagged at her mind.

“Isn’t Appleloosa to the west?” she asked. The ponies around her suddenly grew silent. Applejack went pale beneath her coat.

“Oh hay,” she mumbled. She muscled her way to the edge of the car and shouted down at the conductors. “Braeburn! Change of plans! We’re going west! And step on it!”



\*\*\*

Trixie woke up, to her mild surprise, on her bed in the saloon.

She had half expected to wake up in a dungeon, or in chains in a paddy wagon heading back to Canterlot. And that was if she was lucky – Celestia might simply decide that swiftness is its own virtue, and rip the torc from her chest in a gory display of justice.

She reached a hoof up to her breast to touch the torc. Still there. She tried her magic. Still not there.

The sky outside her window was dim, though the faint tint of dawn could be seen in the east. Loud voices, the same that had woken her, drifted up from the street. Apparently ponies got to work early in Appleloosa.

She got up and trotted to the window long enough to close the shutters. She was halfway back to her bed when a frantic knocking of hooves came from her door.

She had known this was coming. Ever since last night, when they told her Celestia was near, she knew it was only a matter of time. The knocking repeated.

"I'm coming," she called. "I give up." She threw the latch and opened the door, ready to surrender to the guards on the other side.

Big Mike stood alone in the hallway. She gave the showmare an odd look.

"That's... great," she said. "But we need to go. The mayor's ordered an evacuation."

"Huh?" Trixie replied. It was not her best moment.

"Something went wrong with Celestia. I don't have all the details but apparently she's crazy and now we need to get out of here."

"...huh?"

The small mare sighed. "Look, just grab your stuff and meet me downstairs. The last train leaves in ten minutes." She turned and trotted down the stairs, muttering something beneath her breath. Trixie only caught the word "unicorns."

Trixie stood, rooted to the floor, for a full minute. All the possible meanings and implications of Big Mike's message and the evacuation ran through her head. Another shout from downstairs finally kicked her into motion. She grabbed her saddlebags and cloak, wrapping the latter around her chest and head to hide her torc and horn. It wasn't a perfect disguise, or even a good one, but with any luck it would keep casual observers from realizing she wasn't an earth pony.

Big Mike was waiting for her when she reached the stairs, and together they trotted out into the gloom of the desert morning. Only a few ponies were left, readying saddlebags with personal treasures and other belongings for the evacuation. Judging by the piles of household goods in the street, there wasn't much room in the trains for anything but ponies and what they could carry.

"Come on, they'll be waiting for us," Big Mike said. They walked briskly down the empty streets to the last train, a simple affair with five passenger cars, the first four of which were already full. The head of the train was a bustle of activity, all of it centered on an unusually tall pegasus with a horn.

Trixie stumbled as her legs locked up. Big Mike stopped a few paces ahead, looking back at her in concern.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing, just tired," she lied. The two trotted the rest of the way to the train, while Trixie studiously avoided looking toward the indigo alicorn directing the evacuation effort. They were given seats in the final car, which was only half full, just minutes before the last ponies in Appleloosa boarded.

The train pulled away from the town with surprising speed. Apparently they were in a hurry. Trixie said so to an older brown stallion standing next to her.

"Ayup," he responded. "If you'd seen what we did out there with Celestia, you'd be running too."

"I beg your pardon?" Trixie said. She and Big Mike sidled closer to the stallion. The town receded in the distance behind them, lit from behind by the gentle glow of the rising sun.

He sighed. “Well, I don’t know how much of this is true, but...” he started, and launched into a description of the desert encampment.

For perhaps the first time in her life, Trixie knew true fear.

\*\*\*

After the other ponies left, Celestia had a few minutes to herself.

On the one hoof, she was glad her sister and Twilight fled so rapidly. Their chances of escape were better if they left right away, rather than lingering out of some false hope that her warning was a mistake. Thousands of years of life as the ruler of Equestria had taught Celestia a certain pragmatism and acceptance of life’s trials, but she couldn’t bear the thought of being responsible for hurting her beloved student.

On the other hoof, they had abandoned her rather quickly, and now she was alone. She couldn’t be upset with them – she’d demanded it, after all. It would be rather petty of her to expect somepony to stay and provide her with company, only to be incinerated a few minutes later. But still, it would have been nice to have somepony to talk to.

She realized she wasn’t thinking straight. The rays of the sun, refracted though they were through the atmosphere, were already interfering with her thoughts. She could hear it singing to her from below the horizon, now just minutes from rising. Soon she would be alive again.

The torc called to her. It was close now, just a dozen or so miles away. A few minutes of flying and it would be hers; she could be whole. This nightmare would become a thing of the past.

The sky to the east caught fire as the tip of the sun broke over the mountains. The first light of dawn washed over her like a gentle rain, cleansing away the complex thoughts that bedeviled her mind. Only the torc remained.

She was confused, at first. Solid matter, an anathema to her nature, somehow held her trapped. It liquefied within moments and she stepped out of the burning crater with ease. A new river of lava flowed from the mountainside beneath her like an open wound.

She fanned her wings, stretching them to catch the sun’s light. It filled her with power and life, and set a spark to the star burning within her breast.

The princess that her subjects called Celestia vanished, and a god was reborn.

The mountainside ignited as she lifted into the sky. The pitiful, oxygen-based flames quickly suffocated as the air around her superheated to a near vacuum, only to be replaced by hotter fires as the minerals within the rocks began to decompose and react with each other. Within seconds the ground beneath her was a bubbling slag of lava for hundreds of yards around.

She rose above the mountains and paused. A brilliant sphere a dozen feet wide appeared around her; the rarified air literally glowed as it absorbed and reemitted her radiance. She ignored the light (it was hers, after all), and concentrated on the sensation of the missing torc, so close it practically felt beneath her.

It was to the west, she eventually decided. The glowing sphere broke apart and vanished as she moved through the air. A burning contrail followed in her wake.

For the first time in her reign, Celestia came to visit Appleloosa.

\*\*\*

"Where does this train lead?" Luna asked. Her voice slurred as the weight of the sun pressed against her mind.

"Las Pegasus," Applejack replied. "It's a long ride, though. We'll prolly git there after dark."

Luna nodded. "Please tell me it's not due west of here."

"Nope. It's quite a bit north of here, actually. As long as Celestia keeps goin' west, we'll be fine."

"What is west of here, anyway?" Twilight asked. She mentally reviewed the library's maps in her mind, but as far as she could remember there were no major cities or settlements in the direction Celestia was heading.

"More desert, then some mountains, then the ocean," Braeburn said. He had joined them in the lead car as they pulled away from Appleloosa. "There's no big cities out there. Or small ones!"

“So where is she going?” Twilight asked. None of the others could answer.

\*\*\*

Appleloosa was mercifully empty when Celestia arrived.

The wooden buildings didn't last long enough to greet her. They began to smoke before she got within a mile of the town. The painted facades crisped to a uniform black as they ignited, sending a column of smoke high into the sky before the terrible hurricane of winds surrounding her tore it to shreds.

The once-princess landed on the outskirts of the town near the rail station. The ground crackled beneath her hooves, liquefying and later resolidifying into a curious glassy mineral eventually named “Appelite,” in honor of the town's memory. The buildings ceased to burn as she approached, and simply turned to ash.

The torc was here somewhere. She could smell its magic, taste the metal bonds that held its matrix together against the furnace in her heart. It had been here just hours ago. The very ground reeked of its presence.

She searched the town, briefly. By that point Appleloosa was a rapidly expanding cloud of gas, and wasn't able to conceal much from her view. The few metal objects owned by the earth ponies, such as the anvil in the blacksmith's shop, lasted several minutes longer before eventually evaporating along with every other bit of solid matter in the town.

The torc was gone. She was so close, and yet so far.

The tiny star that was Celestia rose again into the sky, circling the glowing remains of the town. Wider and wider she gyred, her senses extended to listen for the tiny bit of magic that would complete her.

There, to the west. Again to the west. She angled her wings, pointless though they were, and shot through the air in pursuit. It called to her, the torc. It wanted her as much as she wanted it.

Celestia flew to her birthright.

# Chapter 8

## Revelations

Twilight Sparkle watched in numb silence as Appleloosa died.

In a way it was worse than the destruction of Canterlot. The immolation of Celestia's city was shocking and unexpected, its horror abated by the chaos and confusion that had gripped them. It had taken hours for the immensity of their loss to sink in.

Not so with Appleloosa. Twilight and the hundred other ponies escaping by train were forewarned, and could do nothing but watch as the town vanished in fire and light. The rising sun behind the town was eclipsed by a mountain of smoke. Even twenty miles away it cast its shadow upon the train.

For hours they watched. The towering black clouds rose impossibly high into the air, eventually flattening and drifting away as they brushed the edge of the stratosphere. The entire world to the east was hidden behind the pall, like an enormous ashen curtain drawn across the land. An acrid reek stung eyes and filled nostrils, and the bright pastel colors of the ponies around her slowly turned sodden and lifeless.

A hellish glow lit the base of the smoke, shining bright as the hidden sun behind it. The living furnace that was Celestia still walked through the streets of Appleloosa, though to what end Twilight could only guess. The blinding light faded as the train pulled further away, and as noon approached the real sun finally broke through the haze high above them.

"You alright, Sug?" came a quiet voice to her side. She turned to see Applejack, her eyes red-rimmed and her orange coat dull and smeared, looking at her with concern.

Was she? Twilight took her time before answering. The shock of watching yet another town vanish in flames was simply the latest crisis they had stumbled through over the past two days. Had it only been 48 hours ago she and her friends were walking to Canterlot for the Summer Sun Celebration? How could the world have changed so quickly?

She took a deep breath, and coughed as the harsh air assaulted her lungs. Unlike the other ponies she still had trouble with the fumes wafting from the distant fires. Applejack politely waited while she recovered.

"I'm fine, Applejack," she finally croaked. The earth pony looked dubious, but held her tongue.

They spent a quiet moment watching the roiling smoke. Most of the other ponies on the train did the same; all had long since stopped crying openly, and mourned the loss of their homes in silence.

"So what do we do now?" Applejack asked.

"I don't know. Get to Las Pegasus and wait for Luna to wake up, I suppose. Maybe Rainbow Dash will be back from wherever Luna sent her by then."

"That's a lotta flyin' for one pegasus," Applejack observed.

Twilight silently agreed. She glanced over at Luna. The alicorn remained asleep. A faint layer of ash smothered her shining coat and feathers.

"If this pattern holds Celestia will collapse when the sun sets," Twilight said. "We'll have a full night to figure something out. Luna might even be able to delay the sunrise, though that's not a good long-term plan..." she trailed off. An excited murmur replaced the silence of the car.

Far to the east, the glow at the base of the smoke was rising into the air. It lit the column from within, like the world's largest jack-o-lantern. After a moment it broke through, and a tiny spark as bright as the sun emerged into the sky.

It was hard to tell, Twilight thought, but it seemed to be following them.

\*\*\*

Trixie was a smart pony. It didn't take her long to put two and two together.

From her seat in the back of the train she had the best view in the house as Appleloosa ceased to exist. Not having seen Canterlot's destruction, it was shocking and impressive to behold. And quite horrifying.

She had spent less than a full day in the town. She had only been in one building. It should have meant nothing to her, no more than any of the other

hamlets or burgs she visited while performing. A one-night stand on a municipal scale. Still it shocked her.

Beside her Big Mike leaned against the railing, her forelegs draped over the side of the car. The mare had watched the unfolding calamity in silence. Even when nothing remained to see but the slowly rising ocean of smoke, she watched. Her eyes remained sharp despite the chemical sting in the wind blowing from the fires.

Trixie wetted her mouth. Just a few moments of breathing the dry desert air was enough to parch her. "Are you..." she trailed off. For some reason her throat closed around the words. She cleared it, and tried again.

"Are you okay?" she asked the bar mare. Big Mike's lemon yellow coat had faded to old parchment beneath the ash and dust.

"Hm?" She didn't look away from the smoke. Above them the sun pierced weakly through the smog. "Yeah, I'm fine."

She didn't sound fine, Trixie thought. She didn't look fine, for that matter. No pony on the train did.

She tried again. "So, where does this train go, anyway?"

"Las Pegasus," Big Mike said quietly. "Never been there."

Silence stretched between them. The train rocked slightly as a stiff gust of wind pushed at the cars. Trixie took another stab at conversation.

"Is that a pegasus town?" She kicked herself mentally. *Is that a pegasus town? Seriously?*

"No, just earth ponies. Apparently they liked the name."

Silence again. Big Mike seemed happy with it, and Trixie reluctantly returned to her own thoughts.

Two nights ago she had stolen Celestia's torc, the most powerful magical item Luna said she had ever seen. A few hours later, according to the ponies at the dig site, Celestia had gone crazy, burning Canterlot to the ground before flying west. The same direction Trixie had gone. With the torc.

She tried to pry her hooftip under the torc again. A burst of pain radiated from the touch, and she lowered her shaking hoof back to the floor. It was



like trying to peel off her horn. A thin crimson line trickled down her coat to paint tiny flowers on the weathered wood floor. She shifted her shawl to conceal the blood.

Presumably there was a magical way to remove the torc, but the only other unicorn on the train, as far as she knew, was Luna, and she couldn't very well approach the princess with her problem. Not until every other avenue was exhausted.

"No unicorns?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant. Big Mike turned to look at her.

She was slow to answer. "A few, I suppose. It's a big town, after all. Almost a city."

Trixie allowed herself a small smile. "That's good to hear."

Behind them the incandescent glow began slowly rising from the ruins of Appleloosa, setting the sky aflame. Her smile faded like the stars before the sun.

\*\*\*

Rainbow Dash had never been a fan of long-distance flying.

Speed was more her thing, as she frequently reminded her friends. She was the fastest pony in Equestria, but only for as long as it took to impress onlookers. After that she was more of a glider, followed shortly by a napper.

It had taken most of a day to fly from Ponyville to the Roof of the World. The flight back was faster, thanks to the huge altitude boost she got from the mountain, as well as a helpful tailwind that pushed her briskly to the south. The extra speed was helpful, but her body still shook with the strain of flying again after two full days without sleep.

By the end of the first hour her back was sore with the effort of staying aloft. Each flap sent a twinge of pain shooting up the sides of her spine to her neck. The thin air at her height made flying faster, but it also made breathing harder. A faint wheeze built in her chest; her lungs protested their abuse.

*In through the nose, out through the mouth*, she repeated, mantra-like. Tiny icicles formed around her nostrils.

By the second hour trees began to reappear below, where they clung precariously to the sides of the mountains. Their long, wind-warped branches waved to her in passing. The pain in her back extended lower, tugging at her pelvis.

To distract herself from the growing discomfort she replayed the stars' advice in her mind. The last thing she wanted to do was find Luna and not remember what exactly they had said.

*Trixie has the torc near Las Pegasus*, she thought. Some paraphrasing was appropriate, she decided. *Get it back and Celestia will be fine. Oh, and stay away when she's awake.* That last part was probably unnecessary, but she had seen her friends attempt crazier things.

By the start of the fourth hour she could no longer keep her forelegs raised to split the air. The wind doubled its assault against her creaking wings. She slowed as much as she dared, and slipped through the turbulence in search of a better tailwind.

An hour later her wings began to burn with fatigue. Her pinions shook furiously as she lost control of the tiny muscles anchoring them. She compensated by folding her wings slightly. It was terrible form and would have earned her a harsh lecture in flight school, but she was too tired to care.

*Trixie has the torc near Las Pegasus.* Noon arrived. Her head slumped, no longer able to look forward. The ground was more interesting to watch anyway, she rationalized. Below her the lunar landscape of the mountains faded beneath aspen forests. A million green and silver leaves winked at her.

A sparkling river wound through the valleys far below. She was fairly certain a river had been the halfway point between the roof and Ponyville. Unfortunately there were quite a few rivers along her route. She swore to never again make fun of Twilight for her love of maps.

*Get it back and Celestia will be fine.* The sun slowly slipped to the west, vanishing briefly behind a bank of gauzy clouds. Her wing joints felt like they were filled with glass. Each stroke was an agony. She settled for gliding for long periods of time, taking detours to gain altitude from the updrafts wafting up from the exposed stone of the highest mountains. It was slower, but she couldn't afford to stop and rest.

A curious hawk, taking a break from its daily hunt, shadowed her flight for a few miles. She only noticed it when its banded body passed under her. Eventually it grew tired and went back to doing whatever it is hawks do.

*Stay away when she's awake.* The first farm appeared below her, a vineyard filled with rows of grapes, their leaves wide and thick with the promise of summer. She longed to dive down to them and snatch a few for a snack, but she knew she'd never be able to take off again once she landed. This was a non-stop flight.

Two hours later she felt like she was going to die. Part of her wouldn't have minded. Her legs dangled numbly from her body. Her vision swam like a fish, and it was all she could do not to crash from sheer exhaustion. Every beat of her wings was a nail driven into her back. She had to synchronize her breathing around her flapping – the stabbing pain made it impossible to inhale.

She cried for a while, until the whipping winds dried all her tears. The ground was only a greenish smudge through her clenched eyes. *Trixie has the torc near Las Pegasus...*

It was almost a surprise when the outskirts of Ponyville appeared below her. She barely had time to descend into a skidding crash that deposited her in the crowded town square.

The cobblestones, hard as they were, felt like the softest of clouds beneath her. Feeling slowly returned to her legs as pooled blood re-circulated. A million stabbing needles replaced the numbness, but she was too tired to care.

Ponies were shouting, she realized. A small crowd had gathered around her, and somepony was running their hooves over her body, starting at her head and moving down her neck and torso. She opened her eyes long enough to make out a white pony with a red cross for a cutie mark. Some wonderful soul placed a dish filled with water next to her head, and she managed to stick her snout into it. Most of it she spilled, but enough got into her mouth to provide a measure of relief.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and when they opened the mayor was sitting next to her. Fluttershy and the white pony from before were talking in the background, though Rainbow Dash was too far away to hear what they said.

“...you hear me?” The mayor’s face was just inches from Dash’s. Her eyes were wide as she took in the pegasus’s condition.

“I’m fine,” she lied. Her words came out as a hoarse whisper, rougher even than her normal scratchy voice. “Where’s Luna?”

The mayor stared at her blankly. Fluttershy and the white pony – Nurse Redheart? – stopped talking and turned to look at her.

“Rainbow Dash,” the mayor said, “Luna left for Appleloosa last night.”

She pondered that for a moment. Was screaming appropriate at a time like this? She decided it was, but twin lances of pain in her sides kept her from drawing a deep enough breath to try. Instead she closed her eyes and sobbed.

But only for a moment. Ignoring the shooting pain in her back, she slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position. Her wings splayed out beside her. They barely twitched when she tried moving them.

“Um, I think you should lie back down, Rainbow Dash,” a soft voice said. She looked up to see Fluttershy in front of her. The look on the yellow pegasus’s face was more serious than Dash could ever recall seeing.

“Can’t,” she grunted. After a few false starts she managed to get her rear legs under her. “Gotta get to Luna.”

“Luna’s very far away, Dash,” Fluttershy said. She moved to stay in front of Dash’s awkward, lurching steps. “And I think you need to rest.”

“Not gonna happen.” She ignored the grinding pain in her back and lifted her wings, and flapped with all the strength she could muster.

When she opened her eyes again she was back on the cobblestones. Her back and wings felt like someone had peeled the muscles from her bones. Fluttershy and Redheart were off to the side, directing a pair of earth ponies carrying a stretcher.

“Please,” she croaked as they approached. The earth ponies set the stretcher down next to her. “You don’t understand. I need to get to Luna. I have to tell her what the stars said!”

“Silly Dashie,” came a perky voice from beside her. When she turned Pinkie Pie was seated next to the mayor, who seemed as shocked as the pegasus by the pink pony’s arrival. “Just have Spike send her a message.”

*Have Spike... Oh. Ohhhh!* That sounded much easier than flying to Appleloosa. The thought was so wonderful she didn’t even complain as they loaded her belly-down onto the stretcher.

The still-burning fires of Canterlot, miles away though they were, filled the sky with streams of smoke and ash. The sunset that evening – a wild tempest of yellows, oranges, reds and purples – was the most beautiful anypony in the town had ever seen.

\*\*\*

The spark that was Celestia stopped following the Appleloosan refugees some time ago, around the time the tracks angled north toward Las Pegasus. From her vantage point on the train, Twilight Sparkle saw the errant princess pause in her flight, like an uncertain firefly puzzling over which blade of grass to land upon.

Eventually the setting sun made Celestia’s decision for her. She flickered as the sun touched the horizon, and a few minutes later her light went out. A flash like the glint of sunlight on water lit the horizon, followed by a small column of smoke that rose from her new resting place. Even from dozens of miles away the ponies on the train heard the echoing clap of thunder as she crashed to the desert floor.

“It’s just like last night,” Twilight said to Luna, who watched groggily from her seat beside the lavender unicorn. The lesser princess had woken just minutes before her sister plunged to the ground.

“Why d’ya think she stopped followin’ us?” Applejack asked from Twilight’s other side. She had brushed the dusting of ash from her Stetson hat, and ignored the identical layer blemishing her orange coat. Twilight was pretty sure there was some deep insight into earth pony psychology there.

“Who knows,” she said. “Maybe we just both happened to be going west? We were following her the first day, remember?”

“She stopped in Appleloosa,” Luna said. She rose to her feet and spread her wings to catch the light of the rising moon. The layer of dust and ash

coating her faded away, leaving only a lustrous indigo magnificence behind. Her mane flowed like a dark corona, speckled with stars. Twilight suddenly felt every speck of dirt ground into her filthy coat.

“She must have wanted something there,” the alicorn continued, oblivious to Twilight’s sidelong glances. “Something she didn’t find.”

The train rocked gently as it rolled across the desert floor. A line of mountains rose in the distance ahead. As the sun’s light fell from the sky another dim glow took its place – the lights of Las Pegasus, now less than an hour away.

Time enough for some answers.

“Princess,” Twilight said, “what happened to Celestia?”

Luna flinched. Her mane drew around her protectively, and several minutes of tight silence passed before she answered.

“I don’t know, Twilight. All my life I’ve known her, and she has never been anything but the princess we always knew. She has certainly never done this.”

Twilight chewed on that for a while. “What do you mean, ‘this’?” she asked.

Luna waved a hoof behind them. “Losing control. Forgetting herself. I don’t know, Twilight, take your pick.” She sighed. “I watch her raise the sun every day, but still it is so easy to forget what she is.”

“What she is? Aren’t you selling yourself short? I watched you walk through lava like it was water back there.”

“Foals’ play,” Luna muttered. “I am not my sister, Twilight. She is beyond me.” The alicorn settled back onto her haunches, her morose gaze locked on the distant pillar of smoke floating above her sister’s repose.

\*\*\*

“So what’s the plan, sug?”

Twilight Sparkle winced at the question. She’d known it was coming ever since they stepped off the train in Las Pegasus. The mayor had greeted them – well, she had greeted Luna, who was standing next to them, and

together they retreated to a local government office to discuss the twin problems of the Appleloosan refugees and the threat posed by Celestia.

While Luna spoke with the mayor and her aides, Applejack and Twilight went in search of food. They found a street vendor outside selling a variety of unhealthy junk food – hay fries, candied carrots, apple cakes and the like. Twilight’s stomach growled embarrassingly loud at the sight of the food, and she was just about to beg the vendor for a meal when Applejack surprised her by pulling a small purse from her mane. They retreated with their treats across the street to a park, still lit for the night and filled with dozens of ponies from Appleloosa.

She took a large bite from her apple fritter the moment she heard Applejack’s question, partly because she was famished, but mostly to buy time to come up with an answer. Unfortunately all she could think about was the delicious taste of molten apples and cinnamon. And a hint of nutmeg.

Applejack waited patiently while she chewed. Seeing that her friend wasn’t going to simply forget the question, Twilight swallowed her mouthful and let out a sigh.

“I have no idea, AJ,” she said. “We don’t know what happened to Celestia, why she’s doing thing, or what could possibly stop her. We have no data. There’s nothing to base any assumptions on.”

“None of yer books said anythin’ about it?”

She shook her head glumly. Books had never failed her before, and the experience was depressing. Even the delicious apple fritter couldn’t cheer her up. She polished it off anyway.

“Unless Luna knows something she’s not telling us, we might have to wait and see what Celestia does,” she said. “Hopefully she won’t go near any more towns in the process.”

Applejack was silent for a while. Her own meal of fried-melon-balls-on-a-stick lay half-finished in her hooves. Twilight tried to look at it suggestively, without making it too obvious that she wanted a bite.

“Do y’think she is?” Applejack finally asked. “Luna, I mean. Hiding somethin’ from us.”

Luna's morose expression from before filled Twilight's mind. "I don't think so," she said. "She seems as shook-up about this as everypony else."

They settled back into silence while Applejack finished her fried-melon-balls-on-a-stick, much to Twilight's chagrin. She was about to suggest going back to the street vendor when a sickly emerald flame materialized in the air before her. The fire swirled in place for a moment before taking the shape of a rolled-up scroll, which dropped to the ground at her feet. The outside of the scroll bore two words in a tiny, neat handwriting that Twilight instantly recognized.

"For Luna," it read.

\*\*\*

Luna and the mayor, an older earth pony mare with a rust red coat and quill cutie mark, had just finished meeting with refugees at the train station when Twilight Sparkle found them. The lavender unicorn panted heavily as she galloped through the crowd to the princess. Beads of sweat dotted her coat, standing out starkly in the thin layer of dust that still covered her.

"Princess!" Luna looked up as her name was called. She mumbled an excuse to the mayor and turned toward Twilight.

The unicorn came to a stop, her sides heaving. An elegant scroll, wrapped in a gentle purple glow, bobbed in the air before her. "It's... it's... from Spike!" she finally managed to say.

Luna snagged the scroll from the air with her own magic. She noted the address on the outside, and pulled it open to read.

To Her Majesty Princess Luna,

Rainbow Dash has just returned to Ponyville. She claims to have spoken with the stars, who delivered this message:

A unicorn who calls herself "The Great and Powerful Trixie" has stolen Celestia's necklace. The necklace is more than just jewelry; it is responsible for subduing Celestia's power. If it can be returned Celestia will once again be safe.

As of this morning Trixie was west of Canterlot, near Appleloosa.



On behalf of Rainbow Dash,

-Spike

The parchment fell from her nerveless magic. It struck the cobblestones and furred back into a loose scroll, and rolled across the ground toward Twilight. The unicorn looked between it and Luna with a concerned gaze.

*Trixie...* Reading the name was almost a physical assault. A terrible hollow pit opened in her gut, and the murmur of the crowd around her was replaced by a toneless buzz in her ears. *Trixie.*

The thought of her friend's crime was shocking, but the realization that followed was worse by far. The numbness faded as anger grew within her heart. She thought of Canterlot, and Appleloosa, and the anger was replaced by a towering rage.

Ponies cried out and scrambled away as she blasted into the air, her wings stirring a gale that tossed them off their hooves. A quick locating spell found Trixie not so far away, though her signature was surprisingly dim, as though she had found some way to magically hide herself.

It mattered not. The windows below her shattered as she effortlessly broke the speed of sound, en route to her target.

\*\*\*

Las Pegasus was an easy town to get lost in. Trixie did so as soon as the train stopped.

Big Mike tried to get her to stay with the other refugees. They were being offered free food and shelter, courtesy of a royal proclamation from Luna. Trixie politely declined, and escaped into the bustling city as fast as her hooves would carry her.

Las Pegasus was a surprise to the unicorn. She had never travelled out west, and simply assumed that any towns out there were small outposts like Appleloosa, which had exactly fit her stereotypes of the Mild West. Las Pegasus, however, was a full-sized city, nearly as large as Manehattan or Fillydelphia, and unlike those ancient cities, Las Pegasus was gleaming and young. Every building, every street, every pony seemed filled with energy and optimism. It was as far from Canterlot in style as it was in distance.

She finagled a cheap room in a seedy hotel near the merchant's district. A simple sob story about escaping from Appleloosa convinced the owners to give her the room for a pittance. For once her story was almost completely true.

The room itself was smaller than the one from Appleloosa, but more lavishly furnished. The bed held a real mattress, not just a sack stuffed with hay. Gas lights filled the interior with a warm glow, and the floors were polished wood, rather than sanded planks. It was a step in the right direction, she thought.

Of course, there was still the matter of the torc, stubbornly stuck to her chest. Not to mention the angry sun goddess chasing her relentlessly across half of Equestria. What she needed, she thought as she settled onto the soft bed, was a plan to deal with both. She drew a deep breath, closed her eyes, and envisioned the plan that would rescue her from this latest predicament.

Absolutely nothing came to mind.

She allowed herself a tiny frown. The expression sat easily on her face, like an old piece of favorite clothing grown soft and loose with time. Had anypony been in the room with her, they would have called it the most relaxed and natural look she had worn in days.

The problem was the torc, obviously. If she could get rid of it, her magic would (presumably) return, and she would be free to return to her life as an itinerant performer. Her future would still be in doubt, depending on whether or not anyone connected her with its theft, but that was something to worry about later. If nothing else she would be in a much better position to flee with her magic than without it. Getting rid of the torc might even solve the second problem, she realized. Celestia might simply be following it, rather than her specifically.

She tried a bit of magic again. As always it failed; the torc absorbed her efforts with mocking silence. It weighed on her neck like a stone.

Finally she came to the only conclusion left – another unicorn would have to help her. There were plenty in the city. They would just need a little convincing.

A bit of the weight on her shoulders lifted away. It wasn't a great plan, to be sure, but it was a plan, and that was more than she had before. She started grooming her mane and coat as best she could without her magic.

\*\*\*

Trixie was about to head out the door to find a gullible unicorn stallion when Luna arrived.

There was no grand entrance, no fanfare announcing her royal presence. One moment Trixie was reaching for the doorknob with her mouth, and in the next the temperature of the room dropped fifty degrees.

She paused at the sudden chill, her breath coating the metal knob with beads of condensation that quickly frosted into tiny dots of ice. The gas lamps flickered uncertainly, and for an instant the room was plunged into a hesitant darkness that only reluctantly receded from the glow of the lights. Her coat prickled at the unexpected intrusion of frigid air, which wafted toward her from the closed window across from the door. Tendrils of fog danced along the ceiling as the humid air plunged below its dew point.

Trixie froze in place, her muscles seizing in panic. She stared stupidly at the door for several long seconds, too terrified to turn and confirm what she already knew to be true. Her hasty, ill-conceived plans to find a unicorn and ditch the torc died without a whimper.

"Luna..." she started to say. Her parched mouth stuck on the syllables, and she swallowed several times before continuing. "I'm glad you found me, I was just about too..." she trailed off again as she turned, and beheld the nightmare behind her.

The princess was immense. She filled the room with darkness; her umbra blotted out the light as the moon eclipsed the sun. Her horn, a wicked and shining spire, grazed the high ceiling where she stood, her head and neck tilted imperiously. A bruise-black cloud that sparkled with a million stars flowed from her mane and tail, the only scrap of motion in the room. Only her eyes, bright and shining with barely contained fury, offered a hint that the princess was anything more than a statue.

All of Trixie's arguments fled; her pleas, about to roll from her tongue, dried up as she drank in the sight before her. Nothing that cared for her excuses shared the small room.

"So it's true," Luna whispered. Her words, cold and distant as the moon, echoed in Trixie's mind.

She unconsciously pulled her shawl tighter around her chest. The bulky metal shape of the torc showed through it like a poorly concealed pregnancy. Her mind raced as she sought an excuse – any excuse – and she forced her best smile onto her face.

"I've been looking for you ever since the Celebration," she said. "I knew you would be able to—"

"Be silent," Luna interrupted. "Even now, at the very end, you lie to me? Was it only ever lies?"

Her horn flared, casting deeper shadows across the room. The shawl wrapped around Trixie's chest lifted slightly, as though floating in a breeze, and disintegrated in a cloud of glittering dust. The traitorous torc, revealed, gleamed like a jewel in Luna's presence.

"You foal," she continued. "You steal from a princess, and flaunt your theft openly? You dare wear that which was made for a god?"

"It was an accident," Trixie blurted. Her words tumbled out of control. "I didn't know. Please, Luna, I didn't—"

"Shut up!" Luna thundered. The room quaked in sympathy as she spoke. "You have no idea the pain and devastation you have caused. Celestia banished me for a thousand years for less than what you have done."

"I had to!" Trixie quailed. She backed as far from Luna as possible, until her rump pressed against the frosted door. "You said it was the most powerful lens you'd ever seen! I needed it too--"

"ENOUGH!" Luna roared. She *moved*; in the blink of an eye she was only inches away from Trixie, her horn lowered like a spear. "Remove it now, and I'll ask Celestia to be merciful for the sake of our former friendship."

The first tear of the evening ran down Trixie's face. "I can't." Her voice shook with terror. "Please believe me Luna, I can't! By the stars I wish I could but I can't. Nothing I've done even budes it!"

Luna snarled. An ugly sneer marred her beautiful face. "Then perhaps you aren't trying hard enough!" Her horn flashed again, and a dark light surrounded the torc.

Trixie's world vanished in a flood of pain. A sensation like a thousand knives sliding beneath her skin forced anything resembling real thought out of her head. A ragged scream tore from her throat as the agony doubled and redoubled. A unbearable rending sensation split her down the middle.

When her eyes opened she was lying on the floor at Luna's feet. A fan of blood, slowly crystallizing in the cold air, stained the varnished wood floor beneath her. She trembled as the memory of the pain only slowly receded, leaving an ache that throbbed around her chest. The vile torc still clung to her, the jewel in its center sparkling brighter than she remembered.

"P-please," she whispered. A thin tendril of drool escaped her quivering lips. "It hurts..."

"Oh, it hurts?" Luna said with sudden softness. She loomed over the fallen unicorn. "At last the Great and Powerful Trixie hurts. To think, I was worried about the hundreds of thousands of ponies your carelessness and avarice have hurt or made homeless, but now I see how little that matters. All that matters to you is your own pain, your own suffering."

The alicorn's horn sparkled again, and a scintillating light danced across the torc, followed almost instantly by a blinding flash. When Trixie's vision returned she was lying several feet further away, in the center of a ring of ash. The floor around her smoked.

Luna narrowed her eyes. "Your thoughtlessness has destroyed two cities so far," she continued. "And who knows how many more if I don't stop this madness? It's either me or her, Trixie; she will pursue you to the ends of the earth. Now give me the torc."

Despair gripped her. Her pain faded with the realization that she would not be leaving the room alive. "I didn't mean for this to happen! By Celestia, I didn't mean—"

"Don't say that name!" Luna screamed. "My sister was the kindest, wisest pony to ever exist, and you turned her into a monster! History will forget you and remember her as a raving beast! How is that fair? How is that fair?!"

An invisible claw latched onto Trixie's hindleg, raising her off the floor to dangle like a fish from a line. The world spun around her as the magic dragged her through the air, and then slammed her into the wall with the force of a runaway train. The thin wood-reinforced plaster shattered, and

she crashed through the new hole into the next room. She tumbled across the floor like a foal's rag doll, only stopping when a solid wood credenza blocked her path. For a disorienting moment she forgot where she was or why her body hurt so.

Luna's frame appeared in the hole. The ragged edges of the broken wall melted as she approached, the pitiful matter dissolving in the face of her terrible will. She stepped into the room with Trixie, and the heartless cold followed.

"I had a dream," the princess whispered. She drew closer to the unicorn, who only now began to whimper and stir again. "I had a sister. I had a home. I thought I had a *friend*." Her silver-shod hoof crunched the flinders of wood beside Trixie's head as it descended. No mere sword ever promised so much danger.

"But you stole *all* those things from me," she continued. Her head lowered until her snout brushed against the weeping unicorn's mane. "You took what I offered and you *spat* on it. I trusted you. Celestia help me, I trusted you!"

She raised her head back up, gazing at the ceiling as though seeing through it to the moon high above. A single tear, bright as a diamond against her midnight coat, trickled down her jaw, through the air, to land before Trixie.

"I am responsible for all this," she said to the ceiling. The anger was gone from her voice, replaced by a sad resignation. "I told you about the torc. I set you on this path, and because of my mistake thousands are suffering again. Again."

"P-please, Luna..."

"Last time I was too weak. I gave into my petty jealousy, and the whole world suffered for it. I will not make that error this time." She looked down at Trixie's prostrate form, and raised her hoof. "I'm sorry, Trixie."

The hoof came down with impossible speed, the silver shoe blurring into a shining streak. It slammed into the amethyst jewel held in the center of the torc, and the room filled with the sun.

\*\*\*

Trixie woke just moments later. Suffocating smoke filled the room, lit an evil red by the fires that consumed the walls. Her mane curled in the heat as the licking flames advanced toward her. She coughed and stumbled to her hooves.

A draft of cool air grabbed her attention. The outside wall of the room was simply gone; a dark hole faintly filled by the lights of the town outside took its place. She could hear the shouts of ponies in the street below. Ignoring the pain in her body, she stumbled to the edge of the hole. The room was only on the second floor, and it didn't take her long at all to decide that jumping was a much better course of action than waiting for the burning room to roast her.

And yet... she turned. Barely visible in the smoke was the dark form of the fallen princess, far smaller now than before. The flames danced ominously close to her still shape. Had she seen what Twilight Sparkle had at the camp site – the alicorn wading effortlessly through molten rock – she might have thought twice. Instead it was an easy decision to make.

She stumbled back through the smoke, stepping as best she could around the advancing flames. Unable to use her magic, she grabbed Luna's mane in her teeth, and slowly, agonizingly dragged the princess across the room to the ragged drop-off. She stepped over her friend, and with her last ounce of strength pushed her off, into the street below.

Trixie balanced precariously on the edge for a moment, too exhausted to leap herself. After a moment the flames caught up with her, and she discovered that she had a bit more strength after all.

The drop to the ground was mercifully short.